

Henri Michaux  
*Experimentation with Signs*



*Nina Parish*

FAUX  
TITRE

Henri Michaux

## **FAUX TITRE**

**302**

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Henri Michaux  
*Experimentation with Signs*

*Nina Parish*



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J'écris pour me parcourir.  
Peindre, composer, écrire: me  
parcourir. Là est l'aventure  
d'être en vie.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

From an interdisciplinary viewpoint, the Belgian-born poet and visual artist, Henri Michaux (Namur, 1899 – Paris, 1984), provides an exceptionally rich and diversified case study. Michaux was both a distinguished writer and an accomplished artist and he gained much recognition for over half a century in these two, often separate, fields. Since Horace's famous 'Ut pictura poesis' (as is painting, so is poetry), artists, writers and theorists have explored the various implications concerning the compatibility of literature and the visual arts and their respective representations of reality, and have reached a great many different conclusions. Some, adapting Horace's aphorism to their own purposes, believe that an exchange takes place. Others consider that these two domains are in no way equivalent, as for example, when Gottfried Ephraim Lessing affirms in *Laocoon* that painting is essentially a spatial art whilst poetry can only represent the temporal.<sup>2</sup>

Many writers incorporate visual elements into their texts. One of the best known examples from the twentieth century is *Calligrammes* by Guillaume Apollinaire, in which the form of the poem represents the subject matter visually. Some writing systems,

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Michaux, 'Observations', in Henri Michaux, *Passages, Œuvres complètes*, Vol. II, ed. by Raymond Bellour, with Ysé Tran (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 2001), pp. 344-52 (p. 345). This edition will henceforth be referred to as *OC II*.

<sup>2</sup> 'S'il est vrai que la peinture emploie pour ses imitations des moyens ou des signes différents de la poésie, à savoir des formes et des couleurs étendues dans l'espace, tandis que celle-ci se sert de sons articulés qui se succèdent dans le temps; s'il est incontestable que les signes doivent avoir une relation naturelle et simple avec l'objet signifié, alors des signes juxtaposés ne peuvent exprimer que des objets juxtaposés ou composés d'éléments juxtaposés [des corps], de même que des signes successifs ne peuvent traduire que des objets, ou leurs éléments successifs [des actions].' Lessing, *Laocoon*, trans. by Courtin (Paris: Hermann, Collection 'Savoir/sur l'art', 1990), p. 120.

such as Arabic calligraphy, Chinese characters and Egyptian hieroglyphs, have a very prominent visual aspect in comparison to our own Roman alphabet. In the twentieth century, many visual artists, from Joan Miró to Annette Messager, have chosen to use words in their paintings and installations. Moreover, the advent of modernisation and mass media has brought about an overt combination of word and image in media, such as film, photography and advertising, to name but a few. Writers and artists have frequently worked together, observing and exchanging their ideas, techniques and experiments. This has often led to the fusion of word and image in the space of the page or canvas. Few artists, however, have been able to express themselves successfully using textual and visual media. William Blake, Victor Hugo and Jean Arp are other eminent examples of what can be described as ‘double artists’.

Michaux’s international reputation as a visual artist was officially established when he won the Einaudi Prize at the 1960 Venice Biennial and, since then, exhibitions have been dedicated to his artistic work all over the world. It must be underlined from the very beginning that Michaux received no formal artistic training, and he cannot be described as a skilled draftsman. Yet his prolific artistic output obtained much success and continues to do so today.<sup>3</sup> Rainer Michel Mason discusses Michaux’s posthumous contribution to the 1985 Paris ‘Nouvelle Biennale’ in the following oxymoronic terms:

Michaux, avec quelle justesse, se révèle à la grande Halle de la Villette un admirable mauvais peintre. Chez qui l’on retrouve par exemple Goya (je pense au défilé d’ombres blanches et rouges, avec taches de bleu et d’or, sur deux strates souterraines) – et Michaux, des visages spectraux aux filets mescaliniens jetés en réseaux blancs sur la nuit bleue. De qui en dire autant?<sup>4</sup>

Although a respected visual artist, Michaux is probably best known for his poetic texts, for example, the Chaplinesque adventures of his fictional character, ‘Plume’, who cannot avoid coming up against social order and convention in the most absurd situations. Michaux

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<sup>3</sup> According to one of the researchers working on the *catalogue raisonné* of Michaux’s entire artistic output, up to 15,000 separate graphic objects were produced by Michaux.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Michel Mason, ‘Un “dernier” Michaux?’, in *Henri Michaux: Les Années de synthèse 1965-1984* (Paris: galerie thessa herold, 2002), pp. 7-12 (p. 9).

generally used his poetic writing, which has been translated into many different languages, to defend himself against the hostile conditions of the outside world, and to explore his inner being and imagination in order to find true self-knowledge. He did not consider himself a poet, however:

Je ne sais pas faire de poèmes, ne me considère pas comme un poète, ne trouve pas particulièrement de la poésie dans les poèmes et ne suis pas le premier à le dire. La poésie, qu'elle soit transport, invention ou musique est toujours un impondérable qui peut se trouver dans n'importe quel genre, soudain élargissement du Monde. Sa densité peut être bien plus forte dans un tableau, une photographie, une cabane. Ce qui irrite et gêne dans les poèmes, c'est le narcissisme, le quiétisme (deux culs de sac) et l'attendrissement assommant sur ses propres sentiments. Je finis par le pire: le côté délibéré. Or, la poésie est un cadeau de la nature, une grâce, pas un travail. La seule ambition de faire un poème suffit à le tuer.<sup>5</sup>

Michaux's poetic texts do not follow the traditional conventions of rhyme and metre. They instead mostly take form in a sort of journal or diary in verse and prose that relates real or invented experiences. Furthermore, his wide range of literary and artistic activities, as well as an eager interest in other expressive forms and science, all contribute to the idea that he was more than a poet. His output was thus varied in both literary and artistic fields: he wrote prose and poetry; he not only painted using watercolour, gouache, acrylic and oil, but also created and drew new alphabets using a variety of instruments, including brushes and fibre-tipped pens. This varied range of creative practices was matched in his private life by extensive travel and a passion for music.

When studying the coexistence of artistic and literary elements in Michaux's work, we will take heed of the three limitations to interartistic studies outlined by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory*:

The first is the presumption of the unifying, homogeneous concept (the sign, the work of art, semiosis, meaning, representation, etc.) and its associated 'science' that makes comparative/differentiating propositions possible, even inevitable. The second is the whole strategy of systematic comparison/contrast that ignores other forms of relationship, eliminating the possibility of metonymic juxtapositions, of incommensurability, and of unmediated or non-negotiable forms of alterity. The third is the ritualistic

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Maurice Imbert, *Bibliographie des livres et plaquettes d'Henri Michaux* (Paris: Micheline Phankim and Maurice Imbert, 1994), unpaginated.

historicism, which always confirms a dominant sequence of historical periods, a canonical master-narrative leading to the present moment, and which seems incapable of registering alternate histories, counter-memories, or resistant practices.<sup>6</sup>

Such prescriptions are helpful in order to avoid falling into the trap of reducing Michaux's output to facile visual and verbal equivalents. Michaux's texts are not simple descriptions of his images any more than his images are illustrations of his texts. As Mitchell points out for William Blake, Michaux's literary and artistic *œuvre* can be studied in isolation, but to gain a complete understanding of his 'imagetexts'<sup>7</sup> in which visual and textual elements are combined, we need to be able to manoeuvre between these domains.

Michaux explores the possibilities of outer and, above all, inner reality using visual and verbal means, sometimes separately, but often in conjunction. He is ultimately concerned with escaping the limitations of everyday language in order to express effectively the body's movement and the speed of the thought process, and thus gain a further understanding of the inner self:

Au lieu d'une vision à l'exclusion des autres, j'eusse voulu dessiner les moments qui bout à bout font la vie, donner à voir la phrase intérieure, la phrase sans mots, corde qui indéfiniment se déroule sinueuse, et, dans l'intime, accompagne tout ce qui se présente du dehors comme du dedans. Je voulais dessiner la conscience d'exister et l'écoulement du temps. Comme on se tâte le pouls. Ou encore, en plus restreint, ce qui apparaît lorsque, le soir venu, repasse (en plus court et en sourdine) le film impressionné qui a subi le jour. Dessin cinématique.<sup>8</sup>

These two realms, visual and verbal, are intricately intertwined, and should be regarded as having parallel importance in the ensemble of Michaux's works. His first book, *Qui je fus*, was published in the same year (1927) as his initial experimentation with alphabets. The following is stated in Michaux's biography, written by the galerie thessa herold, for the catalogue of the exhibition held at this gallery in 2002:

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<sup>6</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> Michaux, 'Dessiner l'écoulement du temps', in *Passages, OC II*, pp. 371-74 (p. 371).

Si l'on se rappelle que les premières tentatives plastiques de Michaux datent de ces mêmes années 25-27 ('Taches' et 'Alphabets' en particulier), on peut constater que le besoin de s'exprimer par le dessin et la peinture s'est manifesté chez lui en même temps que celui de s'exprimer par des mots. Si Henri Michaux sera d'abord connu comme écrivain, c'est peut-être à cause d'une certaine timidité à s'imposer comme peintre [...] et aussi parce qu'on l'encourage à écrire. Lui n'est pas du tout sûr, et il ne le sera jamais, que l'écriture soit le moyen le plus satisfaisant d'exprimer ce qu'il a à communiquer. De cette insatisfaction naîtra l'œuvre du peintre, qui se présente d'abord comme la recherche de signes, d'idéogrammes personnels. Préoccupation qui inspirera beaucoup de ses expériences plastiques futures.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, much of Michaux's literary production expresses his desire to transcend conventional linguistic systems and his joy at discovering a more immediate expressive form in the visual arts, whilst paradoxically, much of his artistic output conveys a close resemblance to writing systems and bears witness to a desire for a universal sign system. These two expressive forms seem to thrive on a mutually beneficial relationship in which traditional generic divisions are shattered.

Any attempt to classify Michaux's visual or verbal production in terms of absolute and mutually exclusive categories appears to be thwarted from the very start by this interaction between text and image as well as his own attitude to belonging to a group or movement, be it artistic or literary. Michaux admits his aversion to being placed in a category: 'Les genres littéraires sont des ennemis qui ne vous ratent pas, si vous les avez ratés vous au premier coup.'<sup>10</sup> And indeed, the reactions of certain critics and writers attest to Michaux's marginal, non-conformist stance. For example, a childhood friend, Belgian playwright Herman Closson, describes Michaux as:

Un 'cas', ne serait-ce que pour la raison que tout rapprochement, les dénonciations d'influence et de différences, si propices à la définition, ne sont ici d'aucun recours. Il importe de parler d'originalité, dans le sens

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<sup>9</sup> 'Biographie', *Henri Michaux: Les Années de synthèse 1965-1984*, pp. 73-85 (p. 74).

<sup>10</sup> Michaux, 'L'Époque des illuminés', *Qui je fus*, in Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, ed. by Raymond Bellour, with Ysé Tran (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1998), pp. 106-09 (p. 106). This edition will henceforth be referred to as *O.C.I.*



précis où généralement on abuse de ce terme, ce qui l'a fait délaïsser [...].  
Ainsi, Michaux l'intangible...<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Jacques Dupin's remarks on Michaux's paintings can only be described as discouraging for a researcher:

Une seule certitude devant les peintures d'Henri Michaux: tout ce qu'on peut écrire a été écrit, et de manière complète, précise et définitive, par Henri Michaux lui-même. N'ayant rien à ajouter, rien à dévoiler des mécanismes qui ont produit cette œuvre, je ne peux qu'éprouver la promptitude de son passage, la vivacité de son empreinte, et tout ce qu'elle débusque et rallie d'images assoupies et de fantômes égarés.<sup>12</sup>

It is rather inhibiting that one of the great contemporary poets starts an essay on Michaux's visual output in this manner. Nonetheless, it is possible to analyse and explore his visual and verbal works, and they in turn need to be read, viewed and studied. As Michaux himself declares: 'Je compte sur toi, lecteur, sur toi qui vas me lire, quelque jour, sur toi lectrice.'<sup>13</sup>

There are also certain pertinent affinities to be drawn with other artists and writers of his time, such as the Surrealists and the practitioners of *art informel*, in terms of their context, their similar objectives and their mutual influence. As in most studies, this will not lead to a clear-cut categorisation of Michaux and his work but it will, rather, point us in the direction of a better understanding of his artistic and literary production. Michaux himself asserts:

Quand vous me verrez,  
Allez,  
Ce n'est pas moi.  
[...]  
Et si l'on me tenait,  
On ferait de moi ce qu'on voudrait.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Brigitte Ouvry-Vial, *Henri Michaux: Qui êtes-vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1989), pp. 71-72.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Dupin, 'Contemplatif dans l'action', in *Henri Michaux: Peintures*, ed. by Hélène Drude et Françoise Gaillard (Saint-Paul: Fondation Maeght, 1976), pp. 3-12 (p. 3).

<sup>13</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador, OC I*, pp. 137-243 (p. 179).

<sup>14</sup> Michaux, 'Petit', *Mes Propriétés*, in *La Nuit remue, OC I*, pp. 499-500.

He thus refuses to be contained by any categorical definition, and this ludic quotation points to what he regarded as the constantly mobile, elusive nature of his own being. His horror of circumscription is further corroborated by the aggressive tone of a letter to Robert Bréchon concerning the preparation of a monograph on his visual and verbal output:

Mes livres montrent une vie intérieure. Je suis, depuis que j'existe, contre l'aspect extérieur, contre ces photos appelées justement pellicules, qui prennent la pellicule de tout, qui prennent tant qu'elles peuvent les maisons familiales ou autres, les murs, les meubles, tout ce qui est permanent et stabilité et que je n'accepte pas, au travers de quoi je me vois passant. Tout ce que dans ma mémoire j'atomise, c'est ça que vous voulez faire apparaître, Mallet et vous. Vous perdez votre temps. Un livre pareil, qui serait un sabotage de mes livres à moi, je ne l'autoriserai jamais.<sup>15</sup>

Michaux therefore positions himself firmly against the idea of being represented in the fixed frame of a photograph or within the pages of a critical work, although it must be added that he did eventually allow the publication of Bréchon's monograph following intense negotiations concerning the inclusion of photographs.<sup>16</sup>

The present study examines a particular aspect of Michaux's production, that is, his innovative experimentation with signs, which spanned over fifty years of his literary and artistic career and during which he published four books containing enigmatic graphic signs and figures: *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*.<sup>17</sup> This experimentation constitutes an intermediary space between writing and drawing, a go-between, which encourages reflection on the possible visuality of the written or drawn line. In so

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<sup>15</sup> Raymond Bellour and Ysé Tran, 'Chronologie', in Michaux, *OC II*, p. XLVII.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Bréchon, *Michaux* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'La bibliothèque idéale', 1959).

<sup>17</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Le Point du jour', 1982, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, 1951). *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* were all published by fata morgana in 1974, 1979 and 1984 respectively. These four books all figure in the Pléiade edition of Michaux's collected works: *Mouvements* in the second volume (*OC II*, pp. 435-41; pp. 531-99); *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* in the third volume (*Par la voie des rythmes*, in Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. III, ed. by Raymond Bellour, with Ysé Tran and the collaboration of Mireille Cardot (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 2004), pp. 761-814. This edition will henceforth be referred to as *OC III*; *Saisir*, *OC III*, pp. 933-983; *Par des traits*, *OC III*, pp. 1233-1285).

doing, it brings together text and image in a highly original fusion within the space of the page in an attempt to render interior rhythm and dynamism, underlining a rejection of the Western alphabet and a preference for the signifying and communicative possibilities offered by the Chinese writing system.

Throughout his life, Michaux drew and painted signs and alphabets in what can only be described as an obsessive fashion, and there are many different examples of this type of production in his literary and artistic works. This book concentrates on the four aforementioned volumes containing signs, precisely because of their relationship with the book form, which has a huge impact on their reception. Not only do they potentially reach a wider audience because of Michaux's reputation as a poet, their semiotic status is also changed because the signs cannot function in the same manner on a canvas as on a page of a book. The study also takes other experiments with signs into consideration, such as the alphabets produced on paper by Michaux in the 1940s.

From a theoretical point of view, Michaux's experimentation with signs can be located within a semiotic tradition that started with the reflections of Ferdinand de Saussure, a key figure in modern linguistics, on the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.<sup>18</sup> Saussure's writings are crucial to both Michaux's formulation of his signs (we can assume that he would have been familiar with these concepts) and the way in which we examine them today. Saussure asserted that the linguistic sign is ultimately unable to reproduce any immediate discourse as there is no intrinsic link that connects a particular sound or image (signifier) with a particular concept (signified). The sign, in fact, translates reference. It can in no way represent what it depicts. By attempting to formulate reality, the sign is actually stating its very absence. An image of Jesus Christ dying on the crucifix, depicted on a stained-glass window in a church or described in a passage from the Bible, does not imply the presence of Christ or the event taking place. Rather, it triggers memories of experiences, through which the reader or viewer can apprehend the visual or written image before their eyes. Objects or concepts cannot present themselves immediately, independently of memory, because memory contains the entire multiplicity of experience, and it is only with the help of memory that

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<sup>18</sup> See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1972), pp. 100-02.

any sign system can be completed. This filtering through the linguistic or visual sign, however, is further complicated by the fact that elements of experience can be seen as proper, singular, private and original to the subject, whereas visual and verbal expression, with their necessarily conventional characteristics, are the very opposite. How is it then possible to express the singularity of experience with the generality of both word and image? Can reality be conveyed without loss? Or, is the uniqueness of experience irreducible to linguistic or visual translation? Inevitably, these questions lead us back to the Saussurian notion of arbitrariness and the impossibility of expressing reality through any form.

American sign theorist Charles Sanders Peirce's theoretical framework, including the classifications of the icon, the index and the symbol, can be extremely useful when assessing the semiotic status of visual or verbal signs and analysing the different levels on which they communicate.<sup>19</sup> The figurative image, which corresponds to Peirce's icon, may appear to simulate the presence of the object it represents, both communicating the idea of it and giving it form. It seems able to lead the viewer directly from the image of the object represented to the memory of his/her actual experience of that object, and could therefore be described as taking on the role of both the container and the transmitter of meaning, in other words, both the signified and the signifier. Visual representation, however, is by definition polysemic and generally more successful in conveying specific objects than abstract ideas. Like language, it also conforms to numerous codes and conventions. Accordingly, Michaux's signs provoke many different interpretations from their reader-spectators: dancing or battling humanoid figures, insects, animals, sea creatures, monsters, Chinese characters. This polysemy is further enhanced by Michaux's development of a loose, allusive style which typically depicts forms on a blank background without markers to indicate scale or gradation of perspective. In his quest for a universal language, to what extent does Michaux manage to circumnavigate the arbitrary nature of language through his use of the visual sign? Indeed, what does the reader understand from these pages of enigmatic figures? How can we

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<sup>19</sup> See Charles Sanders Peirce, '[from] On the Algebra of Logic: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Notation', in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. I (1867-1893), ed. by Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 225-28.

examine the signs, for they have highly visual characteristics and yet function within a literary space, that of the book?

Roland Barthes used linguistic, semiotic and literary terms of reference in the analysis of visual signs and we have decided to follow his example in this book, as the image can be interpreted as a type of representational text that relies on codes and conventions and must therefore be deciphered or 'read' in much the same manner as a written text. The theorist, Louis Marin, states on this subject:

Le tableau est un texte figuratif et un système de lecture: il serait souhaitable, pour comprendre la portée de cette première affirmation, que les termes de texte et de lecture ne fussent point métaphoriques, mais seulement saisis à partir de la métaphore si souvent utilisée de la lecture. Qu'est-ce que lire? C'est parcourir du regard un ensemble graphique et c'est déchiffrer un texte.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Michaux borrows certain characteristics of his signs from conventional writing systems, thereby underlining their infinitely hybrid nature, situated between text and image, writing and drawing.

The aims of this study are to discuss the nature of the different projects contained in *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*, and to determine whether these four key works represent a creative continuum or whether they are the result of substantially different creative processes. This will be established through close analysis of the visual and verbal content of each book as well as examination of Michaux's literary and artistic production, contemporary to each of these publications. Attention will be paid to the mescaline experiments, which dominated Michaux's literary and artistic production for almost a whole decade, as they appear to present a radical change in his creative outlook that altered his work until his death. A thematic rather than chronological development has been favoured in order to avoid repetition and to foreground the conceptual or semiotic differences between the different kinds of works, as well as showing the books as elements in a creative itinerary. For this to be possible, an understanding of the nature of this visual and verbal experimentation has to be acquired. Through the evaluation of Michaux's appropriation of the Chinese writing system and his desire to render inner and outer corporeal movement, the way

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<sup>20</sup> Louis Marin, 'Éléments pour une sémiologie picturale', in Louis Marin, *Études sémiologiques: Écritures, Peintures* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), pp. 17-43 (p. 19).

in which the signs function can be apprehended. Furthermore, his experimentation within and beyond the book form underlines the main aim of his experimentation with signs and, seemingly, all his literary and artistic production, namely to express and render 'l'espace du dedans'.<sup>21</sup>

This book is divided into six chapters, which analyse the four works containing signs in order to assess the extent to which this interdisciplinary experimentation occupies a unique place in Michaux's creative *œuvre* by virtue of its conception, production and reception. In Chapter 1, the salient characteristics of each of these books and their respective literary and artistic contexts will be presented so as to ascertain whether a development or evolution takes place. Michaux's experimentation with hallucinogenic substances will also be studied in order to evaluate the relationship between this and the books incorporating signs, since the first three books that relate these drug narratives, *Misérable miracle: La Mescaline*, *L'Infini turbulent* and *Paix dans les brisements*, also contain both textual and graphic elements.<sup>22</sup> We will see how, immersed in certain Oriental philosophies towards the end of his life, Michaux appears to favour a more meditative, harmonious approach to life and, as a result, his literary texts become more lyrical, leading to the question of whether his experimentation with signs undergoes a similar transformation. In Chapter 2, we shall determine how the conception and formal character of Michaux's utopian language of signs stemmed from his rejection of Western signifying systems. From this perspective, his signs may be seen as being conceptually related to his early experimentation with neologisms.

Chapters 3 and 4 continue to examine in greater detail the format and purpose of these signs and their complex relationship to conventional alphabetic and ideographic forms of expression. These chapters also suggest different possible influences on Michaux's signs in order to evaluate their conception and semiotic status. In all four books incorporating signs, the poet-artist creates and occupies an imaginary form in the transitory space between writing and drawing, a

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<sup>21</sup> This is the title of one of Michaux's volumes of poetic texts: *L'Espace du dedans: pages choisies (1927-1959)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> These three texts by Michaux are all published in the second volume of the Pléiade edition: *Misérable miracle: La Mescaline*, pp. 617-784; *L'Infini turbulent*, pp. 805-953; *Paix dans les brisements*, pp. 977-1010.

form that has been appropriated and adapted from the Chinese writing system. Chapter 3 assesses this resemblance to Chinese characters, and evaluates the ideograph as a possible way of interpreting the semiotic identity of Michaux's signs. Chapter 4 is concerned with Michaux's stated aim of rendering corporeal movement and presence in his enigmatic glyphs, which highlights the symbiotic relationship between dynamism and fatigue in the creative process, while the gestural nature of their production suggests an affinity with Surrealism and automatism.

The last two chapters examine Michaux's experimentation within and beyond the book form. Chapter 5 examines the reading process, reflecting on how pages of signs should be received by the reader. Michaux seems to leave clues for an apparent destruction of the written page on both the author's and the reader's part in some of his other literary texts. The books incorporating signs are not the only unconventional publications produced by Michaux. *Paix dans les brisements*, *Parcours* and his collaboration with the visual artist, Roberto Matta, *Vigies sur cibles*, are other examples of his experimentation with the material properties of the book.<sup>23</sup> Michaux therefore radically questions the book form throughout his literary output. But is he trying to undermine the book or transcend it? Furthermore, the dual nature of the signs inspires a number of questions. Are they drawings or writing? Were they originally conceived for exhibition in an art gallery or for the page of a book? At first glance, these questions allude to a rejection of writing systems. Added to Michaux's recognised double status as writer and artist, this ambiguous interplay between text and image prompts us to consider to what extent his works composed of signs may be defined as *livres d'artiste*. Given the centrality of signs in Michaux's *œuvre*, and his repeated emphasis on them as an alternative to Western signifying systems, it is also essential to consider the specific material format and the publishing history of the works incorporating signs. Chapter 6 examines Michaux's preoccupation with music and cinema, which informs his exploration of rhythm, repetition and seriality. It firstly considers how Michaux structures his books incorporating signs, which do not rely on conventional semantic or narrative order. It goes on to explore Michaux's experimentation with expressive means

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<sup>23</sup> Michaux, *Parcours*, OC III, pp. 429-444; Michaux, *Vigies sur cibles*, OC II, pp. 955-76.

outside the book form or the canvas, primarily music and cinema. A parallel between Michaux's signs on the one hand, and notational systems of dance and movement on the other, is advanced on account of certain material similarities and their shared objectives of rendering corporeal movement.

There exists a large corpus of critical material dedicated to Michaux in both literary and art-historical fields. This encompasses exhibition catalogues, conference proceedings, monographs and articles. His four books incorporating signs, however, have never been studied in great detail. There are a few articles dedicated specifically to this subject,<sup>24</sup> but no book-length study has yet been published.<sup>25</sup> Michaux's signs and alphabets are mentioned in many monographs or exhibition catalogues because this experimentation was an obsessional, ongoing process throughout his life. But most references are fleeting, often simply underlining the utopian or ludic aspect of these signs. Recent research, however, shows a growing interest in this aspect of Michaux's creative output. *Mouvements* appeared in the second volume of the prestigious Pléiade collection, edited by Raymond Bellour with Ysé Tran, and *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* are presented in the third and final volume,

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Gérard Dessons, 'La Manière d'Henry: prolégomènes à un traité du trait', in *Méthodes et savoirs chez Henri Michaux*, ed. by Gérard Dessons (Poitiers: La Licorne, UFR Langues Littératures Poitiers, 1993), pp. 63-81; Véra Mihailovich-Dickman, 'Idéogrammes: L'Apport de la Chine ou "Voie par l'écriture"', in *Quelques Orient d'Henri Michaux*, ed. by Anne-Élisabeth Halpern and Mihailovich-Dickman (Paris: Findakly, 1996), pp. 159-90; Jérôme Roger, 'Enfance des écritures et contre écritures d'Henri Michaux', in *Paroles aux confins: Poésie-Peinture*, ed. by Marie-Hélène Popelard (Mont-de-Marsan: L'Atelier des Brisants, 2001), pp. 51-72; and more recently, Dominique Poncelet, 'Par des traits d'Henri Michaux: La mémoire picturale du signe', *French Studies*, Vol. LX, no. 2 (April 2006), 205-217.

<sup>25</sup> There exist some studies at postgraduate level on Michaux's experimentation with signs that remain unpublished, for example, Christophe Hanna, 'Les "Signes" cinématiques et l'écriture en mouvement dans les livres avec "signes" d'Henri Michaux' (Maîtrise, Université de Provence, Aix-Marseille I, Centre d'Aix, 1994-1995). Two other PhD theses have recently been completed in similar areas: Serguei Chamchinov, 'Signes, écritures, peinture chez Henri Michaux' (Université de Paris 8, 2002); Leslie Jones, "'A Barbarian in Asia": Henri Michaux's Works in Ink, 1927-1955' (The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, May 2003). Margaret Rigaud-Drayton's book, *Henri Michaux: Poetry, Painting, and the Universal Sign* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), is linked to this subject, but is more generally concerned with analysing the notion of a universal language in the totality of Michaux's literary and artistic production from a psychoanalytical viewpoint.



published in 2004. The present study will therefore build on the research on Michaux's signs to date, and fill a critical gap that has not been considered in great depth by Michaux scholars around the world.

## Chapter 1

### Mapping a Creative Itinerary

In this first chapter, we will present Michaux's four books incorporating signs, comparing their respective structures and publication histories before examining their corresponding artistic and literary contexts. In a study of this kind, it is necessary to analyse these more descriptive details in order to establish the ways in which Michaux's experimentation with signs developed over the period of publication of these four books. Attention will be paid to the crossover between text and image in Michaux's output, which prepares the way for the first book incorporating signs, *Mouvements* (1951), to the effects of the Second World War on his literary and artistic production, and to his links with the post-war artistic tendency known as *art informel*. Michaux's intense period of mescaline experiments before *Par la voie des rythmes* (1974) will then be examined in order to determine whether this experimentation constitutes a radical departure from his general creative aims or if, on the contrary, it can be described as a continuation. This will be followed by a brief consideration of the meditative, spiritual outlook of his later life, during which period both *Saisir* (1979) and *Par des traits* (1984) were published. As a result, the richness and variety of Michaux's literary and artistic production will be ascertained and an understanding of his major aims acquired, before studying the conceptual intentions of the signs in more detail.

*Mouvements* is the first book to be published by Michaux that contains signs alongside texts in poetry and prose. The dual generic status of this publication points to its highly experimental nature. Through the interface of visual and verbal elements, Michaux continues his reflection on the possibilities of using the graphic sign for signifying and communicative purposes, thereby attempting to transcend what he regarded as the restrictive limitations of language. This process had started with the invented alphabets of 1927, entitled *Alphabet* (Fig. 1) and *Narration*, and continued at irregular intervals



Fig. 1: *Alphabet*, October, 1927  
(Indian ink on paper, 36 x 26 cm)  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007

for the rest of his life. These alphabets remain confined to a single page that appears destined for exhibition in an art gallery rather than inclusion in a book. Some of the sixty-four pages of reproductions of characters painted in Indian ink included in *Mouvements* have also been exhibited or published elsewhere; others were not chosen for the book, but they still constitute a part of the series.<sup>1</sup> It should be mentioned that at times Michaux admitted covering thousands of sheets of white paper with humanoid, animal or insect-like figures in Indian ink. The fact that he chose to situate some of these interdisciplinary works in a literary rather than visual setting, namely, the space of the book rather than that of the art gallery, is of utmost importance as it highlights his adherence to the world of books in spite of his misgivings about the linguistic sign.

The visual element plays a more dominant role than the verbal in *Mouvements*. The pages containing signs consist, on the whole, of anthropomorphic figures arranged in a linear pattern that can be read either horizontally or vertically (Fig. 2). This organised and rigid layout is, however, called into question by its own disintegration, for not all the signs are structured in this manner, and certain pages even appear to contain circular formations (Fig. 3). The verbal input consists of an eleven page-long poetic text, which serves as a central divider to the whole book, and a three page-long postface in prose. The status of the latter is explicitly different to that of the verse text, as it is not an integral part of the creative work but has an essentially paratextual function. The poetic text in *Mouvements* coexists with the signs, evoking their emergence and development, whilst the text in prose is rather a reflection on the creative process that brought about the signs and a radical critique of conventional linguistic expression. The addition of a brief analytical commentary, produced after the creation of a text and inserted as either a preface or a postface, is a relatively common element in Michaux's early texts. Written in the same self-reflective manner, the postfaces to *Mes Propriétés* (1930) and *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur* (1938) corroborate this

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<sup>1</sup> Following the auction sale of René Bertelé's collection of books and paintings in 1997, this series is now sadly dispersed amongst many individual private collectors. See the auction catalogue: *Collection René Bertelé: Écrivains et peintres du vingtième siècle* (Paris: Drouot Richelieu, 28/11/1997).



Fig. 2:  
*Mouvements, OC II, p. 548*  
© Editions Gallimard

Fig. 3:  
*Mouvements, OC II, p. 561*  
© Editions Gallimard



fact.<sup>2</sup>

*Mouvements* was first published in 1951 by Gallimard in a partly autonomous collection, 'Le Point du jour'.<sup>3</sup> This small publishing house had been founded by René Bertelé in 1946, and was named in an overt homage to André Breton.<sup>4</sup> The very same year, Michaux published his first book with Bertelé as editor, *Apparitions*, which also contains seven of the former's drawings and *frottages*.<sup>5</sup> Bertelé continued to run 'Le Point du jour' once it fell under the aegis of Gallimard, and persevered with the publication and new editions of works by such poets as Jacques Prévert, Tristan Tzara and Eugène Guillevic. In 1982, Gallimard published a new edition of *Mouvements* in a smaller format,<sup>6</sup> including the same poem and postface, but making some adjustments to the signs: four pages of signs towards the end are replaced by completely different pages (Figs. 4-5).<sup>7</sup> This is not mentioned by Raymond Bellour in the second volume of Michaux's collected works, although, in his bibliographical notes to the 1982 edition, he does refer to a similar, rather than identical, version. In his *Bibliographie des livres et plaquettes d'Henri Michaux*, Maurice Imbert alludes to another publication of *Mouvements* in the

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<sup>2</sup> Michaux, 'Postface à *Mes Propriétés*', *OC I*, pp. 511-12; Michaux, 'Postface à *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur*', *OC I*, pp. 662-65.

<sup>3</sup> In his *Bibliographie des livres et plaquettes d'Henri Michaux*, Maurice Imbert states that *Mouvements* was first published in 1952. In an original edition of *Mouvements* at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, however, the publication date is 1951.

<sup>4</sup> André Breton's *Point du jour* was published by Gallimard in 1934. See André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. II, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet with Philippe Bernier, Étienne-Alain Hubert and José Pierre (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1992), pp. 263-392. The polysemy of this title is discussed in the notes in *ibid.*, pp. 1433-34. René Bertelé's reaction to this text is also mentioned: 'La valeur des textes qu'André Breton a réunis dans *Point du jour* me paraît accrue par leur rapprochement. À les confronter, il en jaillit des étincelles nouvelles. Je viens de relire ces pages écrites au cours des dix dernières années, et qui traitent des sujets les plus divers [...]. J'y sens constamment s'affirmer un des esprits les plus lucides et surtout les plus *libres* de notre temps.' *Ibid.*, p. 1437, Bertelé's emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> *Apparitions* was re-edited, with some adjustments and without any visual input, as part of *La Vie dans les plis*, first published by Gallimard in 1949.

<sup>6</sup> The second edition of *Mouvements* (21.5 x 16.7 cm) is considerably smaller than the first (32.5 x 25.3 cm). We do not agree with Imbert's bibliography, which declares that the second edition of *Mouvements* was published in 1984 rather than in 1982.

<sup>7</sup> In the fourth section, the seventh, eighth, ninth and fifteenth pages of drawings differ in the 1951 and the 1982 editions.



Fig. 4:  
*Mouvements* (1951),  
replaced by *OC II*, p. 589  
© Editions Gallimard

Fig. 5:  
*Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 589  
© Editions Gallimard



Gallimard 'Poésie' collection in 1990 along with *Poésie pour pouvoir*, *Tranches de savoir* and *Misérable miracle: La Mescaline*.<sup>8</sup> This edition in fact only contains the latter, Michaux's first text devoted entirely to relating his experimentation with hallucinogenic substances.

An updated version of *Mouvements* was also published by Gallimard in 1954 as an integral part of a larger collection of texts, *Face aux verrous*. This edition, however, incorporates neither the signs nor the postface, both of which play such an important role in *Mouvements*. Another edition of this collection of texts was published in 1967, with some slight alterations to *Mouvements*, but again without the signs or the postface. This absence undermines the interdisciplinary status of the text and the importance of the signs to Michaux and his publishing house. *Face aux verrous* was published once more, this time with the original signs and the postface from 1951, in the Gallimard 'Poésie' collection in 1992.<sup>9</sup> A selection of texts from *Face aux verrous*, including the poem from *Mouvements*, was also published in an updated version of *L'Espace du dedans* in 1966.<sup>10</sup> In the second volume of Michaux's collected works, the signs and postface are again published separately in accordance with the editorial conditions of the Pléiade edition as stated in the first volume: 'Chaque recueil est ici donné à lire dans sa dernière version, mais sa place est déterminée par la date de sa première parution.'<sup>11</sup> As a result, the last version of *Mouvements* is from *Face aux verrous*, published in 1967, whereas the pages of signs are from *Mouvements*, published in 1982. This appears rather incongruous as these two versions were never published together. They instead conform to the imposed editorial constraints for they are the last versions of each verbal and visual text.

From this, it is clear that Michaux constantly revised his texts and signs. This in turn validates the 'Note de l'éditeur' added to the 1992 version of *Face aux verrous*, which inconsistently combines the

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<sup>8</sup> Imbert, *Bibliographie des livres et plaquettes d'Henri Michaux*, unpaginated.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1992 Gallimard edition, the section including the text in verse is paginated whilst the sections containing graphic signs are not. This inconsistency between text pages and sign pages is confusing. In the 1951 and 1982 editions of *Mouvements*, neither text nor sign pages are given numbers.

<sup>10</sup> Michaux, *L'Espace du dedans*, pp. 32-41.

<sup>11</sup> Bellour, 'Note sur la présente édition', in Michaux, *OC I*, p. CXXXVII.



1967 version of the poem with the original signs and postface from 1951. It states:

Comme très souvent c'est le cas chez Michaux, les textes et les illustrations ont fait l'objet de multiples corrections au cours de leurs rééditions successives. La complexité des interventions de l'auteur justifierait un appareil critique qui alourdirait considérablement la lecture et qui paraîtrait déplacé dans une édition séparée d'une œuvre singulière.<sup>12</sup>

This constant updating and correcting of material, both visual and verbal, underlines Michaux's interest in the transformations of the ongoing creative process and his fear of any finished product: 'L'œuvre achevée, j'aurais peur qu'elle ne m'achève aussi et ne m'ensevelisse. S'en méfier.'<sup>13</sup> It also points to his active knowledge of certain Oriental philosophies, such as Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. In *Vide et plein: Le Langage pictural chinois*, François Cheng makes reference to Chang Yen-yuang, the historian from the T'ang dynasty (618-907), whose comments on the notion of a finished painting are similar to Michaux's own conception of the finished work of art:

En peinture, on doit éviter le souci d'accomplir un travail trop appliqué et trop fini dans le dessin des formes et la notation des couleurs, comme de trop étaler sa technique, la privant ainsi de secret et d'aura. C'est pourquoi il ne faut pas craindre l'inachevé, mais bien plutôt déplorer le trop-achevé. Du moment que l'on sait qu'une chose est achevée, quel besoin y a-t-il de l'achever? Car l'inachevé ne signifie pas forcément l'inaccompli; le défaut de l'inaccompli réside justement dans le fait de ne pas reconnaître une chose suffisamment achevée.<sup>14</sup>

It can be asserted that Michaux saw both signs and text as constantly fluid, rewritable entities, reflecting the incessant movements of the inner self, rather than as definitive or permanent expressions. Indeed, the very composition of the signs bears witness to this reluctance to confer any finality upon his work.

Michaux therefore resists completion in both his visual and verbal output, preferring a series of different versions to a unique

<sup>12</sup> 'Note de l'éditeur', in Michaux, *Face aux verrous* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 203. This 'note' is not included in the second volume of Michaux's collected works.

<sup>13</sup> Michaux, '[Faut-il vraiment une déclaration?]', *OC II*, pp. 1029-32 (p. 1029).

<sup>14</sup> François Cheng, *Vide et plein: Le Langage pictural chinois* (Paris: Seuil, Collection 'Points Essais', 1991), p. 85.

finished product. This idea of seriality prompts comparison with Walter Benjamin and the notion of anti-auratic art that he outlines in his famous essay, 'L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée' (1936). Benjamin explains that, although works of art have always been reproduced, the technological advances in this domain at the beginning of the twentieth century, combined with the invention of cinema and photography, have completely transformed their authenticity as it is impossible to reproduce an artwork's unique existence in a particular time and place. Thanks to certain mechanical means, we can, for example, enlarge a picture or put a reproduction of, say, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* on our living room wall. This shattering of the work of art's unicity dramatically changes the viewer's relationship to the work of art and what Benjamin calls its 'aura':

Ce qui, dans l'œuvre d'art, à l'époque de la reproduction mécanisée, dépérit, c'est son aura. Processus symptomatique dont la signification dépasse de beaucoup le domaine de l'art. *La technique de reproduction – telle pourrait être la formule générale – détache la chose reproduite du domaine de la tradition. En multipliant sa reproduction, elle met à la place de son unique existence son existence en série et, en permettant à la reproduction de s'offrir en n'importe quelle situation au spectateur ou à l'auditeur, elle actualise la chose reproduite.*<sup>15</sup>

Reproduction has become cheap and accessible and mass availability has replaced the unique work of art. Consequently, the series has taken on an important role in twentieth-century art (one only has to think of Pop Art and Andy Warhol's *32 Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1961-62) and Michaux's signs can be seen as a manifestation of this tendency. Each page of signs is unique, and yet similar to the others. This interreferentiality forms a dialogue between the four books containing signs, and indeed all his experimentation with signs, which invites a wide range of interpretations.

The division of the sixty-four pages of *Mouvements* into four sections suggests the exploration of four different themes with four different conclusions. The first two sequences contain fifteen pages of signs and the second two, which follow the text in verse, contain seventeen pages. It was Michaux's editor and close friend, René

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée', trans. by Pierre Klossowski, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I, 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 709-39 (p. 711), Benjamin's/Klossowski's italics.

Bertelé, who chose the signs and through this methodical division he appears to place equal importance on each section of signs in terms of length, although they all differ in thematic content. On account of its central position, the text in verse appears to be given pride of place, becoming a pivot for the signs. Indeed, each 'movement' has its own visual particularity. The signs in the first section are composed with thick brush-strokes and bear a resemblance at times to primitive or childlike representations of human beings, birds, animals and insects. They start off in a very ordered, regular structure, which seems to imply lethargy and slowness. As the reader turns the pages, this rigid, linear structure starts to disperse, and the brush-strokes become less controlled. This connotes a gradual acceleration, and yet the signs revert periodically to a more rectilinear layout on the page. Towards the end of the section, the signs appear to be dancing, fighting, moving more and more quickly, growing larger and larger until a blank page puts a definitive stop to this acceleration.

This use of the blank page is characteristic of Michaux's books containing signs, and is used at the end of each section in *Mouvements* to impose a form of control. The signs in the second section accelerate towards a circular layout. The page, here, begins to resemble a battleground. The third 'movement' remains fairly tightly structured until the very last page, which is subject to an anarchic explosion: a giant human sign attacks a crouching insect sign (Fig. 6). This page looks as if it has been signed by Michaux the artist for, in the lower right-hand corner, there appears to be a rather blurred or smudged sign-version of his trademark signature. The fourth and final section is characterised by its finer marks on the page that recall scribbling and handwriting and suggest the use of a pen rather than a brush.

It is somewhat surprising that Michaux accepted this almost symmetrical pattern conceived by Bertelé, as he considered symmetry to be a constraint on artistic expression. Twenty years later, in *Émergences-Résurgences*, an astonished Michaux admits to perceiving a symmetrical element in some of his mescaline drawings, underlining his dislike, up to that point, for this type of mirroring technique:

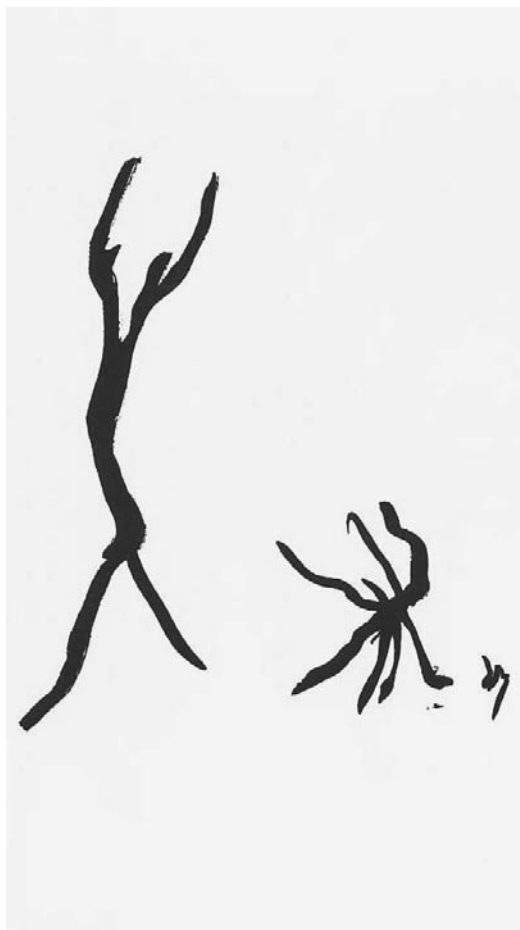


Fig. 6:  
*Mouvements, OC II*, p. 579  
© Editions Gallimard

Lié aux interruptions incessantes, aux changements de sens, à une inversion spasmodique régulière, d'une régularité comme l'alternance dans le courant électrique alternatif, régularité inflexible et indéfiniment répétée, ce stupéfiant caractère m'amena à la symétrie, dont jusque-là j'étais adversaire décidé, toujours prêt à partir en guerre contre elle. En dessinant je faisais maintenant tout naturellement de petits alignements égaux et parallèles.<sup>16</sup>

From this quotation, it can be deduced that the symmetrical element is intrinsically linked to the nature of the visions induced by mescaline. Michaux's experimentation with mescaline, however, did not start until after the publication of *Mouvements*, so the acceptance of Bertelé's almost symmetrical organisation of the pages of signs remains ambiguous. It can be asserted that Michaux's view towards symmetry changed considerably during his lifetime. In a footnote to the text in prose at the end of *Par des traits*, Michaux states that one aim of creating these signs would be to 'rééquilibrer l'Homme dissymétrique'.<sup>17</sup> This change of mind is reflected in Eastern philosophies, such as Taoism, in which Michaux was immersed throughout his life and which are based on harmony, order and balance.

Furthermore, Véra Mihailovich-Dickman suggests a fascinating analogy with ancient Chinese culture, by linking the layout of the sixty-four pages of signs in *Mouvements* to the sixty-four hexagrams which make up the Chinese text, *The Book of Changes*.<sup>18</sup>

Cette composition renvoie sans doute à une référence intertextuelle chinoise, car il se trouve que le *Yi-King*, le livre de mutations et un des plus vieux traités chinois, reconnaît soixante-quatre mutations principales dans le flux du Tao, mutations qui sont divisées en deux mouvements, le premier de trente mutations, et le deuxième de trente-quatre. Chacune de ces mutations est elle-même remplie de mutations possibles, qui sont issues de l'opposition fondamentale des contraires qui refusent de se fixer. Le recueil recèle l'univers entier.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences, OC III*, pp. 541-660 (p. 623).

<sup>17</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits, OC III*, p. 1285.

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Change*, trans. by John Blofeld (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965). This text is also known in English translation as *I Ching: Book of Changes*, trans. by James Legge (New York: University Books, 1964). This translation was first published by Clarendon Press, Oxford in 1899 in the collection 'Sacred Books of the East'.

<sup>19</sup> Mihailovich-Dickman, 'Idéogrammes: L'Apport de la Chine ou "voie par l'écriture"', pp. 168-70.

Bearing this in mind, it is hard to believe that it is pure coincidence that the layout of *Mouvements* mirrors exactly that of *The Book of Changes*. Although it was Bertelé who imposed this structure on the signs, there is no doubt that Michaux would have read this fundamental text because of his knowledge of Confucianism and Taoism, whose major principles are to be found here. Moreover, he quotes from this text in *Idéogrammes en Chine*, published twenty years after *Mouvements*:

Yi Tin, Yi Yang, tche wei Tao  
Un temps Yin, un temps Yang  
Voilà la voie, voilà le tao.<sup>20</sup>

These references to *The Book of Changes* point to an interest in chance operations and the constantly moving process through which a text is formed, rather than the finished product. This is also reflected in the works of other writers and artists, for example, the chance compositions of American composer, visual artist and poet, John Cage. We will see that the other books incorporating graphic signs are not subject to the same organisation as *Mouvements*. Indeed, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* appear to follow no textual or visual pattern.

Twenty-three years separate the publication of *Mouvements* from the second book incorporating signs, *Par la voie des rythmes*. This long interval is highly significant for several reasons. *Par la voie des rythmes* differs substantially in format to *Mouvements* for the former contains no text, but rather seventy-nine pages of freeform drawings divided into five movements. This number does not include the title pages of each chapter, as even the contents page and chapter headings are composed solely of signs (Fig. 7). *Par la voie des rythmes* thus contains reproductions of eighty-seven drawings in black fibre-tipped pen including the contents page and the front and back covers.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michaux, *Idéogrammes en Chine*, OC III, pp. 815-852 (p. 839).

<sup>21</sup> The number of reproductions in *Par la voie des rythmes* is often reported inaccurately, for example, it is cited as eighty-four drawings including the front and back covers in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, ed. by Catherine De Zegher (New York: Merrell, 2000), p. 234. In this catalogue, it is added that these drawings

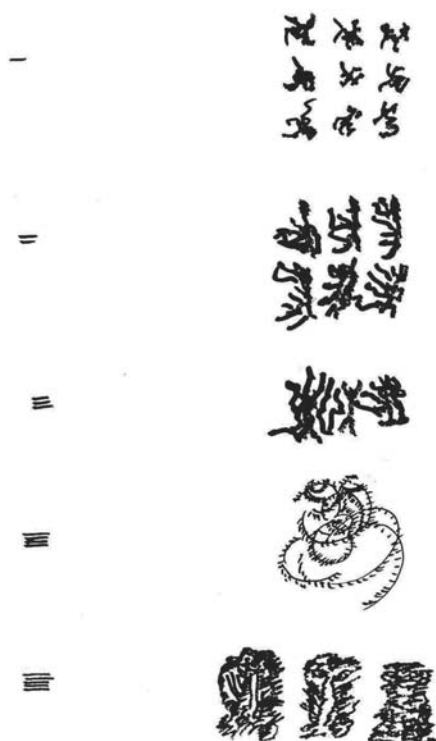


Fig. 7:

*Par la voie des rythmes, OC III, p. 813*  
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are 'ink on paper', which is strictly true, but does not make a distinction between the instruments used, namely, a brush for *Mouvements* and a fibre-tipped pen for *Par la voie des rythmes*. See *ibid.*, p. 245.

Twelve lithographs by the author accompany the first eighty copies of the one and only print run. And indeed, we shall see that this abrupt difference in textual content between *Mouvements* and *Par la voie des rythmes* can be traced back in part to Michaux's literary and artistic activity during the very interval that separates them, namely, his clinical experimentation with drugs. Michaux takes his experimentation with signs one step further in *Par la voie des rythmes* by removing almost all trace of the rigid constraints of the written word and creating a rhythmic structure that relies entirely on blank space and the blank page.

One could, like Anne-Élisabeth Halpern, consider *Par la voie des rythmes* from a ludic point of view:

Simulacre de livre, le volume s'amuse avec le convenu du verbal et du littéraire, tel que l'imprimerie nous a accoutumé à le voir: table des matières sous formes d'idéogrammes, têtes de chapitre dont la disposition nous est familière autant qu'elle nous déroute, et jusqu'à son titre joyeusement polysémique. Rien n'y est à lire, en effet: la 'voie' y est orale, musicale – un chemin graphique à suivre. Métaphore ludique du livre, *Par la voie des rythmes* en est aussi la traduction en équation, son algébrisation en quelque sorte.<sup>22</sup>

Despite valuable emphasis on polysemy, graphic arts and music, another interpretation for this book could be as the most extreme example, the culmination of Michaux's experimentation with signs, as it contains no alphabetic content, apart from the author's name, the title and the colophon, or Arabic numerals. Instead the blank page plays a vital role as a textual divider that also maps out the rhythm of the text, as it had done previously in *Mouvements*. In *Par la voie des rythmes*, it becomes even more essential to the signs in the absence of any text. Michaux has clearly formulated a contents page at the end of this volume that in turn stipulates an order through five different chapter headings, and suggests an organisation comparable to that of *Mouvements*, which is also divided into five sections. In spite of this initial resemblance, these five chapters are not structured in the same way as in *Mouvements*. The first chapter of *Par la voie des rythmes* is twenty-two pages long, comprising eighteen pages of signs divided by

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<sup>22</sup> Anne-Élisabeth Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète* (Paris: Seli Arslan, 1998), p. 353.



blank pages at irregular intervals.<sup>23</sup> The second chapter is the same length, but includes twenty-one pages of signs with one blank dividing page before the title page of chapter three. The third chapter is composed of nine pages of signs divided by three blank pages. The fourth chapter starts and ends with a blank page separated by five pages of signs. Finally, the fifth chapter, the longest, contains thirty pages of signs divided by four blank pages. This final chapter is followed by two blank pages and the contents page. It can thus be affirmed that the organisation of *Par la voie des rythmes*, unlike that of *Mouvements*, does not possess symmetry or regularity of structure.

The last two books incorporating signs, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*, were published within the last five years of Michaux's life. Both volumes, like *Par la voie des rythmes*, contain drawings in black fibre-tipped pen. They appear to fit neatly into the creative itinerary started by *Mouvements* in 1951 as they reintroduce text into the sequences of signs, and these texts provide a verbal discourse on Michaux's double activity. Indeed, the strict division of text and image in *Mouvements* and the radical nature of the textless *Par la voie des rythmes* are both implicitly questioned as here, in both books, text and signs sometimes share the same page.

*Saisir* was published five years after *Par la voie des rythmes* by the same publishing house, *fata morgana*. The first seventy-five volumes of the first and only print run were accompanied by one lithograph by the author. *Saisir* is composed of both signs and written text in prose and poetry, which sometimes intermingle on the same page. It contains sixty-seven pages of reproductions of fairly figurative drawings in black fibre-tipped pen: the reader can make out series of animals and insects in horizontal, vertical, diagonal and circular configurations, which point to the notion of a bestiary, a type of lexicon of animals and insects.

The title, *Saisir*, is evocative of Michaux's quest to seize and then represent even the most abstract information in his signs. The apparently impossible task of grasping and understanding, for example, the essence of the inner self had also been voiced in his texts produced under the influence of hallucinogenic substances:

Comme l'estomac ne se digère pas lui-même, comme il importe qu'il ne se digère pas, l'esprit est ainsi fait qu'il ne puisse se saisir lui-même, saisir

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<sup>23</sup> The total indicated includes the title page of each chapter.

directement, constamment son mécanisme et son action, ayant autre chose à saisir.<sup>24</sup>

And yet, the effect of these mind-altering drugs meant that, no longer concerned with exterior reality, Michaux was at times suddenly able to see and understand his inner self and also the many inner actions and movements that create thought:

Il [l'esprit] saisit alors son 'saisir', état tout à fait hors de l'ordinaire, spectacle unique, aubaine dont, toutefois, pris par d'autres merveilles et par des goûts nouveaux, par des jeux de l'esprit dont auparavant il eût été incapable, le drogué songe peu à profiter.<sup>25</sup>

Through both verbal and visual means, *Saisir* explores this difficulty in apprehending and representing the extraordinary 'merveilles' of the inner self, with which the drug-taker, in Michaux's experience, is not overly concerned.

*Saisir* is more loosely structured than *Mouvements* and *Par la voie des rythmes*; text mingles with signs throughout the book at irregular intervals, sometimes even sharing the same page. If the blank page is considered to be the major dividing element, following the system established in *Mouvements*, *Saisir* is structured as follows: the book starts with a dedication to Micheline Phan Kim Chi, followed by a blank page, and then by a page containing two crab-like signs.<sup>26</sup> This leads the reader to the second blank page, followed by six pages of prose and one page of three signs that resemble scarecrows. The third blank page leads the reader to a section of three pages of insect-like signs (Fig. 8). This is followed by the fourth blank page, which is in turn followed by a section containing eleven pages of signs, divided unequally by a single page of text in verse. The fifth blank page then opens a section of one page in verse and four pages of signs. The sixth blank page provides the interval before the longest section of the book, which includes a first page combining text and signs followed by pages of signs, as well as pages of text in verse or prose, and

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<sup>24</sup> Michaux, *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit et les innombrables petites*, OC III, pp.311-428 (p.314).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>26</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 935.



Fig. 8: *Saisir*, OC III, p. 941  
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sometimes both. The seventh blank page puts an end to this section of thirty-four pages, and leads the reader to a shorter sequence of twelve pages, including ten pages of signs and two pages of text in prose. The eighth blank page introduces the reader to two pages of text in prose and five pages of signs. The final blank page opens the concluding section, which includes three pages of text and six pages of signs. As a result, although the initial figures of nine blank pages and ninety pages of text and signs point to a possibly regular and ordered layout, it can be concluded from this brief analysis that the structure of *Saisir* follows no organised pattern.

The graphic nature of Michaux's experimentation with signs is emphasised by the title of his fourth and final book incorporating signs, *Par des traits*. This title extends the means by which the poet-artist can explore both inner subjectivity and outer reality, announced in *Misérable miracle* as: 'Par les mots, les signes, les dessins.'<sup>27</sup> *Par des traits*, published by fata morgana on Michaux's last birthday, 24 May 1984, was the last book to be published in his lifetime.<sup>28</sup> It consists of sixty-five pages of reproductions of drawings in black fibre-tipped pen.<sup>29</sup> The text in free verse in the middle of this book is kept totally separate from the signs, whilst each page of the essay concluding the volume contains signs at the top and text in prose at the bottom of the page. The notion of an individual prelinguistic state, which Michaux terms '*des avant-langues*'<sup>30</sup> in opposition to a language used collectively, is introduced in a text that parodies linguistic treatises of the eighteenth century, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781).<sup>31</sup>

At first glance, *Par des traits* appears to be structured in much the same manner as *Mouvements*, with a text in verse in the middle

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<sup>27</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, p. 619.

<sup>28</sup> According to Micheline Phankim, the executor of Michaux's will, he was not at all pleased with the publication format and quality of the reproductions in this volume (Conversation with M. Phankim, 10/04/2002). Micheline Phankim also kindly allowed me to view the original drawings for *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* at the Michaux archives.

<sup>29</sup> Some of the original drawings used for *Par des traits* were composed in red ink and red fibre-tipped pen.

<sup>30</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1280.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed analysis of this connection, see Dessons, 'La Manière d'Henry: prolégomènes à un traité du trait', pp. 64-65. Michaux would have been sympathetic to Rousseau's philosophy in general and, in particular, to his ideas on a return to childlike expression, free from the corruption of civilisation.

and a type of manifesto in prose at the end. This text in prose differs in status to that of *Mouvements*, as it is not a postface but rather an essay that is an integral part of the text. The blank page, moreover, is no longer of such central importance for divisional purposes in *Par des traits*, for almost every page of signs is accompanied by a blank page. Four pages containing a single sign serve as section markers,<sup>32</sup> rather like the chapter headings in *Par la voie des rythmes*. *Par des traits* opens with a page containing a single sign, directing the reader's attention to the first section of the book. This includes thirteen pages of signs, which have a circular rather than linear configuration (Fig. 9), and twelve blank pages.

The second section consists of one blank page and an eight page-long text in verse. On the last page including text in this section, there are also two drawn lines, emphasising the visual materiality of the written line and opening the page to other possibilities than the written word. The third section is composed of six pages of signs and five blank pages. The fourth section is the longest and contains thirty-two pages of signs and seven blank pages. The fifth section opens with a title in capitals, 'DES LANGUES ET DES ÉCRITURES / POURQUOI L'ENVIE DE S'EN DÉTOURNER', accompanied by two signs. This is followed by a blank page and in turn nine pages of text in prose with signs at the top of each page. A page containing a footnote follows and the text ends with a page containing a few scribbled signs rather like an illegible signature, which appears to contain the letters *H* and *M*.<sup>33</sup> Once again, the division of a 101 page-long text into five sections seems conducive to establishing sections of equal length. But, as we have seen, this is by no means the case.

The signs in *Par des traits* are the most abstract of the tetralogy examined in this book: many pages are filled with dots and dashes, some following a linear organisation, others not. Certain pages are almost totally filled with signs, reminding the reader of Abstract Expressionist all-over painting. Thick black marks are often interspersed with narrow lines. The contour of these lines emphasises the fact that they were drawn with a black fibre-tipped pen rather than a brush. Some lines are a sketchy black, which increases their dynamic, gestural effect. This is far more pronounced in the original

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Michaux, *Par des traits*, *OC III*, p. 1248.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1285.



Fig. 9: *Par des traits, OC III*, p. 1237  
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drawings, in which we can distinguish the sequence of the composition of the lines on account of their varying intensities. Two pages appear incongruous in comparison with the others, which appear to be organised on the whole thematically. One page resembles a musical score: the anthropomorphic figures are arranged like musical notes on what appear to be diagonally descending bar lines.<sup>34</sup> And another, with vertical and horizontal lines criss-crossing, looks like a page of mathematical symbols or Arabic calligraphy.<sup>35</sup> From examining the original drawing of the latter page, it appears that Michaux composed the vertical lines before adding the horizontal squiggles, thus emphasising the tension between horizontality and verticality on the page of the Western book. A few pages of signs in *Par des traits* appear to be similar to those in *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes* and *Saisir* with glyphs that resemble humanoid figures dancing or fighting in circular groups or animal and plant-like creations.

From this brief presentation of the structure of the four books incorporating signs, the major difference between *Mouvements* and the three other volumes is the division of the pages of signs into four strict sequences, each divided by a blank page. There is no doubt that Bertelé's input into the creative process transforms the structure of *Mouvements* and provides an organisation of the signs which makes this work significantly different to *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*. Bertelé's editorial role and intervention in *Mouvements* will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 5. Other differences become obvious when comparing the publishing histories of these four innovative texts. *Mouvements* is the only one to have been published several times, to have been included in collections of texts, and to have been separated from its signs and postface. *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* were all published by *fata morgana*.<sup>36</sup> *Par des traits* was reprinted in 1999, but no alterations were made either to the texts or to the signs. *Mouvements* is also the only text amongst these four books to include a postface. From the

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<sup>34</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1258.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1276.

<sup>36</sup> The presentation of these three books in the third volume of the Pléiade edition is highly disappointing as, on account of editorial constraints, two pages of the original work appear on one page divided by a horizontal line. This obviously changes the reception of the signs in a radical manner and shows how they are often relegated to a minor or marginal position in Michaux's *œuvre*.

first alphabets to the last book published in his lifetime, Michaux never really abandoned his search for a new universal expressive form that would free him from the constraints of language and words. The different structures and publishing backgrounds of each of the books incorporating signs highlight the fact that, although they constitute a series, they are all unique entities, distinct from conventional literary categories. Their respective literary and artistic contexts will now be considered in order to perceive the conditions in which each book was produced and to examine their respective conceptual frameworks.

### **Introducing *Mouvements*: The Literary and Artistic Background**

This section will examine the period leading to the publication of *Mouvements* in order to determine whether this volume was conceived as a logical continuation of Michaux's contemporary literary and artistic production. By 1951, Michaux had already produced several books containing both verbal and visual elements. Indeed, this combination of text and image had been suggested from a very early stage. In several texts, he evoked painting as constituting a more direct expressive form than writing. For example, in *Ecuador*, published in 1929, he states:

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!<sup>37</sup>

He also described ten of his own pictures in 'Dessins commentés', published in *La Nuit remue* in 1935.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, from 1936 onwards, Michaux published books with both verbal and pictorial content, starting with *Entre centre et absence*. He would continue to do so for the rest of his life. These books indicate an attempt to go beyond mere illustration, as the relationship between word and image varies immensely from one work to another. Unfortunately, the majority of these, like *Mouvements*, are now published without the visual input.

Many of Michaux's books contain his own graphic work, and certain works prove more problematic than others when considering

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<sup>37</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, OC I, p. 151.

<sup>38</sup> Michaux, 'Dessins commentés', *La Nuit remue*, OC I, pp. 436-40.



the relationship between text and image. Around the date of the first publication of *Mouvements*, some images appear to follow the ekphrastic tradition by illustrating or accompanying the text, whilst others reverse this practice, the text providing a commentary on the image. In other books, however, Michaux's only visual contribution is a frontispiece. *Peintures*, published in 1939, is the first book in which he places reproductions of his gouache paintings in direct relation to his texts. The paintings are by no means mere illustrations of the texts: 'poèmes et peintures sont étroitement mêlés comme pour la confrontation de deux moyens d'expression qui traduisent respectivement des thèmes analogues.'<sup>39</sup> According to Michaux, 'ce sont les gouaches qui ont fait naître les poèmes de *Peintures*.'<sup>40</sup> The texts appear to extend the thematics of the paintings rather than to comment on or describe them, and are indicative of Michaux's somewhat paradoxical approach to his literary and artistic production. On the one hand, he appreciates the immediacy of non-verbal expression, yet he still resorts to using words. This need for verbal output to accompany the visual is also present in *Mouvements*. Furthermore, Michaux wrote a short preface for *Peintures* entitled, 'Qui il est', which recalls the title of his early autobiographical text, the enigmatic *Qui je fus*. In this preface, he describes the effect of changing activities from writing to painting:

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 (partie, non, système de connexions plutôt). On change de gare de triage quand on se met à peindre.<sup>41</sup>

This text is also included as 'Peindre' in *Passages* with some lexical and typographical adjustments, but not to the above quotation. The first version of this passage is written using the third person voice, much like *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence*, Michaux's autobiographical chronology which was first published in Robert Bréchon's critical study. Furthermore, 'Qui il est' contains biographical details which do not figure in 'Peindre'. The

<sup>39</sup> Henri Michaux: *Les Années de synthèse 1965-1984*, p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>41</sup> Michaux, 'Qui il est', *Peintures, OC I*, pp. 705-06 (p. 705), reprinted with some changes as 'Peindre', *Passages, OC II*, pp. 318-19 (p. 318).

latter text is composed in the first person and contains two footnotes which do not appear in the earlier version. Both texts underline Michaux's awareness from an early stage of the difference at a creative level between producing visual and literary material. We shall see that he rarely comments on the interaction between these media, other than to deplore the restrictive nature of the written word and to celebrate the liberating capacity of visual expression. This does not, however, prevent him from using both expressive forms together. And indeed, the numerous examples of crossovers between text and image in his output attest to the major differences and similarities between visual and verbal creation.

Michaux's double activity provides the basis for reflection on his exploitation of different forms of expression as a means of representing inner and outer reality. For example, in *Arbres des Tropiques* (1942), he aims to render a single phenomenon by means of writing and drawing.<sup>42</sup> These two expressive forms share certain physical and material characteristics as they are both produced using the same instrument and support. They are significantly different from painting in their use of monochrome as is emphasised when the drawings from *Arbres des Tropiques* are compared to the highly coloured watercolours Michaux was also producing around this time. Mihailovich-Dickman considers *Arbres des Tropiques* as an important precursor to *Mouvements* on account of the drawings which evoke variations on the theme of the tree:

Dans *Arbres des Tropiques*, après une introduction de quelques pages, ce sont les arbres qui parlent, dont dix-huit dessins-signes qui captent l'arbre comme cela a rarement été fait, comme s'il en avait extrait leur alphabet. Michaux en perçoit les gestes et tente de les saisir tout comme il vivra, ceux de 'l'homme' qu'il tentera de représenter, tant bien de l'intérieur que de l'extérieur, en encre de Chine sur des centaines de feuilles d'où seront extraites celles de *Mouvements* en 1951.<sup>43</sup>

And indeed, it does seem as if some of these drawings have human characteristics, which are implied by certain postures and stances and suggest a link with the figures in *Mouvements*. Neither verbal nor visual output, however, is able to portray the reality of the *Arbres des*

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<sup>42</sup> Michaux, *Arbres des Tropiques*, OC I, pp. 721-43.

<sup>43</sup> Mihailovich-Dickman, 'Idéogrammes: L'Apport de la Chine ou "voie par l'écriture"', p. 168.

*Tropiques*. In this book, Michaux shows how each form of expression is flawed and incomplete in terms of signifying capacity; both remain mere metaphors for the reality that constitute these tropical trees.

Another example of the interchange between text and image in Michaux's early output is *Peintures et dessins*.<sup>44</sup> This book is significant for our purposes as it contains two pages of alphabets<sup>45</sup> in which some of the drawings separated by regular grids bear a distinct resemblance to hieroglyphs, underlining Michaux's continued experimentation with pictographic and ideographic forms initiated with the 1927 alphabets. This use of the grid could also be interpreted as a reflection of Michaux's awareness of modern abstract art as many visual artists, such as Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich, were experimenting with this rectilinear form. René Bertelé played a capital role in the conception of this book as he would again five years later with *Mouvements*. Indeed, the editor chose many of the titles and excerpts from Michaux's written texts to accompany the images. *Peintures et dessins* also contains the first essay in which Michaux reflects upon his own art and realises that he is now a visual artist, 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture', re-edited in *Passages* four years later. The original edition of this book provides an intriguing and somewhat paradoxical interaction between text and image. Raymond Bellour states in his notes to the first volume of Michaux's collected works:

Sur chaque image un papier transparent porte en fortes lettres rouges un titre (de texte ou de recueil) et quelques lignes qui en sont extraites. De sorte que ces mots se trouvent à la fois brouiller l'image et en participer sur ce mode confus, jusqu'à ce qu'on choisisse de soulever le calque pour la regarder seule. L'écart entre mots et images est bien situé par la précision de ce geste: les mots défigurant ici d'entrée de jeu l'image qui sans cesse les refigure, ailleurs, selon son mode propre.<sup>46</sup>

By using this format, Michaux appears to indicate the impossibility of attaining satisfactory verbal and visual expression as the words block out the image and the image simultaneously impedes any interpretation of the text. And yet we are able to turn the page so that

<sup>44</sup> Michaux, *Peintures et dessins* (Paris: Le Point du jour, 1946).

<sup>45</sup> Michaux, *Peintures et dessins*, *OC I*, pp. 855-956 (pp. 930-33).

<sup>46</sup> Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' to *Peintures et dessins*, in *OC I*, pp. 1368-71 (pp. 1369-70).

this is no longer the case. The reader is therefore witness to a literal and simultaneous crossover of text and image, which could be said to be emblematic of Michaux's visual and verbal output in general. Each form of expression in *Peintures et dessins* still retains its individual identity through the mobility of the page.

Although Michaux often used word and image together, he still pursued both creative activities separately. He composed many critical commentaries on his own artistic process as well as tributes to specific artists, such as Zao Wou-Ki and René Magritte, often underlining his personal artistic concerns and influences through their selection. For example, the commentary on the drawings of Klee, 'Aventures de lignes', published in 1954 and included in the second edition of *Passages* in 1963, draws attention to Michaux's interest in the expressive possibilities of the graphic line.<sup>47</sup> Several texts on Michaux's conception of art were published in the first edition of *Passages* in 1950. Many of them are particularly relevant to the experimentation contained in *Mouvements*, with texts on nature, childhood, space, painting and the differences between verbal and visual activities from the point of view of their production and reception.

Michaux was not only experimenting with the exchange between word and image when *Mouvements* was first published. Following his volumes of travel writing, *Ecuador* and *Un Barbare en Asie*, based on first-hand experience in South America and Asia, he was now creating fictitious countries with imaginary inhabitants. *Ailleurs*, published in 1948, grouped together the fantastical inventions of 'Au Pays de la magie', 'Voyage en Grande Garabagne' and 'Ici Poddema'. Another imaginary race, the *Meidosems*, had pride of place in the eponymous text, published that very year and containing twelve lithographs of this strange people, constantly undergoing metamorphoses.

Furthermore, the purely artistic aspect of his creative activities was far from neglected. Since his very first individual exhibition of gouaches in 1937 at the Paul Magné Ancienne Pléiade Gallery in Paris, Michaux had continued to paint relentlessly, although it proved

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<sup>47</sup> 'Aventures de lignes' was first published as the foreword to Will Grohmann's monograph, *Paul Klee* (Paris: Flinker, 1954), pp. 5-8. In the original text, Michaux finishes with a playful 'Bonne chance' to the reader, which has been removed from subsequent versions.

more difficult to exhibit during the Second World War, primarily because of the German occupation and his ensuing exile in the south of France and the difficulty of obtaining a *laissez-passer* to Paris, where the majority of his artistic contacts were established at that time. When war first broke out in Europe, Michaux was in Brazil. He quickly returned to Paris only to move on to the unoccupied Southern zone as a refugee a few months later. He spent over two years in Le Lavandou.<sup>48</sup> Michaux returned to Paris in 1943, as he states in *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence*: 'Retour à Paris. Occupation allemande (la seconde).'<sup>49</sup> He had of course experienced his first German occupation during the First World War in Belgium.

It can be suggested that Michaux was deeply affected by the atrocities of the war, the terrible repercussions of the German occupation of both France and Belgium and his exile in the South. And yet, if the reactions of his friends and fellow writers are to be believed, it appears that Michaux was almost oblivious to the war. For example, Jean Paulhan states somewhat coldly in a letter to Raymond Guérin dated 2 October 1941: 'Michaux vit au Lavandou, travaille à des récits imaginaires.'<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, in 1941, André Gide prepared an important conference on Michaux that went unpronounced because of a negative reaction from the 'Légion des anciens combattants'; it was instead published that very same year. Gide declares at the beginning of this short text:

Si j'ai choisi pour sujet de cet entretien le poète Henri Michaux, c'est que j'ai supposé que certains d'entre vous, peut-être, ne le connaissaient pas encore; c'est que Michaux, tout en étant un produit de notre époque aussi caractéristique qu'aucun autre, a su demeurer parfaitement inactuel. On peut parler de lui durant une heure, sans crainte d'effleurer, fût-ce du bout de la

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<sup>48</sup> Bellour writes the following about this period: 'Michaux écrit pendant ces deux années au Lavandou d'autant plus de lettres qu'il est isolé, presque immobilisé. Il ne cesse de demander aux uns et aux autres des nouvelles des uns et des autres, d'attendre des visites remises, d'espérer lui-même bouger et d'évoquer, avec un humour accru par les circonstances, la pénurie alimentaire, le froid, le "cafard" qui monte.' Bellour and Tran, 'Chronologie', in Michaux, *OC I*, p. CXVI.

<sup>49</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence*, *OC I*, pp. CXXIX-CXXXV (p. CXXXIV).

<sup>50</sup> Jean Paulhan, *Choix de lettres II: Traité des jours sombres (1937-1945)*, ed. by Bernard Leuillot, Dominique Aury, Jean-Claude Zylberstein (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 241.

pensée, aucun des problèmes qui nous angoissent. C'est une récréation que je vous propose.<sup>51</sup>

It could be asserted, however, that this absence of political engagement or references to the war, alluded to by Paulhan and Gide, highlights Michaux's horror of present circumstances, a horror articulated in a form of creative escapism. And yet the abominations of this period are most definitely insinuated by the content of texts, such as *Épreuves, exorcismes*, one of Michaux's only books for which the dates of composition are clearly indicated on the front page: 1940-1944. Moreover, in a letter to Henri Parisot from 1941, Michaux states: 'Je peins les plus cauchemardesques têtes que vous vîtes jamais. Ça me soulage.'<sup>52</sup> Anne-Élisabeth Halpern evokes the effect of the evils of the Second World War on Michaux's writings in the following terms:

Michaux a été choqué, jusqu'à la fin de sa vie, par les exactions commises sur l'intégrité humaine pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale. *Portrait des Meidosems* fait vivre des malheureux dans des camps de concentration, comme *Ailleurs* porte la trace douloureuse des expériences pratiquées par les nazis.<sup>53</sup>

This point of view, however, can only be described as speculation because there exists no concrete evidence, such as diary entries, of Michaux taking a public stance against Nazism. It is most likely that he was shocked by the violent acts committed during the war, as indeed were most people, and the atrocities experienced during this period are evoked by the content of some of his literary and artistic output, for example, *Épreuves, exorcismes*.

The war did not prevent Michaux from writing and painting, and his exhibitions held at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s attest to his continued experimentation with gouache as well as with oil, Indian ink, watercolour and lithography. A proliferation of artistic activity during the period following the Second World War is

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<sup>51</sup> André Gide, 'Découvrons Henri Michaux', in André Gide, *Essais critiques*, ed. by Pierre Masson (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1999), pp. 733-49 (p. 734).

<sup>52</sup> Maurice Imbert, 'Repères biographiques', in *Henri Michaux: Peindre, composer, écrire*, ed. by Jean-Michel Maulpoix and Florence de Lussy (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France/Gallimard, 1999), pp. 232-40 (p. 237).

<sup>53</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 41.

in fact corroborated by Michaux's statement in *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence*: 'Il écrit de moins en moins, il peint davantage.'<sup>54</sup> Michaux had, it seems, come to the conclusion that words were no longer adequate for his creative purposes, and it is for this reason that he turned to visual rather than verbal production. And yet paradoxically, this does not necessarily mean that he published substantially less than before. The context of this need for artistic creation must not be forgotten, as it took place not only after the Second World War, but also after the long illness and tragic death of his wife: 'Février 1948. Mort de sa femme des suites d'atroces brûlures.'<sup>55</sup>

Michaux's name is often linked to the artistic tendency, *art informel*, which was born in the aftermath of the Second World War. This connection may seem incoherent when we consider his long-standing opposition to any categorical affiliation. Yet, he appears to have frequented the Informal artists on a fairly regular basis in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and indeed, he expresses extreme admiration for Jean Fautrier, one of the artists linked to the group, in a letter to Germaine Paulhan: 'Je considère le Sanglier de Fautrier comme un des chefs-d'œuvre de la peinture contemporaine.'<sup>56</sup> Michaux also frequented the iconoclastic visual artist and founder of *art brut*, Jean Dubuffet, and they shared many artistic and literary concerns.<sup>57</sup> This reciprocal appreciation is testified by the friendly tone of the correspondence between them and the portraits of Michaux by Dubuffet.<sup>58</sup> The unofficial spokesman for this disparate group of

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<sup>54</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements*, OC I, p. CXXXIV.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. CXXXIV.

<sup>56</sup> Bellour, 'Note et variantes' to *Face aux verrous*, OC II, pp. 1221-45 (p. 1225).

<sup>57</sup> Dubuffet relates in his 'Biographie au pas de course', in Jean Dubuffet, *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, Vol. IV, ed. by Hubert Damisch (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 457-538 (p. 489): 'En avril 1945 se tint dans une galerie de la rue des Saints-Pères une exposition des lithographies et des divers travaux traitant des murs. Cette galerie était gérée, avec sa propriétaire, par l'épouse d'Henri Michaux dont j'aimais fort les écrits, ce qui me donna l'occasion de contracter avec lui des relations amicales qui se poursuivirent ensuite pendant de nombreuses années.'

<sup>58</sup> Dubuffet produced a series of these portraits and announced on the invitations to their first showing in October 1947: 'Les gens sont bien plus beaux qu'ils croient / VIVE LEUR VRAIE FIGURE / à la galerie René Drouin / [...] PORTRAITS / à ressemblance extraite, à ressemblance cuite et confite dans la mémoire, à ressemblance éclatée dans la mémoire de / Mr Jean Dubuffet / Peintre.' Cited in Sandrine Thiry, 'Michaux et Dubuffet, rencontre de deux hommes du commun', in

artists, Michel Tapié, wrote several articles and prefaces to catalogues on Michaux, for example, 'Au Pays d'Henri Michaux' for an individual exhibition at the Galerie René Drouin in 1948.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, he organised exhibitions in which Michaux participated with other exponents of *art informel*, in particular, 'Peintures non abstraites: où il s'agit d'un nouveau dévidage du réel' in June 1952 at the Studio Paul Facchetti, and 'Un art autre' at the same gallery in December of the same year. In these exhibitions, Tapié was aiming to formulate a common denominator that might link the artists of post-war Paris who were experimenting with art as a starting afresh, actively flouting all formal aesthetic conventions and instead placing the accent on fluidity, matter and gesture. These artists were opposed to traditional formalism and to the various *en vogue* forms of geometrical abstraction that had been introduced by the Cubists, continued by the Russian Constructivists, and encouraged by the Bauhaus movement after the Second World War. Informal art instead appeared to highlight the precedence of matter over form. The exponents of *art informel* shared the opinion that painting should also be concerned with recording the actions of the artist in the process of painting, in which respect they have an affinity with the American school of Abstract Expressionism. An indirect, intuitive awareness of mental states and external phenomena would be communicated through this experimentation with matter and gesture.

The December 1952 exhibition was organised to accompany a type of artistic manifesto, *Un Art autre: où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel*, an amalgam of the two exhibition titles mentioned above, written by Tapié, in which Michaux was cited as a precursor of the *art informel* tendency alongside Fautrier, Wols (Wolfgang Schulze), Dubuffet, Georges Mathieu, Jackson Pollock and Alfonso Ossorio.<sup>60</sup> But, in 1956, in a letter to Jean Larcade, the curator of the

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*Henri Michaux: Corps et savoir*, ed. by Pierre Grouix and Jean-Michel Maulpoix (Paris: E. N. S., 1998), pp. 297-324 (p. 321). There exist nine portraits of Michaux by Dubuffet, amongst others of Francis Ponge, Antonin Artaud, Jean Fautrier, Michel Tapié and René Bertelé. See Bellour and Tran, 'Chronologie', in Michaux, *OC II*, p. XIII.

<sup>59</sup> *Henri Michaux*, with texts by Michel Tapié and H. P. Roché (Paris: René Drouin, 1948).

<sup>60</sup> 'Le choc produit par Dubuffet permet d'expliciter l'immense contenu de l'œuvre lentement élaborée de Fautrier, en avance sur l'Histoire, et d'assimiler au fur et à mesure de leur présentation au public la violence cruellement exorcisante d'un Henri



Galerie Rive Droite, Michaux abruptly and characteristically expressed his desire to cease association with any forms of *art autre*:

Veillez prendre note que j'interdis absolument qu'à l'avenir on me fasse figurer dans une exposition ou manifestation de l'art (se disant) autre. Même s'il n'y avait pas certains tableaux de cette tendance auxquels je suis parfaitement hostile, l'actuel jargon tapié suffirait à me convaincre que je n'ai rien de commun avec ça.<sup>61</sup>

This did not, however, prevent Michaux from taking part in other collective exhibitions with practitioners or precursors of *art autre*, for example, he exhibited with Dubuffet and Wols at the Studio Facchetti in May 1957.

*Art autre* was far from constituting an established group or school of artists. This label was instead suggested by Tapié to classify a number of highly individual artists who had no desire to participate in an organised group. Indeed, he emphasises the importance of individuality throughout *Un Art autre* and even states that the artists included were not working together with a collective aim:

J'ai désigné provisoirement cette aventure SIGNIFIANCE DE L'INFORMEL: y ont magistralement participé par l'esprit de leurs recherches (mais sans aucune pensée de travail collectif, et tant mieux, dans tous les sens): Tobey, Hartung, Bryen, Hofmann, Sutherland, Riopelle, Guiette, Soulages, Serpan, Graves, Brauner, Ubac, De Kooning, Appel, Gillet, Rothko, Sam Francis, Ronet, Russell, Arnal, Phillip Martin, Capogrossi, Dova, Kline, les sculpteurs Germaine Richier, Maria, Baskine, Butler, Paolozzi, Kopac, et Claire Falkenstein...<sup>62</sup>

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Michaux, la 'véhémence souffrée' de Georges Mathieu et celle non moins forte mais plus diffusément expressionniste de Jackson Pollock, comme celle plus secrète, plus stupéfiante peut-être dans son ordonnancement indéfinissable mais évident d'Alfonso Ossorio; de tout cela [*sic*] résulte un sens nouveau, créant une nouvelle échelle de sensibilité, un nouveau clavier psychique, un autre sens de la Force, du Devenir, du Vivre.' Michel Tapié, *Un Art autre* (Paris: Artcurial, 1994), unpaginated.

<sup>61</sup> 'Extraits d'une correspondance avec Henri Michaux (1949-1976)', in Alain Jouffroy, *Avec Henri Michaux* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1992), pp. 175-94 (p. 188).

<sup>62</sup> Tapié, *Un Art autre*, unpaginated. In 1960, Tapié established the 'International Centre of Aesthetic Research' in Turin, no doubt bringing with him his ideas on *art informel*. This had a large impact on the Italian artistic and intellectual scene. Indeed, only two years later, Umberto Eco published *Opera aperta*, in which he considers the concept of the *informel* as exemplary of the 'open' work that offers a multitude of possible interpretations to the reader or viewer: 'L'"Informel"', de catégorie critique qu'il était, en vient alors à désigner une tendance générale de la culture présente, au

Dubuffet, who was adamantly opposed to the idea of collective exhibitions, wrote a furious letter to Tapié following the publication of *Un Art autre*, expressing a negative reaction on the part of many of the cited artists, and issuing a warning about the possible harm caused by grouping them together:

Quelle drôle de manie sévit à notre époque d'inventer un slogan et grouper un parti et légiférer. [...] Alors, bon, c'est l'informisme! Ou véhémentisme, ou éclaboussurisme! Là-dessus tu groupes en toute hâte des œuvres d'artistes les plus disparates; qui n'ont apparemment rien à voir les uns avec les autres [...]. On est déçu. Ce qui est sûr c'est que cette façon d'embrouiller complètement les choses en mélangeant et confondant tout sera très dommageable à chacun des artistes mentionnés, et je suppose que tous s'en plaindront. [...] Je proteste à toute force; je suis contre tout cela; je ne suis pas du tout 'informiste' 'véhémentiste', 'éclaboussuriste' et s'il y a des créations d'art que j'aime ça [*sic*] ne sont pas celles-là; je refuse avec la plus grande force de faire équipe avec tout cela. Je ne souscris à rien de ce qui est affirmé dans ce livre. D'ailleurs je ne suis pas parvenu à comprendre ce qu'on prétendait y affirmer: c'est si nébuleux! C'est, j'en ai peur, insuffisamment mûri.<sup>63</sup>

Dubuffet and Michaux were not the only artists to react violently to Tapié's poorly written classification. Jean Fautrier also shared this opinion and believed the literature on this subject to be 'rédigée dans le style pharmaceutique connu'.<sup>64</sup> In *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi*, an influential exhibition and accompanying catalogue that explore the work of many different artists using Georges Bataille's notion of

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point d'englober des peintres comme Wols ou Bryen, les *tachistes* proprement dits, les promoteurs de l'*action painting*, de l'*art brut*, de l'*art autre*, etc. À ce point, l'Informel rejoint la notion plus vaste d'une poétique de l'œuvre "ouverte". "Ouvert", l'Informel l'est parce qu'il constitue un "champ" de possibilités interprétatives, une configuration de stimuli dotée d'une indétermination fondamentale, parce qu'il propose une série de "lectures" constamment variables, parce qu'il est enfin structuré comme une constellation d'éléments qui se prêtent à diverses relations réciproques.' Umberto Eco, 'L'informel comme œuvre ouverte', in Umberto Eco, *L'Œuvre ouverte* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), pp. 117-44 (p. 117).

<sup>63</sup> Extracts from a letter to Michel Tapié, 21 December 1952, in Jean Dubuffet, *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, Vol. II, ed. by Hubert Damisch (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 308.

<sup>64</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1996), p. 131.

‘l’informe’,<sup>65</sup> an unravelling, rather than a progressive control, of form, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois make the following negative comments about this literature:

La littérature de l’époque sur ce que l’on a appelé l’art informel est en général déplorable: des généralités ampoulées, du bran métaphysique, de l’adjectif et de la métaphore à satiété, des flonflons rhétoriques, du vent (et surtout, pas le moindre effort d’analyse historique).<sup>66</sup>

As their names are so similar, Informal art and ‘l’informe’ can be confused, but the works produced by the Informal artists are concerned with the emergence of forms on the canvas. They are in fact more formal than formless, and in this respect cannot be compared to ‘l’informe’, which is more preoccupied with the undoing of form. And yet, certain works by Wols, Dubuffet and Fautrier, three cited precursors of this artistic tendency, do contain characteristics of Bataille’s ‘informe’.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bataille’s famous dictionary definition of ‘l’informe’ is as follows: ‘Un dictionnaire commencerait à partir du moment où il ne donnerait plus le sens mais les besognes des mots. Ainsi *informe* n’est pas seulement un adjectif ayant tel sens mais un terme servant à déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme. Ce qu’il désigne n’a ses droits dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de terre. Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l’univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n’a pas d’autre but: il s’agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est, une redingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l’univers ne ressemble à [*sic*] rien et n’est qu’*informe* revient à dire que l’univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat.’ Georges Bataille, ‘Informe’, in *Documents*, Vol. I, 7 (1929) (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), p. 382, Bataille’s italics. It has been suggested that the linear ‘araignée’ could refer to Michaux’s drawings and the liquid ‘crachat’ to his watercolours. Christiane Vollaire, ‘L’Indéfinition des formes’, in *Henri Michaux est-il seul?: Cahiers Bleus*, 13, ed. by Gérard Danou & Christian Noorbergen (Troyes: Librairie Bleue, 2000), pp. 110-18 (p. 113).

<sup>66</sup> Bois and Krauss, *L’Informe: Mode d’emploi*, p. 130.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Fautrier participe de l’informe lorsque, dans sa dernière période, la disjonction kitsch entre la couleur et la facture projette une ombre de suspicion rétrospective sur l’“authenticité” de la touche personnelle, conçue depuis l’impressionnisme comme résistance ... au kitsch de l’industrie culturelle. Ce n’est pas la peinture mais, beaucoup moins connue, la photographie de Wols qui touche à l’informe, le “bas matérialisme” en étant très proche de celui mis en œuvre par les clichés que Lotar ou Boiffard publient dans *Documents*. Enfin, le matérialisme de Dubuffet ne débouche sur l’absence de concept propre à l’informe [...] que lorsqu’il n’en appelle à aucune projection figurative [...] ou quand le déchet exalté n’est pas donné comme récupérable.’ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Through this brief examination, we have placed *Mouvements* within a literary, artistic and historical context. This book is the first in a series that shatters textual conventions through its unusual fusion of signs and the printed word. Its complex publishing history points to Michaux's dislike of a final end-product. These pages of signs were composed shortly after the Second World War, during a characteristically productive period for Michaux in both artistic and verbal domains, in which he produced several other works combining text and image in different ways. The impact of the Second World War should not be neglected as there is no doubt that this tragic event had a profound influence on writers and artists. Indeed, Michaux's links with the Informal artists following the war suggest certain common artistic aims and aspirations.

### **Introducing *Par la voie des rythmes*: The Mescaline Experiments**

This next section will be devoted to the literary and artistic context of *Par la voie des rythmes*. We will concentrate on Michaux's experimentation with hallucinogenic substances as it constitutes a highly important, if somewhat disturbing, element of his literary and artistic production. Indeed, much of his fame and notoriety have come from his mescaline texts and drawings. Our aim in examining this period is to see whether this experimentation had a direct effect on Michaux's experimentation with signs and whether any parallels can be drawn between these two ostensibly separate activities. Moreover, the mescaline experiments lead up to *Par la voie des rythmes*, which appears to be Michaux's most extreme attempt at transgressing both the book form and conventional writing systems, using rhythm rather than semantics to structure the text.

On examining Michaux's exhibitions from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s, that is, between the publication of *Mouvements* and *Par la voie des rythmes*, two factors are immediately striking: the sheer number of exhibitions and the multitude of their different locations. During this period, Michaux exhibited his large Indian ink, gouache and acrylic paintings several times a year in both Europe and America. The Indian ink paintings are particularly relevant in this respect as they could be regarded as the extension of the graphic experimentation included in *Mouvements*. Michaux's acceptance of the Einaudi Prize at the 1960 Venice Biennial, in contrast to his

refusal of the 'Grand Prix national des Lettres' in 1965, underlines his different approach to these two creative activities.<sup>68</sup> In 1972, he published *Émergences-Résurgences*, a text that traces his artistic trajectory accompanied by his own images. Moreover, *Passages* was published for the second time in 1963, including nine new texts by Michaux on his various artistic and musical activities.<sup>69</sup> As Bellour indicates in his critical notes to the second volume of Michaux's collected works:

Constitué en deux temps, *Passages* se tient ainsi à la charnière entre deux moments de l'œuvre de Michaux: à la fois avant et après ses livres de la drogue, dont un texte du recueil, au moins, se fait directement l'écho: 'Dessiner l'écoulement du temps'.<sup>70</sup>

*Passages* is obviously important in terms of a possible theorisation by Michaux of his own artistic, literary and musical production. It also constitutes a meeting-point between the works created before his experimentation with hallucinogenic substances and those produced afterwards.

Michaux started his infamous experimentation with drugs and, in particular, mescaline in the mid-1950s. This specific creative period gave rise to much literary and artistic production. The drawings conceived under the influence of mescaline, the 'dessins mescaliniens' (Fig. 10), brought him instant recognition and were widely exhibited from the very beginning, for example, the publication of *Misérable miracle* in early 1956 was shortly followed by an exhibition, 'Description d'un trouble', organised by Bernard Gheerbrant at the Librairie-Galerie la hune in Paris. This particular line of inquiry lasted for over a decade, and provided the circumstances for five major publications, all dealing with Michaux's output under the influence of various hallucinogenic substances including hashish, LSD 25, psilocybin and, above all, mescaline: *Misérable miracle* (1956), *L'Infini turbulent* (1957), *Paix dans les brisements* (1959), *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1961) and *Les Grandes Épreuves de*

<sup>68</sup> See the added page to Michaux's *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence*, in Alfred Pacquement, *Henri Michaux: Peintures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 303.

<sup>69</sup> Michaux, *Passages*, *OC II*, pp. 281-395.

<sup>70</sup> Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' to *Passages*, *OC II*, pp. 1161-66 (p. 1163).

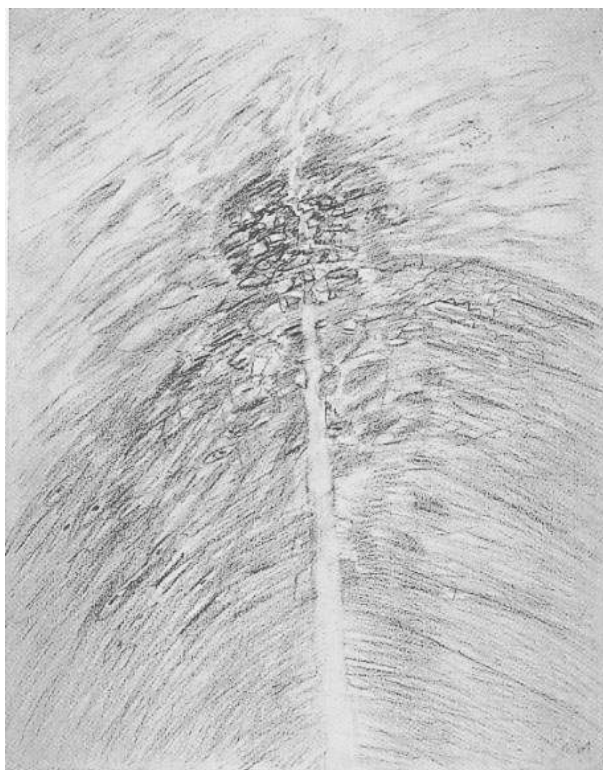


Fig. 10: Mescaline drawing, c.1958-59  
(Sanguine/red chalk on paper, 40 x 30 cm)  
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*l'esprit et les innombrables petites* (1966). The interplay of drawing and writing is essential to the first three publications. *Connaissance par les gouffres* and *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit* do not contain any drawings.

Michaux's literary and artistic research into drugs can at first glance appear somewhat incongruous in terms of his general creative outlook. As we have suggested, the poet-artist was opposed to the idea of belonging to a literary movement, genre or tradition, although his affiliation with certain practitioners of the *art informel* tendency could be said to denote the very opposite. This experimentation with drugs obviously belongs to a long-standing practice of drug-taking amongst poets and artists from the Western world, and thus makes indirect reference to the writings of such figures as Thomas De Quincey on opium,<sup>71</sup> Charles Baudelaire on hashish,<sup>72</sup> Antonin Artaud on peyote,<sup>73</sup> and to Arthur Rimbaud's '*dérèglement de tous les sens*'.<sup>74</sup>

If the opinions expressed by Michaux in a rare conference on poetry in 1936 are considered, it soon becomes obvious that a quest for a secondary inner state alongside general scientific and technological knowledge are paramount to what he regarded as the role and function of the modern poet:

Une assurance accrue provenant de l'assurance donnée par les sciences en général, une assurance plus particulière due aux progrès de la psychopathologie, de la psychanalyse, de l'ethnographie, peut-être de la métapsychique, et d'un néo-occultisme, une connaissance de plus en plus circonstanciée des rapports cerveau-intelligence, cerveau-glandes, cerveau-sang, esprit-nerfs, l'étude de plus en plus poussée et expérimentable des

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<sup>71</sup> De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* were first published in 1822. For more information on European authors who were either active drug-users or indirectly inspired by drugs, see Max Milner's helpful study: *L'Imaginaire des drogues: De Thomas De Quincey à Henri Michaux* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Connaissance de l'Inconscient', 2000). An entire chapter is devoted to De Quincey: 'L'Anglais mangeur d'opium' (pp. 13-52) and another to Michaux (pp. 368-435).

<sup>72</sup> Baudelaire published *Du vin et du haschisch, comparés comme moyens de multiplication de l'individualité* in 1851 and *Les Paradis artificiels* in 1860. See 'Les Paradis artificiels' in Milner, *L'Imaginaire des drogues*, pp. 107-49.

<sup>73</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Les Tarahumaras* (Paris: Marc Barbezat, L'Arbalète, 1955).

<sup>74</sup> Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871, in Arthur Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1972), pp. 249-54 (p. 251), Rimbaud's italics. Rimbaud's poems and prose poems in *Une Saison en enfer* and *Illuminations* often evoke the conscience-altering effect of drink or drugs. See 'Le cas Rimbaud' in Milner, *L'Imaginaire des drogues*, pp. 150-75.

troubles du langage, de la cénesthésie, des images, du subconscient et de l'intelligence, tend à donner au poète la curiosité de toucher tout cela de l'intérieur, et le goût de plus audacieuses incursions aux états seconds, aux états dangereux de soi.<sup>75</sup>

The proclaimed 'goût de plus audacieuses incursions aux états seconds, aux états dangereux de soi' at the end of this quotation appears to foresee the experimentation with hallucinogenic substances undertaken some twenty years later. From a relatively early age, it appears that Michaux was interested in science with a close link to human beings, such as medicine and psychoanalysis. This can also be seen in *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence*, as he studied medicine for a year: 'Prépare le P. C. B. / Ne se présente pas à l'examen. Abandonne la médecine.'<sup>76</sup> Some of his first articles published in in the Belgian review *Le Disque vert*, for which he shared editorial responsibilities with Franz Hellens, also confirm a certain knowledge of psychoanalysis, for instance, 'Réflexions qui ne sont pas étrangères à Freud'.<sup>77</sup>

Michaux was not the only artist or writer experimenting with extreme physical and mental states at the time. The Surrealists, and especially Robert Desnos, were also exploring the creative consequences of states of semi-consciousness. André Breton hails Desnos's experimentation from the 'époque des sommeils'<sup>78</sup> in *Nadja*:

Il 'dort', mais il écrit, il parle. [...] Qui n'a pas vu son crayon poser sur le papier, sans la moindre hésitation et avec une rapidité prodigieuse, ces étonnantes équations poétiques, et n'a pu s'assurer comme moi qu'elles ne pouvaient avoir été préparées de plus longue main, même s'il est capable d'apprécier leur perfection technique et de juger du merveilleux coup d'aile, ne peut se faire une idée de tout ce que cela engageait alors, de la valeur absolue d'oracle que cela prenait.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Michaux, 'L'Avenir de la poésie', *OC I*, pp. 967-70 (pp. 969-70).

<sup>76</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements*, *OC I*, p. CXXIX.

<sup>77</sup> Michaux, 'Réflexions qui ne sont pas étrangères à Freud', *OC I*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>78</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, in André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet with Philippe Bernier, Étienne-Alain Hubert and José Pierre (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1988), pp. 643-753 (p. 661), Breton's italics.

<sup>79</sup> Breton, *Nadja*, p. 661.



The Catalan visual artist, Joan Miró, writes of his own unintended discovery of the hallucinogenic possibilities offered by extreme hunger during the period in which he frequented the Surrealist poets:

Je commençais progressivement à m'éloigner du réalisme que j'avais pratiqué jusqu'à *La ferme* pour, en 1925, me mettre à dessiner presque entièrement à partir d'hallucinations. À l'époque, je vivais de quelques figues sèches par jour. J'étais trop fier pour demander de l'aide à mes camarades. La faim était la grande source de ces hallucinations. Je restais assis pendant de longs moments à regarder les murs nus de mon atelier, essayant de capter ces formes sur du papier ou sur de la toile de jute.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, Jules Supervielle, Michaux's mentor during his first years in Paris, tells of the poet-artist's experimentation with hunger and his aim of reaching hitherto unknown physical and mental states:

Sous le titre faussement bourgeois de *Mes propriétés*, il a décrit ses maladies, ses phobies, toutes ses tristesses, ses peines. Je me rappelle l'avoir vu jeûner trois ou quatre jours de suite dans l'espoir d'atteindre en lui des régions encore inexplorées.<sup>81</sup>

These 'régions encore inexplorées' clearly echo the 'audacieuses incursions aux états seconds, aux états dangereux de soi' evoked by Michaux in 'L'Avenir de la poésie'.

As a result, it can be asserted that Michaux uses his own body as a site of experimentation. And indeed, he affirms that he considers the 'self', that is to say, his body and mind, as a type of benchmark, emphasising his suspicion of the 'other':

Domage que les renseignements qu'on obtient sur les autres soient si insuffisants, suspects, trompeurs et qu'il faille toujours en revenir à l'observation de soi, comme à la matière première la mieux observable, la plus vaste, la plus souvent vérifiable, la plus permanente, malgré tout son instable, la moins capable de duper longtemps du tout au tout, quoiqu'elle y arrive encore trop souvent.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> 'Entretien avec James Johnson Sweeney', *Partisan Review*, 1948, in *Joan Miró: Écrits et entretiens*, ed. by Margit Rowell (Paris: Daniel Lelong, 1995), pp. 228-34 (pp. 230-31).

<sup>81</sup> Jules Supervielle, 'Présentation de Henri Michaux à l'occasion d'une conférence', in *Méthodes et savoirs chez Henri Michaux*, pp. 91-94 (p. 92).

<sup>82</sup> Michaux, 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture', *Passages, OC II*, pp. 320-31 (p. 328).

Much of his visual and verbal output attempts to express his body's reactions when pushed, in either a premeditated or spontaneous fashion, to its limits. The majority of his texts produced under the influence of mescaline deal with conscious experiences. His famous overdose constitutes an exception, although this could be considered almost inevitable when experimenting with substances of this nature:

Une erreur de calcul fit que j'avalai le sextuple de la dose suffisante pour moi. Je ne le sus pas tout de suite. Les yeux fermés, j'observais en moi, comme sur un écran, ou comme sur un tableau de bord, les couleurs et les lignes cette fois démesurées de la Mescaline, apparaissant dans la vision intérieure, et l'agitation des images toujours si surprenante. Puis tout à coup, plus rien. Je ne vis plus rien. J'avais glissé dans un fond. Une porte jusque-là ouverte venait de se fermer d'un coup dans un silence absolu.<sup>83</sup>

Another example of an impromptu experience with drugs is related many years later in *Par surprise*:

...absorbée sans prendre garde, tout en songeant à autre chose, à un départ, à un voyage, la plaquette brune, retrouvée dans le fond d'un tiroir avec de vieilles bricoles, cadeau d'une fille de bonne volonté...<sup>84</sup>

During the latter experience, Michaux is furious with himself for not having thought through the consequences of spontaneously ingesting a considerable amount of an unknown substance. And yet, whereas others might have panicked, especially at over eighty years of age, he calmly decides to make the most of the situation and to observe the effects of this unidentified product on his own mental and physical functioning:

Profitons au moins de cet état. Je peux mieux observer les procédés du cerveau, le mode suivant lequel il continue point par point à raisonner, comme si de rien n'était, pianotant sur les données encore en sa possession. Ah! la logique, l'imperturbée logique avec ses montages qui ne peuvent aboutir, et qu'elle continue bravement à faire, accumulant immanquablement erreur sur erreur! Quel spectacle!<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, p. 723.

<sup>84</sup> Michaux, *Par surprise*, in Michaux, *Déplacements, dégagements*, OC III, pp. 1342-1354 (p. 1342).

<sup>85</sup> Michaux, *Par surprise*, OC III, p. 1345.

He even considers illnesses and accidents as having creative possibilities, for example, when he breaks his arm:

*Je fis un jour, une chute. Mon bras, n'y résistant pas, cassa. Ce n'est pas grand-chose qu'un bras cassé. C'est arrivé à plusieurs, à beaucoup. Ce serait néanmoins à observer bien. Cet état que la fortune m'envoya avec ensuite quelques complications, je le considérai. Je pris un bain dedans. Je ne cherchai pas tout de suite à rejoindre le rivage.*<sup>86</sup>

This accident in fact gives rise to a new perception of the body and leads Michaux to the 'Découverte de l'homme gauche',<sup>87</sup> and a text on this subject, 'Bras cassé'. The same pattern is repeated when he breaks his Achilles' tendon. This accident produces the text recalling his experience, 'Comme un ensablement...'<sup>88</sup>

Michaux recounts the experiences of the drug-taker in a pseudo-scientific tone, which underscores the paradox of trying to remain a detached observer whilst undertaking a mind-altering experience. The poet at first cannot control or enjoy the speed and intensity of the effects of mescaline, which clinically transform every minute detail into a seething mass that extends towards the infinite. He is unable to portray this debilitating experience by either visual or verbal means:

La Mescaline diminue l'imagination. Elle châtré l'image, la désensualise. Elle fait des images cent pour cent pures. Elle fait du laboratoire. [...] Aussi est-elle l'ennemie de la poésie, de la méditation, et surtout du mystère.<sup>89</sup>

Michaux thus declares mescaline to be anti-poetic. The visual works produced under the influence of this powerful drug are abstract; the suggestive and sensual properties of the imagination have been eliminated. And yet, only a year later, in *L'Infini turbulent*, the experience of taking mescaline can be seen to inspire poetic texts that are founded in cosmic unity and mystical revelation, which is, as we

<sup>86</sup> Michaux, 'Bras cassé', in Michaux, *Face à ce qui se dérobe*, OC III, pp. 855-879 (p. 855), Michaux's italics.

<sup>87</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements*, OC I, p. CXXXIV.

<sup>88</sup> Michaux, 'Comme un ensablement...', OC III, pp. 1145-1154.

<sup>89</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, pp. 673-74.

shall see in the final section of this chapter, in fact characteristic of much of his later poetic output:

j'entendais le poème admirable, le poème grandiose  
 le poème interminable  
 le poème aux vers idéalement beaux sans rimes, sans musique, sans mots  
 qui sans cesse scande l'Univers.<sup>90</sup>

This research with drugs gives rise to many striking textual contradictions exemplified by the two above quotations. Michaux aims to maintain a critical, scientific and detached approach to his experimentation. But the nature of these drugs and the radical visions that they induce are such that this analytical awareness is often lost, along with any control of mental operations in a type of poetic reverie, highlighting the confusion of, on the one hand, Michaux the object who has taken the mescaline, and, on the other, Michaux the subject who aims to relate this experience in a scientific manner. This blend of scientific and poetic discourse as a means of exploring both the outer world and the inner self recalls Rimbaud's famous 'Alchimie du verbe' in *Une Saison en enfer*, in which the poet achieves the apparently impossible in a sequence of hallucinatory, dream-like visions, which evoke a combination of colours and letters, and hence, the visual and the verbal:

J'inventai la couleur des voyelles! – A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert.  
 - Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne, et, avec des rythmes [*sic*] instinctifs, je me flattai d'inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens. Je réservais la traduction.  
 Ce fut d'abord une étude. J'écrivais des silences, des nuits, je notais l'inexprimable. Je fixais des vertiges.<sup>91</sup>

The alchemical, magical capacities of the word are brought to the fore by this interchange between science and poetry.

Michaux's experimentation with drugs can be directly linked to, and indeed is influenced by, the scientific context of this period. In the 1950s and 1960s, research was being undertaken to test the therapeutic nature of hallucinogenic drugs in treating mental illnesses. Hallucinations experienced under the influence of mescaline were

<sup>90</sup> Michaux, *L'Infini turbulent, OC II*, p. 860.

<sup>91</sup> Rimbaud, 'Alchimie du verbe', 'Délires II', *Une Saison en enfer*, in Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 91-117 (p. 106).

considered to resemble a schizophrenic's feeling of unreality in relation to the self and the external world, which ultimately leads to depersonalisation. Accordingly, Michaux's experimentation is typical of this period in terms of the emphasis placed on the relationship between experimental psychosis and schizophrenia in his texts. Anne Brun underlines this influence in her psychoanalytical study of Michaux's experimentation with drugs:

Michaux situe explicitement son expérience dans le contexte historique et scientifique des études relatives à la psychose expérimentale. Il sera convaincu d'avoir appréhendé l'essence même de la folie grâce à la mescaline.<sup>92</sup>

It should be noted from the names in the form of initials mentioned in *Misérable miracle* that other writers, painters and editors close to Michaux, such as Jean Paulhan, Bernard Saby and René Bertelé, also participated in these experiments. Paulhan even documented his drug-taking in a short text called 'Rapport sur une expérience'.<sup>93</sup> Dr Julian de Ajuriaguerra, who taught at the Faculty of Medicine in Geneva at the time of the mescaline experiments and was later awarded a Chair in Developmental Neuropsychology at the Collège de France, provided the group with the mescaline.<sup>94</sup> This doctor also wrote, with Dr François Jaeggi, the first book on Michaux's experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs, entitled *Contribution à la connaissance des psychoses toxiques: Expériences et découvertes du poète Henri Michaux*, published by the Sandoz Laboratories in 1963. This publication underlines Michaux's connection with the scientific world at that time. The presence of psychiatrists and their role as observers during some of his experiments further corroborate this link. Indeed, Michaux's experimentation with psilocybin, undertaken in the presence of Jean Delay and his team at the Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris, contributed to their official research on this hallucinogenic mushroom.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Anne Brun, *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné* (Paris: Sanofi-Synthélabo, Collection 'Les empêcheurs de penser en rond', 1999), p. 29.

<sup>93</sup> Jean Paulhan, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. IV (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1969), pp. 422-26.

<sup>94</sup> Bellour, 'Notes et variantes' to *Misérable miracle*, OC II, pp. 1294-319 (p. 1300).

<sup>95</sup> This event is related in the second part of *Connaissance par les gouffres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), entitled 'La psilocybine (Expériences et autocritique)', pp. 33-70.

References to the major scientific discoveries of the twentieth century can also be found in the texts and drawings composed under the influence of hallucinogenic substances. The infinitesimal scale of many of the mescaline drawings points to the invention of the electron microscope in 1940, the splitting of the atom by Enrico Fermi in 1942 and the development of quantum physics. These inventions transformed many artists' visions and perceptions of the world by drawing attention to the infinitely small particles that make up all matter. This awareness is present in the tiny, repeated details of Michaux's mescaline drawings. Florence de Mèredieu discusses the implications of these discoveries in relation to Michaux's artistic output in the 1950s and 1960s:

La main fonctionne tel un sismographe, enregistraut les plus infimes et les plus imperceptibles courants nerveux. Multiplication et division à l'infini, acuité jusque dans le grouillement et l'innombrable, répétition et symétrie conduisent à une forme de vertige, où l'emportent l'infinité et le nombre. Chaque perception se divise elle-même en une infinité de sensations qui se subdivisent chacune à leur tour en une indéfinie mise en abîme. Saisie dans sa dimension microscopique, la matière se révèle ainsi sans fin, sans fond, comme un maelström de sensations. Mais la somme de toutes ses petites perceptions, ordinairement inaperçues et qui se fondent en une masse indistincte, s'offre ici, chez Michaux, de manière claire et distincte, dans un état de totale exacerbation de la vision.<sup>96</sup>

The use of the word 'exacerbation' in the last sentence of this quotation suggests the destructive as well as intensifying effects contained in the mescaline drawings. The minute, repetitive detail of the fissures draws the viewer closer to the canvas, on which the disturbing and obsessive nature of these hallucinations can be perceived.

Michaux makes implicit reference to scientific inventions and discoveries in *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit* when describing the nature of the thought process under the influence of mescaline:

Microphénomène par excellence, le penser, ses multiples prises, ses multiples micro-opérations silencieuses de déboîtements, d'alignements, de parallélismes, de déplacements, de substitutions (avant d'aboutir à une macropensée, une pensée panoramique) échappent et doivent échapper. Elles ne peuvent se suivre qu'exceptionnellement sous le microscope d'une

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<sup>96</sup> Florence de Mèredieu, *Histoire matérielle et immatérielle de l'art moderne* (Paris: Bordas, 1994), p. 211.

attention forcenée, lorsque l'esprit monstrueusement surexcité, par exemple, sous l'effet de la mescaline à haute dose, son champ modifié, voit ses pensées comme des particules, apparaissant et disparaissant à des vitesses prodigieuses.<sup>97</sup>

He continues later in the same section:

Tout est comme moléculaire dans la pensée. Petites masses. Apparition, disparition de petites masses. Masses en perpétuelles associations, dissociations, néo-associations, plus que rapides, quasi instantanées.<sup>98</sup>

It could be suggested from these quotations and the mescaline drawings that Michaux was familiar with neural networks, an expression used frequently in scientific periodicals in the 1950s to describe a system of interconnections which resembles or is based on the arrangement of neurones in the brain and nervous system. These references highlight Michaux's knowledge and perception of scientific developments, which he applied to his own experimentation in a quest for self-knowledge. As Anne-Élisabeth Halpern points out in her book dedicated to the crossover between Michaux's textual production and the scientific advances of the twentieth century:

Michaux engage avec les méthodes et discours scientifiques un compagnonnage fructueux, exploitant en particulier les instruments efficaces que sont l'expérimentation et les classifications propres aux sciences exactes. Le poète lui-même se comporte comme un homme de science – au meilleur sens du terme – et applique les principes de l'expérimentation (hypothèses, observations, conclusions, protocoles expérimentaux, etc.), dans un projet essentiel: se connaître dans et par la connaissance du monde que les sciences se chargent de mettre en ordre.<sup>99</sup>

If one examines the bibliographical references used in the drug narratives,<sup>100</sup> it becomes clear that Michaux has carried out his

<sup>97</sup> Michaux, *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit*, OC III, pp. 314-315.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>99</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 45.

<sup>100</sup> Michaux's references highlight his up-to-date knowledge of psychiatric research (see *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit*, OC III, p. 384) and acknowledge discussions with friends from a scientific or medical background (*Ibid.*, p. 322). He even refers to his own works (*Ibid.*, p. 418), underlining the clinical importance that he bestowed upon his texts produced using the body as a site of experimentation. He does, however, adapt or even misquote these references to suit his own needs. See Bellour, 'Notes et variantes' to *L'Infini turbulent*, OC II, pp. 1337-55 (p. 1347).

research in more applied, rather than purely theoretical, scientific fields. His references to rational and objective research, carried out above all by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts whom he knew, counter the loss of his own critical capacity when the powerful hallucinogenic nature of the substance under observation takes effect.<sup>101</sup>

At this point, it is worth emphasising the fact that Michaux aimed to carry out these hallucinogenic investigations in a scientific manner, continuing from Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*,<sup>102</sup> the inaugural literary approach to mescaline, which was incidentally first published in 1954, the very year that Michaux started his own experimentation with mescaline.<sup>103</sup> Neither Huxley's nor Michaux's investigations into this subject are directly comparable to the more hedonistic, psychedelic experimentation of poets and artists such as Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, members of the Beat Generation, during this period. Michaux states in a footnote to *Connaissance par les gouffres*:

L'auteur du présent écrit a, depuis cinq ans, expérimenté la plupart des démolisseurs de l'esprit et de la personne que sont les drogues hallucinogènes, l'acide lysergique, la psilocybine, une vingtaine de fois la mescaline, le haschisch quelques dizaines de fois, seul ou en mélange, à des doses variées, non spécialement pour en jouir, surtout pour les surprendre, pour surprendre des mystères ailleurs cachés.<sup>104</sup>

Michaux denounced the recreational use of drugs in *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit*. In the last section entitled 'Les quatre mondes', he writes of the possibility of the hallucinogenic substance becoming 'l'alliée, le soutien du rayonnement et de l'illumination', but, so as not to mislead anyone, he adds in a footnote:

Que ceux qui prennent des produits pour s'adonner aux excitations collectives, trépignements, danses hystériques, bagarres ou viols, s'arrêtent et ne se mettent pas à croire qu'il y a quelque chose ici pour eux. On ne parle pas la même langue. On ne va pas aux mêmes effets. Celui qui est

<sup>101</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 19.

<sup>102</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Doors of Perception* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954).

<sup>103</sup> Jean Paulhan remarks on Huxley's *Doors of Perception* in the following rather condescending terms in an undated letter to Michaux: 'L'expérience d'Huxley me paraît viciée par le fait: / a) qu'il n'est pas très intelligent. / b) qu'il est, à l'état naturel, à peu près aveugle. / Tout de même, l'article est intéressant.' Bellour, 'Notes et variantes' to *Misérable miracle*, *OC II*, pp. 1303-04.

<sup>104</sup> Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres*, *OC III*, pp. 1-152 (p. 96).



incapable de retenir les actes, incapable de garder tout *dans le mental* est complètement à côté.<sup>105</sup>

Some critics are of the opinion that Michaux did not go far enough, that he remained too controlled, in his investigations.<sup>106</sup> And indeed, Michaux insisted very strongly on the scientific nature of his experimentation and reiterated that he was not dependent on these substances. He affirms somewhat ironically in the postface to *Misérable miracle*:

Aux amateurs de perspective unique, la tentation pourrait venir de juger dorénavant l'ensemble de mes écrits, comme l'œuvre d'un drogué. Je regrette. Je suis plutôt du type buveur d'eau. Jamais d'alcool. Pas d'excitants, et depuis des années pas de café, pas de tabac, pas de thé. De loin en loin du vin, et peu. Depuis toujours, et de tout ce qui se prend, peu. Prendre et s'abstenir. Surtout s'abstenir.<sup>107</sup>

Five years after the publication of *Misérable miracle*, in the epigraph to *Connaissance par les gouffres*, Michaux was still attesting that his aim in experimenting with drugs was to acquire knowledge rather than pleasure, underlining once more his intellectual approach:

*Les drogues nous ennuient avec leur paradis.  
Qu'elles nous donnent plutôt un peu de savoir.  
Nous ne sommes pas un siècle à paradis.*<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Michaux, *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit, OC III*, p. 417, Michaux's emphasis.

<sup>106</sup> Bellour, 'Vues extrêmes', in 'Notice' to *Misérable miracle, OC II*, pp. 1246-72 (p. 1269). Bellour acknowledges these opinions but finds them limited. He concludes (p. 1272): 'La brutalité de Michaux, si l'on veut, tient en peu de mots: à l'âge où d'autres se resserrent sur la vocation ou le centre dérobé de leur œuvre, il a voulu par la drogue *changer de corps*, autant qu'il est possible de le faire sans s'anéantir. [...] Ses inventions métaphoriques fabuleuses ne pouvaient y survivre. Elles deviennent d'autant plus précieuses d'avoir dû être ainsi peu à peu abandonnées, ou transformées, au profit d'une expérimentation nouvelle par laquelle leur auteur devient plus étroitement tributaire de la mutation de son corps-esprit, par là lieu de passage de sa propre fable.' Bellour's italics.

<sup>107</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle, OC II*, p. 767. Michaux's auto-description as a 'buveur d'eau' could be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Baudelaire, who states in *Du Vin et du haschisch, comparés comme moyens de multiplication de l'individualité*: 'Un homme qui ne boit que de l'eau a un secret à cacher à ses semblables.' Charles Baudelaire, *Paradis artificiels*, in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975), pp. 375-520 (p. 382).

<sup>108</sup> Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres, OC III*, p. 3, Michaux's italics.

The use of the term ‘paradis’ obviously alludes to Baudelaire’s *Paradis artificiels* and the unbearable experiences of his own and Baudelaire’s experimentation with drugs. Michaux, however, negates the Baudelairean metaphor, highlighting his desire to break free from the inevitable comparisons between the two poets on this subject. The last line resonates with references to the atrocities of two world wars and the more negative technological and scientific developments engendered by the advent of modernity.

In *Émergences-Résurgences*, Michaux even describes his initial reluctance to take mescaline when the idea is suggested to him by Paulhan:

Un écrivain cherchait, pour essayer la mescaline qui lui avait été remise, un lieu convenable où personne ne le dérangerait. Chez moi peut-être... Je participerais.  
Géné, ne voyant pas comment me dérober, j’acceptai.  
Guère envie. Ne m’attendais à rien. Ce serait un échec. Ça n’agirait pas sur moi.<sup>109</sup>

The apparent unwillingness to become involved in this experiment corroborates Michaux’s professed lack of self-gratification when taking hallucinogenic substances. His assertion can appear somewhat unconvincing when we consider the amount of time he dedicated to this experimentation. This ambiguity is further underlined by the fact that this information is divulged by Michaux in an autobiographical text written in the first person about his activities as a visual artist. This textual account cannot be regarded as objective, especially when we take into consideration Michaux’s rather enthusiastic response by letter to Paulhan’s request: ‘Si tu m’en trouves (de la mesc) je suis ton homme. / Si tu le désires, ton compagnon de voyage et mon appartement notre plage d’envol.’<sup>110</sup> It is therefore difficult to establish whether Michaux’s lack of enjoyment in drug-taking is at all believable. Certain ambiguities are there to be acknowledged in these texts. Their putative scientific nature attempts to dismiss any element of hedonism or enjoyment, and yet, some texts, such as *L’Infini turbulent*, describe experiences of ecstatic, spiritual transcendence. It must be understood that Michaux’s drug-taking is not of a hedonistic

<sup>109</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 606.

<sup>110</sup> Bellour and Tran, ‘Chronologie’, OC II, p. XXXVI.

nature in that he does not pursue pleasure at all costs. This does not mean, however, that enjoyment is totally excluded from this experimentation, but instead that it is not the main objective.

Although there exist clear links with a specific literary tradition as well as with contemporary scientific research, Michaux's experimentation with hallucinogenic substances can still be considered disconcerting. For the reader who is familiar with Michaux's earlier textual production, it contains many surprises. His shift towards literary and artistic output devoted to recording his experimentation with drugs is also rather puzzling in terms of his sudden neglect of other forms of visual and verbal production which had hitherto been well represented. As Malcolm Bowie points out:

What is surprising is not that the later experiments should take place, but that they should preoccupy Michaux for an entire decade and that the task of producing a written report on them should replace almost all other literary activity.<sup>111</sup>

For a period of more than ten years, Michaux's publications and exhibitions deal almost solely with his experience of reality under the influence of various drugs. It is difficult to say why he spent over a decade engrossed in these experiments at the expense of other forms of activity. It could be suggested that the all-consuming and contradictory initial experiences related in *Misérable miracle* and *L'Infini turbulent* incited him to pursue his investigations, implying a certain dependence that he adamantly denies. The most convincing explanation, however, seems to be that he had exhausted a creative cycle inhabited by fables and imaginary worlds and urgently needed to change registers. For Bellour, this necessity is expressed though the violent tone of the last texts of the collection, *Face aux verrous*:

Les raisons, à jamais difficiles à estimer, du choix qui a poussé soudainement, et si longtemps, si excessivement, Henri Michaux vers 'la drogue', sont sans doute liées à la peur rageuse, mélancolique, piétinante, qui passe dans les derniers textes de *Face aux verrous* comme dans quelques autres de ces mêmes années, non repris par lui en volume. La seule chose sûre est que la drogue ouvre de façon imprévue un passage vers une aventure de vivre et de créer à laquelle ni l'écriture ni la peinture ne

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<sup>111</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A study of his literary works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 151.

semblent suffire – bien que Michaux tente alors vivement de les saisir l’une par l’autre pour cerner des issues possibles.<sup>112</sup>

Michaux’s experimentation with signs, which continued sporadically throughout his life, could not compete with the attraction of transcendent mystical and spiritual experiences offered by mescaline. And yet, although this experimentation with drugs would put an almost complete stop to Michaux’s imaginary worlds,<sup>113</sup> for example, his *Garabagne*,<sup>114</sup> three of the four books containing signs would be published after this period.

Michaux’s research into hallucinogenic substances could be said to continue an experimental trajectory that included numerous literary and artistic activities in addition to travel and music, often blurring the generic distinctions between these normally discrete practices. Through these investigations, Michaux aimed to transcend any singular norm, classification or genre in order to devise a new thought system:

Penser! Plutôt agir sur ma machine à être (et à penser) pour me trouver en situation de pouvoir penser nouvellement, d’avoir des possibilités de pensées vraiment neuves.

Dans ce sens, je voudrais avoir fait de la pensée expérimentale.<sup>115</sup>

This new thought system should in turn incite a form of expression, that would enable the creator to render the dynamic nature of the inner self. It must also be noted that Michaux had already experimented with certain drugs: for example, in *Ecuador*, he relates his experiences of taking ether, laudanum and opium. He adds these experiences

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<sup>112</sup> Bellour, ‘Notice’ to *Misérable miracle*, *OC II*, p. 1246.

<sup>113</sup> In his book composed with Matta in 1959, *Vigies sur cibles*, Michaux describes fictional cultures in his former style, for example, in ‘Affaires impersonnelles’: ‘Le dénombrement des monstres se fait une fois l’an ou toutes les neuf lunes. Le sort est appelé à décider. Beaucoup périssent, mais assez survivent pour que monstrueusement se développent à nouveau les monstres des Haw’, *OC II*, p. 958.

<sup>114</sup> Roland Barthes compares his representation of Japan to Michaux’s ‘Garabagne’ in the opening sentence of *L’Empire des signes*: ‘Si je veux imaginer un peuple fictif, je puis lui donner un nom inventé, le traiter déclarativement comme un objet romanesque, fonder une nouvelle Garabagne, de façon à ne compromettre aucun pays réel dans ma fantaisie (mais alors c’est cette fantaisie même que je compromets dans les signes de la littérature).’ Roland Barthes, *L’Empire des signes* (Geneva: Albert Skira, Collection ‘Les Sentiers de la création’, 1970), p. 9.

<sup>115</sup> Michaux, ‘Observations’, *Passages*, *OC II*, p. 349.

rather sheepishly at the end of the anti-drug postface to *Misérable miracle*: 'J'oubliais. J'ai dû, il y a vingt-cinq ans, ou plus, essayer sept ou huit fois l'éther, une fois le laudanum et deux fois l'affreux alcool.'<sup>116</sup>

Many commentators have seen a certain inevitability in this change of literary and artistic direction, considering it as an intensification of a pre-existing tendency, which can be justified by these early experiences and an openness to new creative methods.<sup>117</sup> There is little doubt, however, that the visual and verbal output produced under the influence of various hallucinogenic substances does not simply follow on from the earlier works. As Milner argues:

Ce serait méconnaître l'originalité profonde et déconcertante de cette partie de son œuvre que de la penser en continuité avec tout ce qui précède, même si, considérée rétrospectivement, elle donne l'impression qu'il 'devait en venir là', par une sorte de passage à la limite de ce que son œuvre antérieure laissait pressentir.<sup>118</sup>

The texts produced under the influence of hallucinogenic substances build on a fascination with certain themes, such as speed, rhythm and trajectories, that was already present in Michaux's poetic and artistic *œuvre* before this period. Although the creative process is radically transformed by the involvement of mind-altering drugs, the line of inquiry remains basically similar. Michaux is concerned with the nature of the thought process, a certain multiplicity of the self and a renewal of his creative faculties in order to record the distortive dimension of these experiences.

Michaux stopped any regular experimentation with drugs out of a fear of being trapped by dependence, which is, of course, characteristic of his general creative outlook. He states in the

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<sup>116</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, p. 767.

<sup>117</sup> 'Disons – même si l'affirmation peut paraître après coup ridicule – que la drogue était très naturellement inscrite dans ce voyage curieux et exigeant que fut la vie de Michaux. Comment lorsque l'on est sans cesse à s'interroger sur sa position dans le réel, ne pas aller voir du côté de ces substances qui modifient profondément la relation au monde?' Jean-Pierre Giusto, 'Henri Michaux: L'Échappée belle', in *Sur Henri Michaux*, ed. by J.-P. Giusto, Maurice Mourier and Jean-Jacques Paul (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, Collection 'Parcours', 1988), pp. 5-55 (p. 34).

<sup>118</sup> Milner, *L'Imaginaire des drogues*, p. 384.

‘Addenda’ to *Misérable miracle*, written over ten years after the publication of this text:

En prendre (de ces produits) tous les quatre ans, une fois ou deux pour savoir où on en est, ne serait probablement pas mauvais.  
Même cela je l’abandonne.  
Mettons que je ne suis pas très doué pour la dépendance.<sup>119</sup>

Michaux took drugs spasmodically for the rest of his life, but never in the same recurrent fashion. He admits, moreover, that his aspiration towards constant independence was in fact the downfall of his attempt at mastering mescaline, which appears to have been a most unlikely prospect in any case:

Je n’étais pas neutre non plus, de quoi je ne me défends pas. La Mescaline et moi, nous étions souvent plus en lutte qu’ensemble. J’étais secoué, cassé, mais je ne marchais pas. [...] On me voulait tout consentant. Pour se plaire à une drogue il faut aimer être sujet. Moi je me sentais trop ‘de corvée’.<sup>120</sup>

In this context, it should also be noted that after the period of literary and artistic output concerned with charting his experimentation with drugs, Michaux chose to publish in 1973, for the one and only time, an anthology composed almost uniquely of poems in verse, *Moments: Traversées du temps*.<sup>121</sup> The poem, *Paix dans les brisements*, is included in this book, but without the drawings and the two short texts in prose, ‘Au sujet de *Paix dans les brisements*’ and ‘Signification des dessins’ that appear to form a single artistic unity in the first publication of 1959. The innovative layout of this first published version of the poem, which will be examined in Chapter 5, has also become more conventional, following traditional, horizontal linear constraints although its central alignment has been preserved. Anne-Élisabeth Halpern remarks on this inclusion of *Paix dans les brisements* in *Moments* in terms of the success of Michaux’s hallucinogenic experimentation as well as its scientific nature:

Or, seul le poème a été repris dans *Moments*, comme si la visée scientifique avait été reléguée par Michaux au titre de sa redondance avec les livres

<sup>119</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, p. 784.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp. 620-21.

<sup>121</sup> Michaux, *Moments: Traversées du temps*, OC III, pp. 721-760. The only text in prose in this volume is ‘Lieux, moments, traversées du temps’ (pp. 753-755).

véritablement axés sur l'expérimentation des drogues. Comme dans le cas de *Vers la complétude* et du *Jardin exalté*, *Paix dans les brisements* pose la question des limites d'une écriture strictement scientifique des expériences hallucinatoires, voire de l'impossibilité radicale de cette écriture.<sup>122</sup>

The poetic nature of *Paix dans les brisements* challenges the scientific objectivity of the other texts composed under the influence of hallucinogenic substances. In 1974, the year following the publication of *Moments*, the figures of *Par la voie des rythmes* were published. Both of these volumes bear the mark of Michaux's experimentation with drugs.

According to Anne Brun, most of the poetic texts included in *Moments* would have been created during this period.<sup>123</sup> It could be suggested that the influence of the mescaline-induced works can also be seen in *Par la voie des rythmes* because, in comparison to *Mouvements*, more pages include frailer, lighter lines, trembling zigzags on the verge of disintegration, which appear closer to the pen or pencil used in the mescaline drawings. Consequently, the publication of *Moments* and *Par la voie des rythmes* following this unique period could be said to reflect the impossibility of rendering the drug-induced state in an entirely satisfactory way using either visual or verbal means. *Moments* complies with the conventional book form through its exclusively verbal nature, whilst *Par la voie des rythmes* forms a radical critique of this same book form through its very lack of verbal content. But, although these publications could be said to negate the interface between writing and drawing, dividing Michaux's verbal and visual output into two separate entities, the use of the fibre-tipped pen in *Par la voie des rythmes*, instead of the brush, calls into question this interpretation. Both works, however, definitively mark the end of this period of intense experimentation with drugs.

Although different in their making, the five books produced during this period of hallucinogenic experimentation do present some parallels with the rest of Michaux's poetic and artistic output, and, in this case, with his books incorporating signs. If these visual and verbal works are ultimately concerned with representing the motion implied in the movement of inner and outer reality, that is, the movement of

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<sup>122</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 121.

<sup>123</sup> Brun, *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné*, p. 27.

the mind (the creation and interaction of thoughts, emotions and other mental states) and the movement inside the body (the beating heart, blood pulsating through the veins, the constant creation of cells that all point to Michaux's medical awareness) in juxtaposition with the hostile conditions of the outside world, the mescaline writings and drawings are created with a similar objective in mind. The body participates in this process, as both an intermediary between these two conceptions of reality and a transmitter of this collision through the creative process. Bowie comments on this subject in relation to the books that deal with narcotic experimentation:

Their most surprising feature, and the feature which ensures the general unity of each, is Michaux's rediscovery of the world as organic process. [...] The organicist-vitalist view to which he adhered in such poems as *Mouvements* was positively enforced by the experience of mescaline: his vision of an undulating movement which filled space and was continuous in time provided him with an image of the world-process at large.<sup>124</sup>

The idea of the world as an organic process is predominant in Taoist thought, and is also suggested by the rhythmic, living structure of the books incorporating signs. Michaux's experimentation with drugs is particularly pertinent for our purposes because he composed the five books from notes he had taken during his experiments, which often comprised both drawing and writing. This interplay between text and image in three of the five mescaline works, *Misérable miracle*, *L'Infini turbulent* and *Paix dans les brisements*, needs to be examined in more detail when gauging their influence on *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*.

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<sup>124</sup> Bowie, *Henri Michaux*, pp. 168-69. When Bowie wrote his book on Michaux, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* had not yet been published. These three books appear to correspond to this 'organicist-vitalist view' as they all convey dynamically their own making. They also suggest a connection between their own creation and that of natural phenomena through their very form.



### Writing/Drawing the Hallucinogenic Experience

The avant-propos to *Misérable miracle* dating from March 1955 points to the interdisciplinary nature of Michaux's production under the influence of mescaline, and to the complicated process of conveying this within the confines of the conventional written page:

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 récrit. Le texte primordial, plus sensible que lisible, aussi dessiné qu'écrit, ne pouvait de toute façon suffire.<sup>125</sup>

Any clear distinction between the written and drawn line is shattered as a letter or a word tails off in a doodle that never quite becomes an image, or a vibrating zigzag becomes a word (Fig. 11). Michaux's scribbled notes, transcribed in *Misérable miracle*, constitute a type of infra-language,<sup>126</sup> where both drawing and writing are called upon in an attempt to convey the altered reality, which can be both terrible and sublime, experienced through the medium of drugs. In *Émergences-Résurgences*, he writes of words losing their semantic identity as they attempt to capture the momentum of this experience:

Dans l'écriture, certains jambages s'élançaient démesurés, faussant le mot, sortant du mot, leur graphie emportée à part par leur élan propre, et aussi par l'appel pressant à la représentation et à la figuration de ce dont il était question et dont, maladroites et insuffisantes, perçaient les soudaines, rapides tentations, les ébauches trop tôt interrompues.<sup>127</sup>

The typed text in *Misérable miracle* does not follow typographical norms as it contains words in the margin. These are key words from the text and could be described as a type of mathematical root. They convey and often repeat the essential and are inextricably linked to the chemical formula for the mescaline molecule that opens this book. The marginalia combined with the scribbled notes and drawings in

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<sup>125</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, p. 619.

<sup>126</sup> This term is used by Bellour in his introduction to the first volume of Michaux's collected works, p. XXXIX.

<sup>127</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 627.

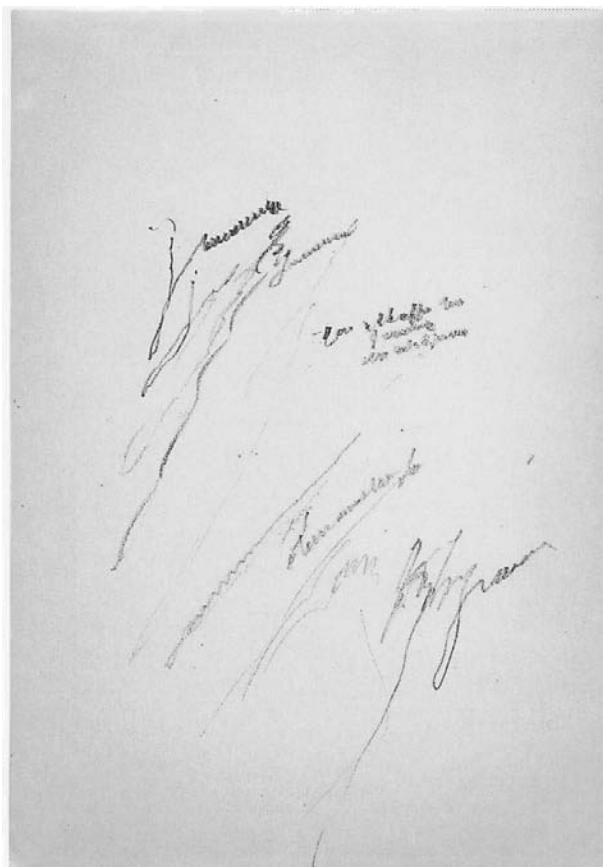


Fig. 11: Mescaline drawing, c. 1956  
(Pencil on paper, 40 x 27 cm)  
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*Misérable miracle* suggest a particular type of reading practice, which no longer follows linear conventions.

Michaux's visions and the means he uses to capture them, writing or drawing, often take on multiple significations under the influence of mescaline. For example, when confronted with the 'immense' spectacle of the Himalayas, Michaux writes:

Tandis que je suis encore à regarder ces monts extraordinaires, voilà que, se plaçant 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'élançant à leur tour vers les hauteurs, arches pour impensables et baroques cathédrales, arches ridiculement élancées sur leur base demeurée petite. C'est du dernier grotesque.<sup>128</sup>

In this example, words and letters take on a pictographic function by representing figuratively certain objects.<sup>129</sup> In *Paix dans les brisements*, a similar pattern is repeated. The letter *S* acquires snake-like qualities: 'De grands "S" obliques / m'obligent à serpentiner',<sup>130</sup> recreating the onomatopoeic link between the object and the letter. This nostalgic return to an ancient, universal sign system, in which the letter imitates the object that it depicts, is shared by other writers, for example, Michel Leiris, who writes in 'Alphabet':<sup>131</sup>

Ainsi, les lettres ne restent pas 'lettres mortes', mais sont parcourues par la sève d'une précieuse kabbale, qui les arrache à leur immobilité dogmatique et les anime, jusqu'aux extrêmes pointes de leurs rameaux. Très naturellement, l'A se transforme en échelle de Jacob (ou échelle double de peintre en bâtiment); l'I (un militaire au garde-à-vous) en colonne de feu ou

<sup>128</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, p. 624.

<sup>129</sup> *M* is also obviously the first letter of Michaux's surname. This letter seems to acquire a certain importance in his works as it also makes an appearance in phonetic form in two short texts, entitled 'Emme et son parasite' and 'Emme et le vieux médecin', in *La Nuit remue*, OC I, pp. 446-47. These texts relate Emme's reactions when parasites and microbes, thus dependent alien beings, are present in his body.

<sup>130</sup> Michaux, *Paix dans les brisements*, OC II, p. 1006.

<sup>131</sup> This coincidence is mentioned by Anne Brun in *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné*, p. 180. Brun also comments on another similarity in the same passage: 'Il est remarquable, toutefois, que les deux écrivains mâchent, avalent, ingurgitent l'alphabet.'

de nuées, l'O en sphéroïde originel du monde, l'S en sentier ou en serpent, le Z en foudre qui ne peut être que celle de Zeus ou de Jéhovah.<sup>132</sup>

Furthermore, Paul Claudel assesses the ideographic nature of the Western alphabet in 'Idéogrammes occidentaux'.<sup>133</sup> He comments on the letter *M* in 'Les mots ont une âme', making similar comparisons to Michaux. The letter *M*:

[...] se dresse au milieu de notre alphabet comme un arc de triomphe appuyé sur son triple jambage, à moins que la typographie n'en fasse un échancrement spirituel de l'horizon. Celui du Monde par exemple et pourquoi pas celui de la Mort? Portique ouvert à toutes sortes de vue et de suggestions.<sup>134</sup>

It is not surprising that Michaux, Leiris and Claudel made comparable choices for representing these letters pictographically as they all came from similar cultural backgrounds. The pictographic letter, however, although the ideal meeting point for signifier and signified, is in fact restrictive because an endless number of letters would be needed to represent the millions of objects that fill the world, and also because of the complexity of conveying abstract concepts by means of pictorial signs. Despite these difficulties, some visual artists were also formulating alphabets of signs to represent certain concepts around this time. Miró invented a key of symbols that represented, for example, the sun, the moon, a ladder of escape and male and female genitalia. The elaboration of this type of alphabet can be seen in the progression from his preparatory drawings and annotations to the finished painting.<sup>135</sup> It should, nevertheless, be highlighted that, in Michaux's case, the letter has above all (re)acquired a visual dimension in a traditionally verbal signifying context. Gérard Dessons comments on this use of the forms of letters from the alphabet in order to evoke the mental distortions provoked by mescaline:

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<sup>132</sup> Michel Leiris, 'Alphabet', in Michel Leiris, *La Règle du jeu I: Biffures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 40-76 (p. 45).

<sup>133</sup> Paul Claudel, 'Idéogrammes occidentaux', in Paul Claudel, *Œuvres en prose*, ed. by Jacques Petit and Charles Galpérine (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1965), pp. 81-91.

<sup>134</sup> Claudel, 'Les Mots ont une âme', in Claudel, *Œuvres en prose*, pp. 91-95 (p. 92).

<sup>135</sup> For examples of this kind, see *Joan Miró 1893-1993*, ed. by Rosa Maria Malet (Barcelona: Fondació Joan Miró/Julio Ollero, 1993).

*Dessin* de lettres, c'est-à-dire, linguistiquement parlant, non-lettres, le graphisme établit cependant une relation indirecte au langage, sur un mode fantasmatique qui prend [...] dans l'indécision de la notion d'*écrire*, notion explorée sur ses deux versants, graphique et linguistique, et définissant, dans cette indéfinition même, la pratique poétique de Michaux.<sup>136</sup>

This exploration of the graphic and linguistic nature of the written word and letter in the drug narratives obviously draws attention to close affinities with Michaux's experimentation with signs, which can be described as a type of variation on both drawing and writing.

These visual and verbal activities were described by Klee, whom Michaux greatly admired, as being 'identiques *en leur fond*',<sup>137</sup> thereby underlining the physical materiality of the written word or letter and the signifying, expressive capacity of the drawn line. Furthermore, there exists a close physical link between these two activities in that, whether writing a text or drawing with a brush in Indian ink or with a fibre-tipped pen, the paper must be placed in a horizontal position, for reasons of both comfort and practicality. In *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi*, this difference between the horizontal aspect of the writing gesture and the vertical nature of the painting gesture is explored, focusing on the example of Jackson Pollock. For Pollock removed the canvas from the easel and placed it on the ground:

C'est la rotation que lui fit subir Pollock qui allait perturber l'art de manière indélébile. Il n'est pas le premier à peindre à plat, mais il est le premier à souligner l'horizontalité de son support en tant qu'élément essentiel de son procès de travail (il n'y a pas de coulure verticale, l'espace isomorphe de ses tableaux n'est pas orienté par rapport au corps de l'homme érigé). En abandonnant le pinceau et, donc, la liaison anatomique qui faisait de l'instrument du peintre la prolongation de sa main, Pollock délègue une partie de ses pouvoirs à la matière même.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Gérard Dessons, 'La Manière d'Henry: prolégomènes à un traité du trait', p. 64, Dessons's emphasis.

<sup>137</sup> Paul Klee, 'Philosophie de la création', in Paul Klee, *Théorie de l'art moderne*, ed. and trans. by Pierre-Henri Gonthier (Paris: Denoël, Collection 'Folio/Essais', 1985), pp. 57-62 (p. 58), Klee's italics.

<sup>138</sup> Bois, 'La Valeur d'usage de l'informe', *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi*, p. 27. A whole section is devoted to horizontality in this catalogue, pp. 86-95.

This rotation from the easel to the floor opens the painting up to other media. It is no longer just a painting, no longer medium-specific,<sup>139</sup> just as Michaux's signs are no longer writing or drawing, but rather somewhere in between (Fig. 12). Furthermore, the materiality of Pollock's works, be it in the thick, uneven layers of paint or the random cigarette butts found on some canvases, underlines the horizontality of the work and its ultimate baseness, and therefore the reasons for which Krauss and Bois call it 'informe'.<sup>140</sup> One of the main aspects of Bataille's definition for 'l'informe' was its ability to 'déclasser',<sup>141</sup> and Pollock does just that through placing the canvas on the ground and using techniques and materials that cannot be described as painterly.

Like Pollock and Michaux, many artists and writers have questioned the interchange between text and image by using both media within the book or artistic frame. For instance, the seemingly random scribbling technique of the American visual artist, Cy Twombly, has characteristics of both writing and drawing as it contains recognisable as well as indecipherable words. His images have often been compared to graffiti, the form of street art that is thought to have close links with so-called primitive or childlike forms of expression. Roland Barthes explores this resemblance to graffiti in his essay, 'Cy Twombly ou Non multa sed multum':

Le malheur de l'écrivain, sa différence (par rapport au peintre d'écriture, comme l'est TW [Cy Twombly]), c'est que le graffiti lui est interdit: TW,

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<sup>139</sup> 'If Pollock had progressed beyond the easel picture, as Clement Greenberg had claimed, it was not to make bigger and flatter paintings. Rather, it was to rotate his work out of the dimension of the pictorial object altogether and, by placing his canvases on the floor, to transform the whole project of art from making objects, in their increasingly reified form, to articulating the vectors that connect objects to subjects.' Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 26.

<sup>140</sup> 'La puissance de la marque de Pollock en tant qu'index signifiait qu'elle témoignait avec persévérance de la résistance opposée par l'horizontale à la verticale, et que c'était le caractère *matériel* de ce témoignage – l'aspect huileux, croûteux, brillant, cordé de cette marque si manifestement horizontale – qui combattait la formation visuelle de la Gestalt et garantissait le caractère *informe* de l'œuvre.' Bois and Krauss, *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi*, p. 89, their emphasis.

<sup>141</sup> Bataille, 'Informe', p. 382.



Fig. 12:

Original drawing for *Par la voie des rythmes, OC III*, p. 804

(Ink on paper, fibre-tipped pen, 33 x 26 cm)

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c'est en somme un écrivain qui accèderait au graffiti, de plein droit et au vu de tout le monde. On sait bien que ce qui fait le graffiti, ce n'est à vrai dire ni l'inscription, ni son message, c'est le mur, le fond, la table; c'est parce que le fond existe pleinement, comme un objet qui a déjà vécu, que l'écriture lui vient toujours comme un supplément énigmatique: ce qui est *de trop*, en surnombre, hors sa place, voilà qui trouble l'ordre.<sup>142</sup>

Through the illegibility and non-linear organisation of his hand-written lines on a canvas, Twombly at first glance manages to undermine both verbal and pictorial systems of representation. And yet this seeming destruction actually leads to a positive affirmation of the visual aspect of writing and the verbal nature of drawing. Although Twombly may destroy any preconceptions of art as a transparent window on the world, he above all brings word and image together in a celebration of the proximity of the drawn and written line.

The question of an interference of visual and verbal forms is highly relevant in relation to Michaux's books incorporating both text and image, and in particular to the drawings in the textless *Par la voie des rythmes*, which appear to point to the destruction of writing systems. Moreover, as Barthes underlines through the analogy with graffiti, Twombly's visual production calls into question the material support of the artistic or literary product, in his case, the canvas, through the introduction of scrawled words. In a review article, published in 1930 in *Documents*, Georges Bataille discusses childlike and primitive creation, using an analysis of M. G. H. Luquet's book on primitive art as his critical starting point. In this article, Bataille introduces the phenomenon of 'altération' and asserts the co-dependence of damage (implicit in this French term) and transformation in the artistic process:

Il est vrai que l'*altération* principale n'est pas celle que subit le support du dessin. Le dessin lui-même se développe et s'enrichit en variétés, en accentuant dans tous les sens la déformation de l'objet représenté. Ce développement est facile à suivre à partir du griffonnage. Le hasard dégage de quelques lignes bizarres une ressemblance visuelle qui peut être fixée par la répétition. Cette étape représente en quelque sorte le second degré de l'*altération*, c'est-à-dire que l'objet détruit (le papier ou le mur) est altéré à

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<sup>142</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly ou Non multa sed multum', in Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. III, 1974-1980 (Paris: Seuil, 1995), pp. 1033-47 (p. 1040), Barthes's emphasis.



tel point qu'il est transformé en un nouvel objet, un cheval, une tête, un homme. Enfin, au cours de la répétition, ce nouvel objet est lui-même altéré par une série de déformations. L'art, puisque art il y a incontestablement, procède dans ce sens par destructions successives.<sup>143</sup>

It can be assumed that Michaux would have been familiar with Bataille's writings.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, the former's signs can be interpreted as close to this notion of 'altération', figuring the presence of the subject through a dismemberment of form and a distortion of its support, the book. Michaux even suggests in *Par des traits*: 'altérer par des traits'.<sup>145</sup>

Barthes also introduces the notion of the Book with regard to Twombly's work: 'Quand l'écriture presse, éclate, se pousse vers les marges, elle rejoint l'idée du Livre.'<sup>146</sup> This use of the word 'Livre'

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<sup>143</sup> Georges Bataille, 'L'Art primitif', in *Documents*, Vol. II, 7 (1930), pp. 389-97 (p. 396). Georges Didi-Huberman explains this concept in the following terms: 'Il cherche à nous faire comprendre que la dialectique des formes commence par une *altération du subjectile*, c'est-à-dire du support – mur, papier, voire le dos d'un camarade de classe –, modifié par des marques que les enfants ne se contentent jamais de "poser" innocemment, puisqu'ils les imposent avec une entière violence, fût-elle réjouie dans quelque "béatitude du plus mauvais aloi". Cette altération du subjectile induit, dans le texte de Bataille, l'esquisse de ce qu'on pourrait ici nommer une élémentaire *dialectique de la trace*: dans cette dialectique, la "présence réelle" du sujet s'affirme dans l'objet comme une négation souveraine, une destruction ou un *démenti* que la trace a précisément pour fonction de "relever". Elle y parvient en *maintenant* l'objet lui-même – l'objet non absolument détruit –, désormais porteur du "sceau" de la négation par laquelle le sujet vient non pas de néantiser l'objet, mais de l'*altérer*.' Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le Gai Savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, Collection 'Vues', 1995), p. 264, Didi-Huberman's emphasis. Jacques Derrida discusses the term 'subjectile' in his essay on Antonin Artaud, 'Forener the subjectile', in Paule Thévenin and Jacques Derrida, eds, *Antonin Artaud: Dessins et portraits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 55-108.

<sup>144</sup> A letter addressed to Bataille from Michaux, dated April 1961, corroborates this, and also points to a definite allegiance between these two iconoclastic creators through its surprisingly friendly and admiring tone: 'Uniques, Capitales les pages sur l'extase (comme est capitale l'extase) / qu'après la mescaline je comprends et prends d'une participation toute nouvelle. / Sur le rire aussi, que de tout temps, fâcheusement j'eus tendance à minimiser. / Merci / Et quelle bonne nouvelle! / Surprise qui fera chaud au cœur de vous retrouver, de vous apercevoir, présence que fichera par terre l'inutile et le médiocre rien qu'en pensant, sans même avoir à parler.' *Henri Michaux, le corps de la pensée*, ed. by Evelyne Grossman, Anne-Élisabeth Halpern and Pierre Vilar (Tours: Farrago, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>145</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, *OC III*, p. 1249.

<sup>146</sup> Barthes, 'Cy Twombly ou Non multa sed multum', p. 1037.

alludes to Stéphane Mallarmé's notion of the ideal, unrealisable Book, the definitive Book that would sum up the very essence of all works of literature and art. He states in *Le Livre, instrument spirituel*:

Une proposition qui émane de moi – si, diversement, citée à mon éloge ou par blâme – je la revendique avec celles qui se presseront ici – sommaire veut, que tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre.<sup>147</sup>

If Michaux's graphic signs are considered as a type of gestural script, which finds its roots in both drawing and writing and aspires to reflect the inner dynamism of the body and mind, they could be said to aspire to the same sort of total experience as engendered by Mallarmé's notion of the Book.<sup>148</sup> But when Michaux's aversion to a completed end-product and his quest for a universal expressive form in opposition to conventional Western signifying systems are considered, it is more likely that his graphic signs, especially in *Par la voie des rythmes*, are to be regarded as a subverted form of writing, which strives to undermine their support, the page. Using Barthes's terms, Michaux is both 'écrivain' and 'peintre d'écriture'. His figures in *Par la voie des rythmes* could be described as a form of graffiti as he is fully aware of the conventional use of the book filled with words, and yet he uses this form in a subversive manner, replacing meaningful words with meaningless squiggles.

It is not by chance that, in French, the same word, *trait*, as in *Par des traits*, can be used to describe writing, drawing and the face, *les traits de l'écriture, du dessin et du visage*. The *traits* of Michaux's signs suggest a means of expressing subjective identity, or monstrous

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<sup>147</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Le Livre, instrument spirituel*, in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1945), pp. 378-82 (p. 378).

<sup>148</sup> Anne-Élisabeth Halpern would refute this link to the Mallarmeian concept of a total Book in Michaux's poetics because of his active interest in the scientific advances of the twentieth century: 'Persuadé qu'il n'y a que des livres, des tentatives, Michaux tient un discours proche de celui des sciences contemporaines, pour lesquelles il existe des théories, des savoirs partiels, mais sûrement pas de théorie absolue qui donnerait la formule définitive du monde', in *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 261. This would also explain his dislike of any totally finished product. This interest in the experiment can only be reconciled with the totality a book suggests if Michaux's constant updating of his textual material means that he never considered his books to be finished entities.

alterity, which spring, unsolicited, out of his watercolour portraits, for example. As Dessons points out:

Les signes (graphiques) ne sont pas du langage verbal, mais ils sont ici la condition d'une réflexion sur le langage, et, surtout, sur la pratique du langage. En ce sens, ils ne sont pas du dessin, si dessiner est un acte qui s'épuise dans sa propre réalisation, qu'il soit tendu ou non vers la représentation. Chez Michaux, on ne peut penser les traits sans leur rapport (négatif) au langage, en tant qu'actes d'individuation.<sup>149</sup>

These graphic signs express the inner self by going against both conventional writing and drawing systems. As drawings, they do not aim to represent a particular object accurately and, as a form of writing, they have no semantic value. It is through this negative and destructive relationship with conventional expressive means that Michaux is able to reach a purer, more direct form of expression based on the transdisciplinary, and indeed, transcendental line.

It must be emphasised that Michaux abandoned the brush soon after *Mouvements*. Indeed, in *Émergences-Résurgences*, he mentions this change of implement in relation to his large Indian ink paintings:

A quel moment ai-je cessé de les dessiner au pinceau? Du temps s'écoule avant que je me serve de l'encre avec sans-gêne. Enfin un jour j'y vais carrément. Par gestes saccadés je la fais déboucher en flots de la bouteille ouverte. Qu'elle se répande maintenant...

Fini le pinceau.

Le flot qui coule, souverain, semble impudent. Plutôt – car il coule assez mollement – il me rend impudent par son noir barbare.<sup>150</sup>

This quotation underlines the controlled nature of drawing with a brush and Michaux's need for a freer form of expression. In *Par la voie des rythmes*, the drawings are no longer composed with a brush, but with a black fibre-tipped pen. This type of pen was invented in the 1940s but, as the first versions were rather crude applicators of ink, they were mostly used for labelling and artistic work, for example, 'Études de danseurs' by the French visual artist, Jean Bazaine.<sup>151</sup> The

<sup>149</sup> Dessons, 'La Manière d'Henry: prolégomènes à un traité du trait', pp. 79-80.

<sup>150</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 585.

<sup>151</sup> Christian Delacampagne, 'L'Amour du remuant: Le Corps dansant et la peinture, de Bouguereau à Pollock', in *Corps provisoire: Danse, Cinéma, Peinture, Poésie*, ed.

modern fibre-tipped pen was invented in 1962 in Japan by Yokio Horie of the Tokyo Stationery Company. This product, unlike the ballpoint pen, was ideally suited to the strokes of the Japanese ideographic writing system, which are traditionally produced with a pointed ink brush. Furthermore, the ink used in fibre-tipped pens, although closer to a dye, is indelible, much like Indian ink. Consequently, in his change of instrument from brush to fibre-tipped pen, Michaux is in fact mirroring the evolution that took place in writing habits in Japanese society. We shall see that this is of relevance when the influence of ideographic writing systems on Michaux's signs is examined in greater detail in Chapter 3. Moreover, some of the drawings from his mescaline period are in ballpoint pen or Crayolor, underlining the fact that he was not averse to experimenting with new materials and instruments. This use of everyday pens emphasises his rather iconoclastic approach to his artistic work, confirmed by the fact that he often used watercolour, another medium often dismissed as 'unpainterly'. Michaux continued to use the fibre-tipped pen for *Saisir* and *Par des traits*. This instrument of course renders the lines of the drawings less fluid and more square-edged, and brings the whole creative process closer to writing. It also creates a rather neat distinction between the four books incorporating signs and the experimentation with hallucinogenic substances. For the drawings in the three books that follow this period are all composed in fibre-tipped pen, perhaps highlighting the fact that Michaux's experimentation with drugs dramatically reduced the gap between writing and drawing in his perception, hence the textless *Par la voie des rythmes*.

The fact that Michaux's investigations with hallucinogenic substances took place between *Mouvements* and *Par la voie des rythmes* suggests that his attitude towards his experimentation with signs may have been altered as a result. Indeed, in 'Dessiner l'écoulement du temps', he recalls the terrifying experience, when under the influence of mescaline or LSD-25, of a hitherto unknown speed and rhythm of thought, impressions, images, speech and other mental functions, which he compares to the change in tempo experienced by those suffering from certain psychoses:

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by Jean Rouch and others (Paris: Armand Colin, Collection 'Arts chorégraphiques: L'Auteur dans l'œuvre', 1992), pp. 152-93 (p. 193).

Je devais apprendre moi-même l'horrible, trépidante expérience que c'est de changer de tempo, de le perdre subitement, d'en trouver un autre à la place, inconnu, terriblement vite, dont on ne sait que faire, rendant tout différent, méconnaissable, insensé, décoché, faisant tout filer, qu'on ne peut suivre, qu'il faut suivre, où pensées, sentiments, tiennent à présent du projectile, où les images intérieures, aussi accentuées qu'accéléérées, sont violentes, vrillantes, térébrantes, insupportables, objets d'une vision intérieure dont on ne peut plus se détacher.<sup>152</sup>

The experimentation with drugs presents a change to Michaux's literary and artistic output whilst remaining in a similar experimental trajectory. It highlights his understanding of contemporary scientific and medical developments and his use of his own body as a site of experimentation. Many tensions exist in the five major works composed under the influence of drugs, for example, between poetic and scientific discourses, the poet-scientist being both the subject and the object of his experimentation, or between writing and drawing as adequate expressive means to convey this mind-altering experience. A major difference between the experimentation with signs and the mescaline drawings, besides the different creative processes, appears to be the fact that Michaux actively imposes a degree of structure on his signs. This in turn implies a critique of the book and of Western writing systems in general, but it also suggests a need for some sort of order in the text. Finally, Michaux's signs reappear throughout his life, achieving his aim of rendering a type of lifelike continuum:

Or en ce temps je garde un autre désir, un par-dessus tous les autres. Je voudrais un *continuum*. Un *continuum* comme un murmure, qui ne finit pas, semblable à la vie, qui est ce qui nous continue, plus important que toute qualité.

Impossible de dessiner comme si ce continu n'existait pas. C'est lui qu'il faut rendre.<sup>153</sup>

The mescaline experiments, on the other hand, represent a unique period of intense experimentation. The final years of Michaux's life, which see the publications of *Saisir* and *Par des traits*, can now be examined. These are characterised by Michaux's meditative outlook, which can be said to be a direct result of the revelations produced under the influence of hallucinogenic substances.

<sup>152</sup> Michaux, 'Dessiner l'écoulement du temps', *Passages, OC II*, pp. 373-74.

<sup>153</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences, OC III*, p. 546, Michaux's italics.

### Introducing *Saisir* and *Par des traits*: Final Attempts

Only ten years separate the publication of *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*, and yet, in this relatively short space of time, Michaux still managed to publish a large number of texts<sup>154</sup> and take part in many individual and collective exhibitions worldwide. It is striking that, even towards the end of his long life, Michaux was still highly productive in terms of verbal and visual output, although he often suffered from ill health.<sup>155</sup> Retrospectives of his artistic work took place in 1976 at the Fondation Maeght in St Paul de Vence,<sup>156</sup> at the Stadtmuseum in Graz, Austria, and at the Museum des 20 Jahrhunderts in Vienna. 1978 saw his largest retrospective until then, curated by Alfred Pacquement and Agnès Angliviel de La Beaumelle at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne in Paris.<sup>157</sup> This exhibition then travelled to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and to the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montreal. In 1981, he exhibited for the first time in Tokyo at the Kaneko Art Gallery. Two years later, an important retrospective of his work took place at the Seibu Museum in the same city.

It may appear a cliché, but, during the last decades of Michaux's life, an almost mystical serenity surrounded both him and his artistic and literary production. Indeed, towards the end of his life, he was engaged in the practice of various Oriental philosophies.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>154</sup> The poet Bernard Collin tells Claude Fintz: 'Il n'a jamais autant publié que lorsqu'il eut officiellement déclaré qu'il ne voulait plus rien écrire. "Il s'est mis alors à écrire un livre par jour", dit ironiquement mon interlocuteur, qui faisait allusion à la période 1970-84.' Claude Fintz, *Expérience esthétique et spirituelle chez Henri Michaux: La Quête d'un savoir et d'une posture* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), p. 311.

<sup>155</sup> Claude Fintz writes: 'À quelques heures de sa mort, il demandait encore à Micheline Phan-Kim [*sic*] son avis sur un dessin qu'il venait de faire à l'hôpital, durant sa nuit d'insomnie. Il lui demanda cependant aussi d'annuler ses rendez-vous multiples', in *Expérience esthétique et spirituelle chez Henri Michaux*, p. 309.

<sup>156</sup> See the exhibition catalogue: *Henri Michaux: Peintures*, ed. by Hélène Drude & Françoise Gaillard (Saint-Paul: Fondation Maeght, 1976).

<sup>157</sup> See the catalogue: *Henri Michaux*, ed. by Agnès Angliviel de La Beaumelle and Alfred Pacquement (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1978).

<sup>158</sup> Claude Fintz recalls Micheline Phankim observing the following: 'Il existait dans la semaine un moment important, "qu'il consacrait à une pratique singulière" [Phankim]: toute la journée du dimanche, du lever jusqu'au soir, il s'enfermait chez lui, débranchait le téléphone, jeûnait et se livrait à la méditation. [...] Dans son itinéraire personnel, aucune initiation, aucune révélation, aucune illumination

Texts such as *Une Voie pour l'insubordination* underline a renewed interest in mysticism and sainthood, which had first been expressed through his choice of reading matter as a teenager:

Lectures en tous sens. Lectures de recherche pour découvrir les siens, épars dans le monde, ses vrais parents, pas tout à fait parents non plus cependant, pour découvrir ceux qui peut-être 'savent' (Hello, Ruysbroek, Tolstoï, Dostoïevsky). Lectures des *Vie* des saints, des plus surprenants, des plus éloignés de l'homme moyen. Lectures aussi des excentriques, des extravagants ou des 'Jeunes Belgique' à la langue bizarre qu'il voudrait plus bizarre encore.<sup>159</sup>

The peaceful and somehow fulfilled nature of some of his later texts can also, however, be attributed to the spiritual, quasi-religious revelations experienced after taking mescaline, which led to texts such as 'Vers la complétude':

L'émanation d'exister  
l'agrandissement d'exister  
le promontoire, l'impétuosité d'exister

Je suis à l'arrivée de la plénitude  
L'instant est plus que l'être  
L'être est plus que les êtres  
Et tous les êtres sont infinis.<sup>160</sup>

The tone of this text is diametrically opposed to the more hostile, aggressive nature of some of Michaux's earlier poems. Furthermore, the question can be asked as to why he included the word 'promontoire' in this text, especially in such a sparse one? Given that 'promontoire' is virtually the only noun that refers to the world of objects, it has an unusual position here, because, with the possible exception of 'arrivée', all the other nouns relate to more abstract,

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particulière, si ce n'est la révélation panoramique – très marquante – du panthéon hindou, sous mescaline. "Il aspira à une paix bouddhique" [Phankim][...] celle-ci trouvera son expression dans l'apaisement de la fin de sa vie. [...] En résumé, pour Micheline Phan-Kim [*sic*], la vraie dimension de la "spiritualité" de Michaux – si ce mot pouvait convenir! – réside dans sa recherche continue, quotidienne, de spiritualité plus que par un quelconque "accomplissement" spirituel.' Fintz, *Expérience esthétique et spirituelle chez Henri Michaux*, pp. 308-09.

<sup>159</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements*, OC I, p. CXXXI.

<sup>160</sup> Michaux, 'Vers la complétude (*Saisie et Dessaisies*)', in *Moments*, OC III, pp. 744-52 (p. 744).

human, spiritual concerns. The line in which it appears would arguably be clearer, as well as rhythmically more unified, without the words 'le promontoire'. For all of these reasons, we are inclined to look especially closely at it. Moreover, 'Promontoire' is the title of one of Rimbaud's poems in prose contained in *Illuminations*.<sup>161</sup> Obviously, the sparseness of Michaux's poem makes it very different to Rimbaud's lavish physical descriptions in 'Promontoire', but what they have in common is a shared structural rigour. In the stanzas quoted from Michaux's poem, the middle line 'Je suis à l'arrivée de la plénitude' acts as a fulcrum separating the three occurrences of 'exister' from the three lines with 'être(s)'. Rimbaud's prose poem is not only symmetrical, but stresses its thresholds, its outermost extremes (title, first sentence, last word). The passage from Michaux's poem is built upon a similar formal pattern in that the title, central line and final word all suggest a trajectory towards fulfilment and a sense of the immeasurable: 'complétude/ plénitude/ infinis'. In this context, 'promontoire' is an evocative word, as it suggests an end-point that opens onto an infinity, the horizon. Both texts have an insistent rhythm, Michaux's deriving from the incantatory effect of the repetitions, Rimbaud's from the long string of clauses separated by semi-colons. This is not to say that there is a conscious intertextual connection here, even if Michaux was almost certainly familiar with Rimbaud's work.<sup>162</sup> The most significant connections between the two poets lie in their attempts to break with literary traditions and formal constraints rather than in any single specific intertextual reference. In *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art: Sites of Imaginary Space*, Dee Reynolds makes the following point about *Illuminations*,

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<sup>161</sup> Rimbaud, 'Promontoire', *Illuminations*, in Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 119-55 (pp. 148-49).

<sup>162</sup> Michaux mentions Rimbaud in *Ecuador, OCI*, pp. 163-64: 'Quand je songe qu'il y a deux ou trois ânes qui se sont imaginés avoir reconstitué la vie de Rimbaud d'après sa correspondance! Comme si des lettres à sa sœur, à sa mère, à un pion, à un copain, livraient quoi que ce soit.' This quotation underlines Rimbaud's legendary status, and is more concerned with his life than his poetry. Michaux continues in much the same vein in an interview with Claudine Chonez: 'Être trafiquant d'armes, mais c'est magnifique! Il s'est dit: j'ai cherché quelque chose par le langage et je suis arrivé à autre chose. Mais je suis au bout; passons à un nouvel exercice. Ça c'est nullement renoncer.' 'Devant Henri Michaux', *Magazine littéraire*, 364 (April 1998), 25, Michaux's emphasis.



which can be applied to Michaux's textual practice generally, and more specifically to his use of the word 'promontoire' in this text:

Imagining activity breaks away from mimetic models which allow 'picturing' of realistic images: the reader is not invited to mentally picture potentially realistic scenarios, but to engage in a process of projecting new, hitherto unthought of and ungraspable sensory spaces. Imaginary space is indefinable: it interacts with textual rhythms, but cannot be identified with them.<sup>163</sup>

This idea of 'ungraspable sensory space' relates very well to the stanzas quoted from Michaux's poem, and not least to line three: it is unclear whether 'le promontoire' and 'l'impétuosité d'exister' are in apposition, or whether they stand in a different relation to one another. Either way, the conflation of the physical and emotional is highly unusual and striking, and the line defies our attempts to recuperate it into a single, coherent visual or mental image. To continue the analogy with Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Tsvetan Todorov concludes his essay on the problematic status of this collection of texts by affirming:

Paradoxalement, c'est en voulant restituer le sens de ces textes que l'exégète les en prive – car leur sens, paradoxe inverse, est de n'en point avoir, ou, plus exactement, de rendre problématique sa construction. Rimbaud a élevé au statut de littérature des textes qui ne parlent de rien, dont on ignorera le sens - ce qui leur donne un sens historique énorme.<sup>164</sup>

This absence of meaning can be compared to Michaux's experimentation with signs published in book form for, although suggesting a myriad of possible interpretations, the signs actually contain no conventional semantic or phonetic value.

The collection of texts that could be described as exemplary of Michaux's calmer, less contestatory approach at this time is *Jours de silence*. His poetry in these texts is characterised by an almost minimalist purification, for example:

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<sup>163</sup> Dee Reynolds, *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art: Sites of Imaginary Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Collection 'Cambridge Studies in French', 1995), p. 42.

<sup>164</sup> Tsvetan Todorov, 'Les *Illuminations*', in Tsvetan Todorov, *La Notion de littérature et autres essais* (Paris: Seuil, Collection 'Points Essais', 1987), pp. 139-60 (pp. 159-60).

Arrêt  
 arrêt  
 Jour immobilisateur  
  
 Plus d'apport, plus de prises

L'œil ne va pas voir  
 L'oreille n'écoute plus.<sup>165</sup>

The ascetic content of this poem is mirrored by the absence of articles in the extremely short opening verses. This elliptic simplicity of both form and content reminds the reader of certain Oriental poetic forms such as the Japanese haiku, a poem composed of seventeen syllables divided into three lines of five, seven and five syllables. In Michaux's poem, the reader is guided towards a meditative state of unconsciousness, where the ear cannot hear nor the eye see, but where the distilled essence of a spiritual whole is somehow harmoniously present. This balance is emphasised in this quotation by the pairs of repeated terms ('arrêt', 'plus de') and structures (the negative form) in all three clusters.

Another example of this serene attitude is 'Fille de la montagne'. In this poem, Michaux tells the story of a young girl who experiences an apparition in the mountains, which leads to a type of otherworldly revelation:

Pour la fille de la montagne  
 secrète, réservée  
 l'apparition fut-elle une personne,  
 une déesse?

surtout lumière  
 seulement lumière  
 comme lumière elle demeura.<sup>166</sup>

This innocent girl's metaphysical experience is mirrored through the uncluttered linguistic style and content of the text. The absence of upper case letters, definite and indefinite articles and nearly all grammatical conjunctions highlights this simplicity. The second

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<sup>165</sup> Michaux, 'Jours de silence', in *Jours de silence*, in *Chemins cherchés, chemins perdus, transgressions*, *OC III*, pp. 1211-13 (p. 1211).

<sup>166</sup> Michaux, 'Fille de la montagne', *OC III*, pp. 1287-93 (p. 1291).

cluster answers the question as to the physical presence of the apparition and centres on the word 'lumière', which is repeated three times. The signification of this light, however, remains open to interpretation, as the adverbs ('surtout', 'seulement') imply that it is both everything yet nothing, and the reader is unsure, because of the feminine personal pronoun, whether it applies to the apparition or the girl herself.

Many of Michaux's texts published during this short period of time are re-editions of former publications, for example, *Idéogrammes en Chine*, his essay on the evolution of the Chinese writing system. *Choix de poèmes*, published in 1976, is a collection of poems chosen by Micheline Phankim, which spans Michaux's literary career, starting with 'Le Grand combat' (1927) and ending with 'Yantra' (1973). 'Bras cassé' was also published again in 1975 in a collection of texts entitled *Face à ce qui se dérobe*. Nonetheless, Michaux also wrote entirely new material, for example, 'Les Ravagés', a series of short texts in prose, which deal with the creative output of those suffering from mental illnesses. This subject matter can be traced back in part to his mescaline experiments. Michaux was interested in Dubuffet's concept of *art brut* which incorporated the art of the mentally ill and gradually grew to encompass creators who did not conform to society's definition of the artist through their lack of formal training, their ignorance of art history and their distance from intellectual circles.<sup>167</sup> They were, in Dubuffet's opinion, free from cultural and educational influences. Michaux even became a member of the 'Compagnie de l'*art brut*' when it reformed in the 1960s. In 'Les Ravagés', he explains his inspiration for this text in a short foreword:

Pages venues en considérant des peintures d'aliénés, hommes et femmes en difficulté qui ne purent surmonter l'insurmontable. Internés la plupart. Avec leur problème secret, diffus, cent fois découvert, caché pourtant, ils livrent avant tout et d'emblée leur énorme, indicible malaise.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> The English synonym for *art brut*, 'outsider art', was introduced by Roger Cardinal in 1972. See 'Art brut chez Dubuffet', in Dubuffet, *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, Vol. IV, pp. 40-58 (p. 50).

<sup>168</sup> Michaux, 'Les Ravagés', in *Chemins cherchés, chemins perdus, transgressions, OC III*, pp. 1158-80 (p. 1158).

This introductory paragraph underlines Michaux's admiration for marginal artistic output. Both Michaux and Dubuffet were opposed to the established perception of mainstream art and who should produce it, as they believed that this view of art might seek to marginalise or relegate artistic production by those outside the norm, for example, the mentally ill. Their questioning and rejection of rules concerning artistic expression led them to appreciate the art of those who were no longer considered part of society.

The importance and topicality of 'Les Ravagés' are underlined by Jean Starobinski in his preface to Hans Prinzhorn's *Expressions de la folie: Dessins, peintures, sculptures d'asile*, a monumental study in which for the first time artistic production by those tortured by various mental illnesses was considered as valuable, innovative and original art in its own right:

Ces images marquées par le destin de la maladie ont suscité d'autres figures, produites cette fois par des artistes lucides qui décidaient librement de tirer bénéfice des inventions du malade. Elles ont suscité de grands textes qui les décrivaient, qui célébraient leurs auteurs: je pense en particulier aux *Ravagés* d'Henri Michaux [...]. Lisant le destin de l'artiste 'paranoïde' après avoir lu ses tableaux, Michaux fait acte de compréhension intuitive. Il rassemble, dans une raison élargie, ce qui s'imposa et ce qui se déroba à l'un de ces êtres 'en difficulté'. C'est vers de pareilles lectures que le livre de Prinzhorn nous a mis en chemin.<sup>169</sup>

Through his interest in all forms of marginal output, Michaux would, without doubt, have been familiar with this famous book, first published in 1922,<sup>170</sup> which had also inspired other visual artists with whom he felt an affinity, such as Klee and Max Ernst.

*Une Voie pour l'insubordination*, published by fata morgana in 1980, reiterates many of the thematic concerns in Michaux's poetry, and could be described as a type of umbrella text for his literary production. The title of this text points to the ideas of rejection and resistance, which are present in Michaux's literary and artistic output, and which will be examined as a starting point for his experimentation

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<sup>169</sup> Jean Starobinski, 'Préface', in Hans Prinzhorn, *Expressions de la folie: Dessins, peintures, sculptures d'asile*, ed. by Marielène Weber and trans. by Alain Brousse and Marielène Weber (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Connaissance de l'Inconscient', 1984), pp. VII-XVI (pp. XV-XVI).

<sup>170</sup> According to Bellour, Michaux had a copy of this book dating from the 1920s. See 'Notes et variantes' to *Misérable miracle, OC II*, p. 1296.

with signs in Chapter 2. This text contains reflections on poltergeists, demons and sainthood, studded with familiar references to different forms of marginal output, which can be found in other texts published by fata morgana around the same time. Michaux refers to the extreme experiences provoked by hallucinogenic substances when considering sainthood and the terrifying characteristics of demons:

Récemment l'irruption généralisée des drogues a ouvert les yeux à ceux qui savent voir. L'esprit du *mal* s'y révèle maintes fois au lieu que l'*esprit du bien* y est rare, faible, hésitant. Anges bien plus rares *que démons*. On en viendrait à croire que les tentations de l'acte mauvais sont la matière première et le soubassement de la vie pensante. Une surprise pour beaucoup.<sup>171</sup>

This is followed by an analogy with drawings produced by those tormented by mental illnesses:

Les dessins de fous en laissent des traces, sur lesquelles on ne peut se méprendre, des traces de la figure terrifiante, insoutenable qu'ils ont soutenue, avec d'autres confuses difficultés, et dans l'entraînement d'autres lignes de distorsion. Car c'est à l'état de broiement et comme pâte pétrie qu'apparaissent ces visages infra-humains, à l'origine humaine au milieu de tracés d'une suprême inconvenance.<sup>172</sup>

As has already been argued, this subject matter is also present in his contemporary publications.

The sheer variety of Michaux's artistic and literary production, as well as a constant preoccupation with rendering the fluctuations of the inner self, becomes apparent on studying the literary and artistic contexts for each book incorporating signs. Towards the end of his life, and following his period of experimentation with drugs, Michaux's texts appear shrouded in a veil of peaceful serenity. They attest to continued interest in all forms of marginal output as well as the occasional foray into hallucinogenic substances. We shall see that the tone and content of *Saisir* and *Par des traits* seem to be in complete juxtaposition to the more harmonious and meditative texts published in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as 'Fille de la montagne'. The last two books

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<sup>171</sup> Michaux, *Une Voie pour l'insubordination*, OC III, pp. 985-1016 (pp. 1006-07), Michaux's italics.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1008.

incorporating signs instead continue a vein of contestation and line of inquiry already present in *Mouvements* and *Par la voie des rythmes*. Indeed, much of Michaux's early production is characterised by a radical rejection of Western linguistic and pictorial conventions. In the next chapter, we shall examine this refusal in order to gain a fuller understanding of Michaux's signs and their conception.



## Chapter 2

### Breaking New Ground

Michaux's experimentation with alphabets and signs stems from his desire for a universal language. This utopian creative urge can be traced back to his refusal of what he considered to be the restrictive nature of Western signifying systems. Much of his literary and artistic production is grounded in a position of staunch opposition to categorisation of any type. And indeed, we shall see how he often starts the creative process with the destruction of these potentially oppressive structures. According to Michaux, the sign or the line allows us to escape the confining aspects of language, and their therapeutic potential will be examined in this light. Michaux's experimentation with neologisms within conventional signifying systems will then be studied in relation to Roland Barthes's reflections on the tyrannical nature of language, as these invented languages could possibly be described as a precursor to Michaux's books incorporating signs. The final section of this chapter will focus on the third book incorporating signs, *Saisir*. This book introduces new subject matter, which is not discussed in the three other books containing signs, such as the poet-artist's sudden desire to represent situations rather than the mobile nature of the inner self in his signs.

#### Refusals

The very first word of the text in free verse that provides a fulcrum underpinning *Mouvements* is 'contre'. This preposition is repeated at the beginning of each line of the first stanza in the 1951 and 1982 editions:

Contre les alvéoles  
contre la colle  
contre la colle les uns les autres



contre le doux les uns les autres.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, it recurs at the beginning of the first two lines in the updated version of *Mouvements* included in the 1954 edition of *Face aux verrous*. It is therefore predominant in every single version. Repetition and anaphora are amongst Michaux's favourite poetic devices, which he uses to provide texts with increasing intensity and momentum, drumming their meaning across to the reader. The declamatory nature of this linguistic tool can also be linked to Michaux's concept of exorcism and his quest for the curative effects of a 'poésie efficace'.

The repetition of 'contre' at the start of *Mouvements* is a far from isolated occurrence. It is also repeated several times in 'Premières impressions', first published in *Le Mercure de France* in 1949:

Contre Versailles  
 Contre Chopin  
 Contre l'alexandrin  
 Contre Rome  
 Contre Rome  
 Contre le juridique  
 Contre le théologique  
 Contre Rome.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, 'contre' could be described as one of the key words in understanding Michaux's literary and artistic production for, as has already been mentioned, he was opposed to any type of taxonomic restriction, whether it be a surname, a national identity or linguistic structures.

Moreover, the reason for the inclusion of *Mouvements* in the collection of texts, *Face aux verrous*, becomes more comprehensible through this idea of refusal, of being 'contre' in order to start anew. For the title, *Face aux verrous*, represents the same idea evoked by the signs and concentrated in the very first word of the text in verse in *Mouvements*. If the expression *sous les verrous* means behind bars, under lock and key, and the prepositional phrase *face à* implies facing, and thus the presence of an *autre*, an enemy, a difficulty or a danger,

<sup>1</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, both editions are unpaginated.

<sup>2</sup> Michaux, 'Premières impressions', *Passages, OC II*, pp. 334-43 (p. 342).

the title-manifesto of these texts can be interpreted as meaning a resistance to constrictions, introducing the notions of revolt, escape and freedom.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the signs signify the same ideal for Michaux. He regards them as a ‘nouveau langage, tournant le dos au verbal, des libérateurs’.<sup>4</sup> From another point of view, Max Milner calls this title ‘une sorte d’impasse’.<sup>5</sup> He considers it to be the beginning of a creative questioning that will lead to a new form of experimentation but, in this case, with hallucinogenic substances.

As its declamatory title suggests, the poem entitled ‘Contre!’ in *La Nuit remue* exemplifies this notion of opposition and begins with images of impossible tasks that the poet aims to carry out in protest against the hostile exterior world. He sets out to create with the by-products of complete destruction:

Je vous construirai une ville avec des loques, moi!  
Je vous construirai sans plan et sans ciment  
[...]  
Oh monde, monde étranglé, ventre froid!  
Même pas symbole, mais néant, je contre, je contre,  
Je contre et te gave de chiens crevés.  
En tonnes, vous m’entendez, en tonnes, je vous arracherai ce que vous  
m’avez refusé en grammes.<sup>6</sup>

Both in its aggressive tone and in its linguistic innovation, this text has strong similarities to Dada poems and manifestos, a genre to which this poem also alludes in form and content.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this list of

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<sup>3</sup> The first choice of title for this book was to be ‘Coups dans le piège’. This title evokes the same notions as *Face aux verrous*. See Bellour, ‘Note sur le texte’ to *Face aux verrous*, *OC II*, pp. 1218-21 (p. 1219).

<sup>4</sup> Michaux, ‘Postface’ to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 599, Michaux’s italics.

<sup>5</sup> Milner, *L’Imaginaire des drogues*, p. 383.

<sup>6</sup> Michaux, ‘Contre!’, in *La Nuit remue*, *OC I*, pp. 457-58.

<sup>7</sup> One only needs to consider the linguistic and semantic content of Tristan Tzara’s Dada manifestos to understand this analogy, for example: ‘Nous déchirons, vent furieux, le linge des nuages et des prières, et préparons le grand spectacle du désastre, l’incendie, la décomposition. [...] Je détruis les tiroirs du cerveau et ceux de l’organisation sociale.’ Tristan Tzara, ‘Manifeste Dada 1918’, *Sept Manifestes Dada*, in Tristan Tzara, *Œuvres complètes 1912-1924*, Vol. I, ed. by Henri Béhar (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), pp. 353-90 (p. 363). Michaux would have definitely been familiar with Tzara’s literary output. Bellour writes the following in his ‘Chronologie’ to *OC II*, pp. XI-XII: ‘*Mai* [1947]. Tristan Tzara lui envoie son livre *Morceaux choisis*, préfacé par Jean Cassou, avec la dédicace suivante: “À Henri Michaux, ces vieux souvenirs, amicalement.” C’est l’un des rares signes d’une connivence lointaine entre

impossible tasks in Michaux's poem could be seen as a reference to the creation of the world through the written word, that is, to the assertion of the true value of textual production. Furthermore, the transformation of the title-preposition into a verb, repeated three times, mirrors the evolution from a certain static position, as implied linguistically by the preposition, into action. It was even suggested by Adrienne Monnier, a contemporary and close friend of Michaux's, that he had invented this verb: 'Tout ce monde conjugue le verbe inventé par Henri Michaux: "Je contre, tu contres, il contre."' <sup>8</sup> Pierre Loubier describes 'Contre!' as a:

[...] texte manifeste et texte réalisation de la construction par destruction. Michaux écrit contre la tradition mais aussi contre les mots, mais, dirait Sacha Guitry, 'tout contre', collé à eux, dans une relation amoureuse fondamentalement ambivalente, car chez lui aussi 'les mots font l'amour' (mais contre, tout contre, le mur). <sup>9</sup>

This double meaning of 'contre' emphasises a crucial paradox concerning Michaux's creative *œuvre*. For 'contre' does not only connote opposition, it can also imply a certain physical proximity. Hence, Michaux is against tradition and words, but these still remain among his points of reference as he continues to write.

Michaux was intent on destroying the creative gesture from the beginning to the end of his literary and artistic career. In *Saisir*, when torn between figurative and abstract representation for his bestiary project, he makes a statement to this effect:

Je me livrais tantôt à l'un, tantôt à l'autre, et les animaux soumis chaotiquement à ma représentation contradictoire étaient traversés de traits brusques comme de grandes négations. C'en était réellement. Images à la fois montrées, niées et raturées. N'étaient-elles pas plus complètes ainsi, plus satisfaisantes? <sup>10</sup>

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Tzara et Michaux depuis l'envoi à Tzara de *Peintures* en 1939. Très tôt, Michaux aimait à compter Tzara parmi les "modernes" et pouvait donner, au milieu des années 1930, son premier rendez-vous à Henri Parisot en tenant à la main le livre de Tzara *La main passe*, "à couverture bleue".

<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Monnier, *Rue de l'Odéon* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1960), p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Loubier, 'Croc, ergot, kriss: écrire pour s'orienter (*Un barbare chez les Malais*)', in *Quelques Orient d'Henri Michaux*, pp. 87-116 (p. 108).

<sup>10</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, *OC III*, pp. 938-39.

A copy of *Qui je fus* from 1927 contains an example of his stance of opposition to mimetic forms of representation: a figurative portrait of Michaux has been crossed out and the word ‘non’ has been added, accompanied by Michaux’s signature.<sup>11</sup> According to Bellour, Michaux would have preferred a drawing to the wood etching that appeared in this publication.<sup>12</sup> Over half a century later, Michaux declares in the poetic text in *Par des traits*:

d’un trait biffer tout  
 biffer hier  
 biffer les débats,  
 les édifices, les entreprises,  
 les interventions qui agressent  
 les pétitions qui braillent.<sup>13</sup>

The written or drawn line becomes a form of negation, a way of saying ‘no’ to conventional linguistic systems, of being ‘contre’ as was first expressed in *Mouvements*. Indeed, Michaux writes in *Saisir*, in a very similar declamatory tone to the poetic text in *Mouvements*: ‘Échapper, échapper à la similitude, échapper à la parenté, échapper à ses “semblables”!’<sup>14</sup> In both of these quotations, the accumulation of repeated verbs in the infinitive, ‘biffer’ and ‘échapper’, amplifies rhythmically their signification.

The last page of *Saisir* epitomises this concept of opposition.<sup>15</sup> The final words read ‘vers accomplissement’, which reminds the reader of the contemplative nature of the drug-induced ‘Vers la complétude’. On the opposite right-hand page, twelve thick, irregular, black smudges take the form of three quatrains. *Saisir* thus finishes with the mark of a traditional poem in regular quatrains. Michaux seems to be dismissing the linguistic signifier but also verbal expression in general. Again, this could be seen as a development of Tristan Tzara’s prescription for writing a Dada poem, ‘Pour faire un

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Cette image provient d’un exemplaire sur lequel le nom du dédicataire a été effacé; il appartient aujourd’hui à Jean-Luc Steinmetz qui l’a trouvé dans sa famille; l’image a été reproduite en couverture du volume *Méthodes et Savoirs*.’ Bellour, ‘Note sur le texte’ to *Qui je fus*, *OC I*, pp. 1055-57 (p. 1055).

<sup>12</sup> Bellour and Tran, ‘Chronologie’, *OC I*, p. LXXXVIII.

<sup>13</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, *OC III*, p. 1253.

<sup>14</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, *OC III*, p. 958.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 983.

poème dadaïste',<sup>16</sup> or Breton's recipe for an automatic poem in *Manifeste du surréalisme*.<sup>17</sup> It also underlines the fact that reading is a visual as well as a deciphering activity. In order to understand a text, the reader must take into account its visual aspect. We recognise a text in prose or poetry or indeed the difference between a dialogue and a description in a novel by its layout on the page. In poetic texts, stanza size and line length can be taken in at a glance. The rigid codes concerning the recognisable layout and typography of a poem were shattered by Mallarmé's famous poem, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, which revolutionised linear poetry, rendering the white space of the page as important as the black line of the letter, making it an integral part of the poem's meaning as well as its form.<sup>18</sup> Michaux's experimentation with signs could never have been published without this poem nor the technological innovations in typefaces and printing techniques that took place at the turn of the twentieth century. The visual dimension of the written page thus became more prominent and less recognisable. This obviously problematises the legibility of a poem, as it transforms the reader's relationship to it. On this last page of *Saisir*, therefore, all verbal input is obscured, no word can be deciphered, and yet the layout on the page is distinctly familiar. Signifier meets signified in these destructive lines, which imitate forms of writing, but have no semantic value for they delete all possible verbal meaning.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tristan Tzara, 'Dada manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer', *Sept Manifestes Dada*, p. 382.

<sup>17</sup> André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, in Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, pp. 309-46 (pp. 331-32).

<sup>18</sup> Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, in Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 453-77.

<sup>19</sup> As Jean-Gérard Lapacherie reminds us, Man Ray also carried out this type of typographical experimentation: 'A "poem" by Man Ray, published in *391*, #17, in June 1924, illustrates this preeminence of typography over text. This "poem" is not made up of words, nor letters, but of thick black dashes, of variable length, each one of which is supposed to stand for a word. It is arranged the way poems usually are: with a title (made up of three dashes) and seventeen lines of unequal length, which are divided into four groups or stanzas: a tercet, two quintils, a quatrain. It retains the visual and graphic appearance of a "poem": that is to say an arrangement in lines of unequal length and in stanzas.' Jean-Gérard Lapacherie, 'Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and Drawing', in *Yale French Studies*, 84, *Boundaries: Writing and Drawing*, ed. by Martine Reid (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 63-77 (p. 72).

This type of overlapping of the verbal and the visual in a conventional textual form had already taken place in *Par la voie des rythmes*, but also, almost twenty years earlier, in one of the drug narratives, *Connaissance par les gouffres*. On page 63 (*OC III*) of this book, four regular black lines, which gradually become wider, mirror symmetrically the last lines of the poetic text. This typographical innovation is preceded and followed spasmodically by the replacement of lines in the text by dots.<sup>20</sup> Further on in this text, Michaux attempts to render his thoughts in a seismographic fashion using a sequence of long and short horizontal dashes on the page. He comments on this in the following terms:

Souvent j'ai suivi une pensée. Était-ce toujours une pensée? Parfois plutôt une phrase mentale, muette, signalée, non prononcée, comme sans mots les tam-tams africains transmettent des messages.

Je notais par exemple:

[Sequence of dashes]

et c'était un bout de phrase, plutôt trois mots qui apparaissaient finalement et comme le dernier état d'une manipulation mentale (que je n'avais pu voir jusque-là).<sup>21</sup>

These dashes are reminiscent of Morse code, a system of long-distance signs, through which messages can be transmitted either audibly, much like the African drums in the quotation, or visually by patterns of dots, spaces and dashes of varying length. It can be assumed that Michaux would have been familiar with this code from his time at sea, as it was widely used for sending messages to and from ships.<sup>22</sup> This fusion of the verbal and the visual in *Connaissance par les gouffres* above all points to the unachievable nature of expressing thought and reality using words. On two pages of *Saisir*, what appear to be scratches down the page could be interpreted as marks of frustration with this apparent impossibility of verbal and graphic expression or as a more primitive, animalistic, alternative form of expression.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres*, *OC III*, p. 39, p. 48 & p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> '1920, Boulogne-sur-Mer. Embarque comme matelot, sur un cinq-mâts schooner.' Michaux, *Quelques renseignements*, *OC I*, p. CXXXI.

<sup>23</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, *OC III*, p. 953.

Michaux is often categorised as a ‘poète du refus’, and this refusal is present through action as well as contemplation. He travels for this very reason:

Il voyage *contre*.  
 Pour expulser de lui sa patrie, ses attaches de toutes sortes et ce qui s’est en lui et malgré lui attaché de culture grecque ou romaine ou germanique ou d’habitudes belges.  
 Voyages d’expatriation.<sup>24</sup>

In this quotation from his famous text, *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d’existence*, Michaux expresses his desire to transcend any restrictions imposed on him by belonging to any one country and thus to a single set of defined rituals and traditions. The adoption of the third person voice throughout this text lends a semblance of objectivity to a highly subjective text by distancing the author from his creation. Since Michaux was famously reticent when it came to giving details about his life, this text has in consequence been considered as the only first-hand source of biographical details. As Bellour points out in the first volume of Michaux’s collected works, where he places a more objective ‘Chronologie’ next to *Quelques renseignements*:

On verra que Michaux a souvent ménagé, dans sa propre chronologie, un décalage allant de six mois à un an avec certaines des dates avérées. Participant déjà de l’œuvre, ce texte est aussi, parfois, la seule source disponible. Tel est le piège que Michaux nous tend.<sup>25</sup>

In this passage, Bellour warns the reader that this text is above all a fictitious construct. One should not be duped by its objective tone. It can be deduced that Michaux’s inclination for embellishing or changing biographical details, and his aversion to giving these in the first place, imply a disdain for these facts that might also pin him down.

In the same way as he travelled to escape constraints on a patriotic and cultural level, Michaux hated his surname, loaded as it was with regional and national connotations that classified him neatly

<sup>24</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements*, *OC I*, p. CXXXIII, Michaux’s italics.

<sup>25</sup> Bellour and Tran, ‘Chronologie’, *OC I*, p. LXXIII.

into a family, and into a banal existence. Jean-Pierre Martin explores this dislike for proper names:

Le nom est normatif, il fixe et classifie, affuble d'un patronyme et d'un ethnonyme qui redoublent leurs effets aliénants, désigne le 'multimillénaire', le tribal en soi, le familial étouffant ('Freud, il veut me refiler une famille'), l'atavique, le fils de fils – tout ce que Michaux déteste.<sup>26</sup>

Anne Brun links Michaux's desire to escape any sense of belonging with a desire to escape the 'voix du père', in order to find his own voice:

Ici s'esquisse le drame de la drogue pour Michaux: il recherche à travers elle une autre langue, sa voix propre, et retrouve au lieu de voix propre 'le piège de la langue des autres' [...], les voix du père qui toujours et encore exerce son emprise [...]. Michaux rêve d'effacer les traces des voix du père, que la drogue ranime, pour mieux en perpétrer le meurtre. Là sans doute s'enracine la nécessité interne de l'écriture – y compris de l'écriture de la drogue – destinée à faire jaillir, du chœur des voix réveillées, la voix propre de l'écrivain et, dans cette perspective, écrire revient à 'tuer: écrire, écrire, tuer quoi'.<sup>27</sup>

Accordingly, Michaux was wary of literary and artistic classifications, norms and genres because of a dislike of belonging or adhering in general although, as we have seen, he did allow his name, occasionally and often for very brief periods, to be affiliated with certain artistic tendencies through exhibiting, for example, with exponents of *art autre*. This isolationism suggests that he wanted to be able to start afresh, free from any societal constraint, or in psychoanalytical terms, from 'les voix du père'.

Michaux continues to cry 'contre' in the poetic text of the last book published in his lifetime, *Par des traits*. Although at first glance this text could be said to be minimalist on account of the absence of any qualifiers, producing possible affinities with contemporary poems, such as 'Jours de silence', it soon becomes clear that the repetition instead creates an aggressive, declamatory effect, similar in fact to Michaux's earlier, more Dadaist, poems:

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Pierre Martin, 'De quelques mots en sourdine', *Magazine littéraire*, 364 (April 1998), 42-46 (p. 44).

<sup>27</sup> Brun, *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné*, pp. 286-87.



Contre les boues  
 contre le paralyseur secret  
 contre tous les agglutinants  
 [...]  
 Contre les barbelés d'aujourd'hui  
 contre l'écartelé de demain,  
 [...]  
 Contre ce qui retient, stoppe, engourdit  
 contre le piétinement  
 [...]  
 Contre l'adversaire déguisé en quotidien  
 contre ceux qui 'raccourcissent nos jours'.<sup>28</sup>

The recurrence of 'contre' at the beginning of these lines is a direct reference to the opening lines of *Mouvements*. In her analysis of this text, Mihailovich-Dickman focuses on the past when commenting on this use of repetition with regard to the line.<sup>29</sup> She uses the expression 'tirer un trait' which is particularly apt in this context because it alludes to both drawing a line, crossing something out and, with the addition of 'sur son passé', severing any connections with the past, all dominant themes in Michaux's artistic and literary output. The lines, which include 'contre' in *Par des traits*, however, are also preoccupied with present and future hindrances ('aujourd'hui'/'demain'), perhaps suggesting that time can act as a constraint that needs to be destroyed. This nihilistic aspect is also present in the last lines of the poetic text in *Par des traits*:

missiles tombant des cieus,  
 qu'on n'aura pas le temps de voir,  
 traits, la durée d'un instant  
 mettant fin à tout  
 à jamais.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, pp. 1250-51.

<sup>29</sup> 'Dans le texte écrit, le leitmotiv "contre" revient à tant de reprises qu'il suggère le désir de l'auteur de tirer un trait – sur son passé, sur le malaise, sur l'ennemi qu'il lui reste à combattre.' Mihailovich-Dickman, 'Idéogrammes: L'Apport de la Chine ou "Voie par l'écriture"', p. 184.

<sup>30</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1253.

Here man destroys himself and his world using ‘traits’, lines of missiles falling from the sky, perhaps making reference to the constant danger of nuclear attack since the discovery of the atom bomb.

Michaux may consider words and linguistic structures to be restrictive, but in *Par des traits* he offers a clear alternative: the line. He mentions in *Saisir* what a line can contain: ‘La ligne n’est pas un abrégé de volume ou de surface, mais un abrégé de cent gestes et attitudes et impressions et émotions.’<sup>31</sup> The text in verse in *Par des traits* is in fact a celebration of the ‘trait’, the line. Michaux uses no punctuation whatsoever, but takes advantage of the typographical variations available within the conventional alphabetic writing system. Italics, capital letters and quotation marks are employed in an apparently random fashion, emphasising the visual possibility of the written word within linguistic limitations. The line is posited against the word as a more direct, uncluttered form of expression of the inner self:

Contre les édits de l’Écrit  
[...]  
contre le faste, le dépouillement  
contre l’emphase, la réduction.<sup>32</sup>

The excessive importance bestowed on the written word by our Western society is reflected through the capitalisation of the first letter of ‘écrit’ in this quotation. Roland Barthes discusses the difficulty that Western society has experienced in understanding and accepting any writing systems which are not wholly based on alphabetic, verbal communication in an essay on the semiography of André Masson:

[...] ne sommes-nous pas superbement persuadés que notre alphabet est le meilleur? le plus rationnel, le plus efficace? Nos savants les plus rigoureux ne soutiennent-ils pas comme ‘allant de soi’ que l’invention de l’alphabet consonantique (de type syrien), puis celle de l’alphabet vocalique (de type grec) furent des progrès irréversibles, des conquêtes de la raison et de l’économie sur le gâchis baroque des systèmes idéographiques?<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 960.

<sup>32</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1252.

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Sémiographie d’André Masson’, in Roland Barthes, *L’Obvie et l’obtus: Essais critiques III* (Paris: Seuil, Collection ‘Point Essais’, 1982), pp. 142-44 (pp. 143-44).

This insensitivity towards the signifying function of the ideogram has meant that ideographic systems were relegated by the Western world to a primitive status on account of their aesthetic nature.<sup>34</sup> Both André Masson and Henri Michaux were aware that these systems were able to convey something other than beauty, that is, the body. From this appreciation of the visual nature of certain signifying systems ensued their respective appropriations of the gestural nature of the line. This notion of assimilating certain aspects from Oriental writing systems with the aim of rendering corporeal presence will be developed in Chapters 3 and 4.

A veneration of the line is hammered home by Michaux on the opening page of the verbal text as 'par des traits' is repeated five times using both upper and lower cases. He had already stated over ten years before in *Émergences-Résurgences*:

Si je tiens à aller par des traits plutôt que par des mots, c'est toujours pour entrer en relation avec ce que j'ai de plus précieux, de plus vrai, de plus replié, de plus 'mien', et non avec des formes géométriques, ou des toits de maisons ou des bouts de rue, ou des pommes et des harengs sur une assiette; c'est à cette recherche que je suis parti.<sup>35</sup>

This refusal of words in pursuit of a more ascetic means of expression to render the inner self is also typical of both *Mouvements* and *Par la voie des rythmes*. It should be reiterated that the layout of *Par des*

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<sup>34</sup> For example, until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, it was believed that Egyptian hieroglyphs functioned as simple pictograms. This stone was found in Egypt in 1799 by a French military expedition. It caused much excitement for on it were etched three texts in different types of writing which were thought to hold the key to the mysteries of these hitherto indecipherable hieroglyphs. The scholarly hypothesis was that the three different texts engraved on the stone were three versions of the same text aimed at three different groups of readers: the educated Egyptians, the uneducated Egyptians and the Greeks. And yet, how could any parallels be drawn when, for example, the text in Greek contained 55 lines and 486 words whereas the inscription in hieroglyphic characters could be divided into 32 lines and 1419 signs? The complexity of this hieroglyphic system was finally realised when Jean-François Champollion managed to solve the enigma, after many years of research, in 1822. Some hieroglyphs are easily recognisable and function in a visual, symbolic manner, but many refer to the represented object or concept through mechanisms of rhetorical substitution. For more details, see Robert Solé, 'Une Pierre devenue célèbre', *Le Monde*, 21 July 1998, p. 10 and Umberto Eco, *La Recherche de la langue parfaite dans la culture européenne* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), pp. 172-80.

<sup>35</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 549.

*traits* is very similar to that of the first book incorporating signs. Furthermore, the influence of *Par la voie des rythmes* is perceptible through the chapter headings for each section. Michaux also appears to have given up all attempts at capturing and rendering situations as well as depicting the juxtaposition between abstraction and figuration started in *Saisir*.

Michaux expands on the restrictive nature of language in the text in prose at the end of *Par des traits*. In this postface of sorts, Michaux denounces the widespread use of alphabetic languages and the way in which they impose conformist order upon expression. Sandrine Thiry states in an article comparing the ideas of Michaux and Dubuffet:

Le sujet de l'énonciation est rendu servile, fixe: on entre dans la langue, on s'y conforme comme on entre dans les ordres (ordre de ressembler au père, ordre de se conformer à l'État). C'est cette accusation que l'on trouve dans *Par des traits*.<sup>36</sup>

Michaux complains in the postface to *Par des traits* that these languages eliminate 'le passager, le surprenant du spontané, du momentané'.<sup>37</sup> He defines them instead as:

Langues d'application, de direction, organisatrices.  
Devenue entreprise, la langue, sans qu'on y ait pris garde occupe la place des murmures, des plaintes, sourdes ou vives, des appels; commandante.<sup>38</sup>

He suggests the utopian alternative of '*des avant-langues*', able to 'être ouvert au monde autrement, créant et développant *une fonction différente* en l'homme, le désaliénant'.<sup>39</sup> Jean-Luc Steinmetz describes this search for a personal, intimate language in the following terms, cleverly managing to underline the paradox that Michaux still continued to use conventional linguistic systems to express himself:

Le procès du langage est mené par Michaux, bien qu'il l'utilise fondamentalement jusque dans ses effets de glossolalie. De fait, il le considère surtout comme une carapace pétrifiante empêchant toute

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<sup>36</sup> Sandrine Thiry, 'Michaux et Dubuffet, rencontre de deux hommes du commun', p. 300.

<sup>37</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1281.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 1281.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 1284-85, Michaux's emphasis.

manifestation individuelle. Face à ce ‘tissu administrant’, il songe à une langue intime qui parviendrait à rendre compte de l’expressivité personnelle. Langue-écriture ne passant plus par le caténaire obligé de l’alphabet, du phonocentrisme, mais redonnant force au trait, à la graphie intime, au pictogramme inapprivoisé.<sup>40</sup>

In the text in prose in *Par des traits*, Michaux sets up his clearest and most confident definition of what he is aiming for in his experimentation with signs.

Michaux strives to attain an intimate and gestural form of expression through which the individual would be able to express himself freely, far from the constraints of syntax, grammar and vocabulary of established languages. Bellour manages to distinguish four attributes of this pre-language outlined in the postface, although he admits that these are somewhat difficult to discern:

They remain figurative, pictographic, and ideographic. They are impoverished, made of few words (in contrast to overly rich languages, recorded in the account books of the ‘bureaux de la Science universelle’, [p. 1282]). They are playful, daring (‘signes passe-temps, traces sur le tronc d’arbre que l’écorce se dilatant défaisait sans qu’on y prit garde...’, [p. 1282]). They are local, and in the minority (‘d’une langue de peu de moyens [...] langue de peu de besoins, entre amis [...], pas territoriale’, [p. 1284]).<sup>41</sup>

In fact, Michaux states that it is difficult to even describe this project as a language:

Pas vraiment une langue, mais toute vivante, plutôt des émotions en signes qui ne seraient déchiffrables que par la détresse et l’humeur; signes, dont le manque nous fait vivre maintenant en état de frustration.<sup>42</sup>

This idea of the signs being alive incites parallels with the theoretical work undertaken at the Bauhaus by Klee and Vassily Kandinsky on dynamic, vitalistic alphabets. Both artists believed that forms were not

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<sup>40</sup> Jean-Luc Steinmetz, ‘Le Passage de la ligne’, in *Passages et langages de Henri Michaux*, ed. by Jean-Claude Mathieu and Michel Collot (Paris: José Corti, 1987), pp. 225-41 (pp. 225-26).

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Bellour, ‘The Utopia of the Sign’, in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, pp. 199-206 (p. 202). I have taken the liberty of inserting the original French quotations from *Par des traits*, *OC III* as well as inserting page numbers in this quotation.

<sup>42</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, *OC III*, p. 1284.

immobile traces but rather energetic movements that transcribe internal tensions. Kandinsky states about the line in his theory of forms published in 1926:

La ligne géométrique est un être invisible. Elle est la trace du point en mouvement, donc son produit. Elle est née du mouvement – et cela par l’anéantissement de l’immobilité suprême du point. Ici se produit le bond du statique vers le dynamique.<sup>43</sup>

Thirty years later, Klee asserts the following about form in general:

Nulle part ni jamais la forme n’est résultat acquis, parachèvement, conclusion. Il faut l’envisager comme genèse, comme mouvement. Son être est le devenir et la forme comme apparence n’est qu’une maligne *apparition*, un dangereux fantôme.

Bonne donc la forme comme mouvement, comme faire, bonne la forme en action. Mauvaise la forme comme inertie close comme arrêt terminal. Mauvaise la forme dont on s’acquitte comme d’un devoir accompli. La *forme* est fin, mort. La *formation* est Vie.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, comparisons are not only to be made with visual artists. Gérard Dessons shows how Michaux’s ideas on language can be traced back to the thoughts of many writers and philosophers on this subject. He writes the following about ‘DES LANGUES ET DES ÉCRITURES / POURQUOI L’ENVIE DE S’EN DÉTOURNER’:

Dans ce texte, l’établissement des langues est traité comme un acte institutionnel portant atteinte au devenir du sujet [...] Figure tyrannique [...] la langue, la langue héritée, est un laminoir de la subjectivité [...]. C’était la position de Rousseau, qui liait l’avènement des langues à la perte de l’émotion, comme il liait la constitution des écritures modernes à la disparition de la figuralité propre aux premières écritures.<sup>45</sup>

These comparisons with both visual artists and writers emphasise the fact that the line, which Michaux extols in *Par des traits*, can either be written or drawn. The poet-artist, however, does not directly acknowledge this double nature of the line. He generally makes a

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<sup>43</sup> Kandinsky, *Point et ligne sur plan: Contribution à l’analyse des éléments de la peinture*, ed. by Philippe Sers, trans. by Suzanne and Jean Leppien (Paris: Gallimard, Collection ‘Folio/Essais’, 1991), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Klee, ‘Philosophie de la création’, p. 60, Klee’s italics.

<sup>45</sup> Dessons, ‘La Manière d’Henry: prolégomènes à un traité du trait’, p. 65.

radical distinction between all verbal and visual activity on account of the organised, conventional nature of written language:

On peut peindre avec deux couleurs (dessiner avec une). Trois, quatre au plus, ont pendant des siècles suffi aux hommes pour rendre quelque chose d'important, de capital, d'unique, qui autrement eût été ignoré.

Des mots, c'est autre chose. Même les moins évoluées des tribus en ont des milliers, avec des liaisons complexes, des cas nombreux demandant un maniement *savant*.

Pas de langue vraiment pauvre. Avec l'écriture en plus, c'est pire. Encombrée par l'abondance, le luxe, le nombre de flexions, de variations, de nuances, si on la fait 'brute', si on la parle brute, c'est malgré elle.<sup>46</sup>

And yet, when considering his experimentation with mescaline later on in this same text, Michaux does recognise several possible crossovers between word and image: 'Le passage de l'une à l'autre, la disparition de l'une dans l'autre (où elle s'achève), ici (souvent) on pouvait le voir, on l'avait en spectacle.'<sup>47</sup>

The very fact that Michaux positions himself as 'contre' from *Mouvements* to *Par des traits*, a period of over thirty years, can be said to be one of the major reasons for his experimentation with graphic signs. Indeed, he believed that to follow Western writing systems slavishly was to become trapped in the constraints of language and words, 'ces collants partenaires', as he termed them in the postface to *Mouvements*.<sup>48</sup> He considered drawing or painting as more efficient for his purposes than words. A clear illustration of this can be found after the death of his wife, when the therapeutic act of writing was suggested to him. In response to this, he declared: 'À bas les mots. Dans ce moment aucune alliance avec eux n'est concevable', and he continues later on in the same passage: 'pour m'en soulager un peu, la peinture convient mieux.'<sup>49</sup> This stance against the arbitrary nature of words and language, however, does not mean that he ceased writing. Indeed, it could be suggested that an extremely personal need to erase the past in order to start again is present in litanic form in the text in verse in *Mouvements*:

Taches

<sup>46</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 550, Michaux's italics.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 614.

<sup>48</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 599.

<sup>49</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, pp. 568-69.

taches pour obnubiler  
 pour rejeter  
 pour désabriter  
 pour instabiliser  
 pour renaître  
 pour raturer  
 pour clouer le bec à la mémoire  
 pour repartir.<sup>50</sup>

The book's format encourages the reader to interpret these lines as a reference to Michaux's own artistic production, as the signs or 'taches' appear to signify a refusal, going against conventional forms of verbal expression, and a quest for a direct, gestural and dynamic form, free of these constraints.

Consequently, this section has analysed the importance of the word 'contre' for Michaux's artistic and literary production. On his own admission, this notion of refusal provides the basic premise for his creative gesture. Michaux's experimentation with signs can be interpreted as a dynamic, gestural form, created in opposition to the confining structures of Western signifying systems. And yet, he remains in many ways reliant on these linguistic constructs against which he insists on battling. In the next section, we shall consider the reasons why Michaux believes the sign advocated in *Mouvements* and the line celebrated in *Par des traits* are more suitable for his purposes than the word.

### Magical Properties of the Line

Before examining the therapeutic capacities of the sign and the line, Michaux's early appreciation of the word for its litanic and incantatory possibilities must be clarified. It has already been argued that, from an early stage in Michaux's literary career, he considered words to be inadequate for naming objects and conveying experiences, and it is debatable whether it is in fact ever possible to do this successfully, or in a more than partial way. Michaux regarded painting and drawing as more efficient means of expression. This did not, however, prevent him from giving two poems the title 'Magie' or naming one volume of poetry *Poésie pour pouvoir*, a title that, aided by alliteration, suggests the transcendental nature of poetry.

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<sup>50</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 439.



Furthermore, an important leitmotif of *Par des traits*, and indeed Michaux's artistic and literary output in general, is the magical nature of the line. As he states in *Par des traits* when considering the emergence of ideographic languages: 'Une nouvelle force magique faisait son apparition.'<sup>51</sup> It can therefore appear somewhat paradoxical that, before the Second World War, Michaux also celebrated the magical power of words. Indeed, the repetitive aspect of Michaux's poetic texts in his books made up of signs could be described as incantatory.

In the first 'Magie', published in 1935 as part of *Mes Propriétés* in *La Nuit remue*, Michaux describes the process of making a live frog appear from a figurative painting, a surprising idea when we consider how far this is from his own conception of visual expression:

Quand je veux faire apparaître une grenouille vivante (une grenouille morte, ça c'est facile) je ne me force pas. Même, je me mets mentalement à peindre un tableau. J'esquisse les rives d'un ruisseau en choisissant bien mes verts, puis *j'attends* le ruisseau. Après quelque temps, je plonge une baguette au-delà de la rive; si elle se mouille, je suis tranquille, il n'y a plus qu'à patienter un peu, bientôt apparaîtront les grenouilles sautant et plongeant.<sup>52</sup>

In the second, perhaps better known poem entitled 'Magie', which is the first poem of *Entre centre et absence* published in *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur*, Michaux ventures inside an apple in a tableau that appears to evoke a still life: 'Je mets une pomme sur ma table. Puis je me mets dans cette pomme. Quelle tranquillité!'<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in the outlandish *Au Pays de la magie*, he describes a shepherd who does not look after sheep, but rather water: 'Le Berger d'eau siffle une source et la voilà qui se dégageant de son lit s'avance en le suivant. Elle le suit, grossissant au passage d'autres eaux.'<sup>54</sup> In this imaginary country, the narrator tells tales of unpremeditated, wondrous events:

Sur une grande route, il n'est pas rare de voir une vague, une vague toute seule, une vague à part de l'océan.  
Elle n'a aucune utilité, ne constitue pas un jeu.

<sup>51</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1283.

<sup>52</sup> Michaux, 'Magie', *La Nuit remue*, OC I, p. 484, Michaux's italics.

<sup>53</sup> Michaux, 'Magie', *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur*, OC I, pp. 559-62 (p. 559).

<sup>54</sup> Michaux, *Au Pays de la magie, Ailleurs*, OC II, pp. 66-104 (p. 72).

C'est un cas de spontanéité magique.<sup>55</sup>

The apparently impossible thus becomes possible using the power of words and imagination, at times accompanied by unexpected references to conventional figurative painting.

*Poésie pour pouvoir* follows *Mouvements* in *Face aux verrous*. The former volume had first been published by René Drouin in 1949, including illustrations by Michel Tapié. The original edition of *Poésie pour pouvoir* consists of two texts of an aggressive, declamatory nature, 'Je rame' and 'A travers mers et déserts'.<sup>56</sup> Michaux's narrative voice chants the following verses in the second text, creating a shamanic effect through the rhetorical device of anaphora:

Efficace comme le coït avec une jeune fille vierge  
Efficace  
Efficace comme l'absence de puits dans le désert  
Efficace est mon action  
Efficace.<sup>57</sup>

Tapié was very taken by this idea of a 'poésie efficace', and he wanted to create a book-object with equivalent powers. He writes on this subject:

La force, exceptionnellement opérante de ce poème, jointe au fait de son élection unique, centrant justement sur ce texte toutes les intentions d'intervention – de pouvoir – de l'auteur, me donna une furieuse envie d'en faire une édition où je tenterais de forcer les usages du livre dans le même rapport d'échelle qu'Henri Michaux l'avait fait ici par rapport non pas seulement à la poésie, mais même, comme je ne le sentis d'ailleurs que bien plus tard, à l'usage, par rapport à ses plus efficaces exorcismes. Le problème consistait à fabriquer un *objet* recéleur de force supportant ce texte de sorte que sa vue, son contact tant épidermique que musculaire provoquent au maximum l'expansion effective de cette force, puisque magie il y avait.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Michaux, *Au Pays de la magie, Ailleurs, OC II*, p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> Michaux, *Poésie pour pouvoir* (Paris: René Drouin, 1949).

<sup>57</sup> Michaux, 'À travers mers et déserts', *Poésie pour pouvoir*, in *Face aux verrous, OC II*, pp. 444-45. He discusses the composition of these poems and the powerful nature of the word in 'Pouvoirs', *Passages, OC II*, pp. 375-77.

<sup>58</sup> Bellour, 'Notes et variantes' to *Face aux verrous, OC II*, pp. 1221-44 (p. 1227), Tapié's italics.

Tapié was responsible for the innovative *mise en page* of this book. Original editions of *Poésie pour pouvoir* are bound in wood and sealed with nails and the text is mostly printed in white capitals against a black background with jagged, irregular edges. The presence of arrows alludes to the direction of the text for the reader and also suggests the influence of Klee, who often used arrows in his artistic works, such as *Betroffener Ort* (*Stricken Place, Lieu interdit*, 1922) and *Schwankendes Gleichgewicht* (*Unstable Equilibrium, Equilibre instable*, 1922).<sup>59</sup> In addition, *Poésie pour pouvoir* contains linocuts by Tapié, which represent, for example, a crocodile-like bird, a monster's face or mask as well as hands and arms with eyes that hint at more primitive sources. The page layout and illustrations reflect an attempt at rendering the supposed magical powers and the violent incantations against an unknown other of this text.

In the preface to *Épreuves, exorcismes*, Michaux expands on the incantatory and shamanic dimension of his poetic texts by introducing the notion of exorcism. He divides his textual output into two types: 'exorcisme' and 'exorcisme par ruse':

*Il serait bien extraordinaire que des milliers d'événements qui surviennent chaque année résultât une harmonie parfaite. Il y en a toujours qui ne passent pas, et qu'on garde en soi, blessants.*

*Une des choses à faire: l'exorcisme.*

*Toute situation est dépendance et certaines de dépendances. Il serait inouï qu'il en résultât une satisfaction sans ombre ou qu'un homme pût, si actif fût-il, les combattre toutes efficacement, dans la réalité.*

*Une des choses à faire: l'exorcisme.*

[...]

*Nombre de poèmes contemporains, poèmes de délivrance, ont aussi un effet de l'exorcisme, mais d'un exorcisme par ruse. Par ruse de la nature subconsciente qui se défend au moyen d'une élaboration imaginative*

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<sup>59</sup> Grohmann, *Paul Klee*, p. 393. Albert Cook discusses Klee's use of the arrow in *Dimensions of the Sign in Art* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), p. 140. He also makes reference to an entire doctoral dissertation on this subject: Mark Lawrence Rosenthal, 'Paul Klee and the Arrow', State University of Iowa, 1979. René Micha compares Michaux's 'passages' to Klee's arrows to underline the latter's influence on the former: 'Klee confirme, aux yeux de Michaux, que la poésie et peut-être la vérité sont dans la métamorphose (une partie de l'âme change, une autre est mise en sommeil): Michaux dit le passage, Klee peint la flèche.' René Micha, 'Plume et les anges', in *Cahiers de l'Herne: Henri Michaux*, ed. by Raymond Bellour (Paris: L'Herne, 1966), pp. 143-58 (p. 156). Klee outlines his theory concerning the arrow and movement in 'Esquisses pédagogiques', *Théorie de l'art moderne*, pp. 71-143 (pp. 128-38).

*appropriée: les rêves. Par ruse concertée ou tâtonnante, cherchant son point d'application optimus: les rêves éveillés.*<sup>60</sup>

Exorcism, through trickery or not, is the religious or magical action of exorcising or expelling an evil spirit by adjuration or the performance of certain rites. The poetic texts of *Par des traits* and *Mouvements* belong very much to the first category of exorcism because of their declamatory nature. One only needs to consider the recurrence of 'contre' in both texts to confirm this litanic and thus exorcising dimension. Michaux writes in a short text entitled 'Notes sur les malédictions' about the beneficial effects of incantation, in this case, used to curse enemies:

Les malédictions et spécialement les malédictions en chaîne (leur lecture est du reste presque toujours tonique) tendent plus qu'à une destruction, tendent à créer un moteur. [...]  
Grâce au rythme, le mouvement enlève le plus grave de la matière; son poids, sa résistance.  
Vitesse, soulagement du mal, du bas, du lourd. Sorte d'antimatière, d'idéal au premier degré.<sup>61</sup>

His idea of exorcism through firstly poetry and words and then the ascetic line is therefore therapeutic by nature.

Michaux evokes the healing aspect of the line in *Par des traits* as a possible cure to one's own personal ills as well as to a more general *malaise* of modern times:

Cure par les traits  
débrayages, coups de barre par les traits  
Traits: notre thérapie, notre hygiène,  
notre périmètre de défense.<sup>62</sup>

Mihailovich-Dickman comments on Michaux's therapeutic appropriation of the line in the following terms, taking into consideration both remarks that he made on this subject and his own use of his literary and artistic production as a type of curative act:

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<sup>60</sup> Michaux, *Épreuves, exorcismes 1940-1944, OC I*, pp. 771-821 (p. 773), Michaux's italics.

<sup>61</sup> Michaux, 'Note sur les malédictions', *Passages, OC II*, pp. 353-55 (p. 354).

<sup>62</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits, OC III*, p. 1251.

Au cours d'une conversation avec l'auteur, nous avons appris qu'il était revenu à cette expérience calligraphique pour se guérir d'un état morbide, vieil ennemi devenu complice, car alité, bridé, Michaux traduit depuis toujours sa révolte par une activité créatrice qui permet de la dépasser [...]. Le signe lui est revenu pour retrouver le goût, le flot, la fluidité, la continuité, le rythme et le pouls de la vie. Michaux parvint ainsi, petit à petit, à guérir psychiquement d'une faiblesse physique ce corps-obstacle.<sup>63</sup>

This idea of using the line, in direct contact with the cumbersome body, as therapy creates parallels with the composed, contemplative tone of many of Michaux's publications towards the end of his life, and also makes reference to the postface to *Mouvements*, which highlights the positive aspects of the sign rather than the line:

Qui, ayant suivi mes signes sera induit par mon exemple, à en faire lui-même selon son être et ses besoins, ira, ou je me trompe fort, à une fête, à un débrayage non encore connu, à une désincrustation, à une vie nouvelle ouverte, à une écriture inespérée, soulageante.<sup>64</sup>

As a result, in his books incorporating signs, Michaux strongly advocates simplicity and asceticism as a means of freeing the therapeutic line from, what he considers, the muddled and cluttered constraints of conventional linguistic forms. This idea of the healing nature of the line can, however, be linked to the magical element of the word in some of Michaux's early poetic texts, for example, in the two poems entitled 'Magie' and *Épreuves, exorcismes*, underlining his need to paint, compose and write as exorcising, therapeutic acts.

### **Neologistic Experimentation**

One of the main contributing factors to Michaux's experimentation with signs can now be introduced, namely, his experimentation with neologisms. By way of introduction, Michaux's desire to escape the tyrannical nature of language appears to prefigure the ideas expressed by the renowned exponent of structuralism, Roland Barthes, on this subject. Michael Moriarty gives a clear definition of structuralist activity in his book devoted to Barthes:

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<sup>63</sup> Mihailovich-Dickman, 'Idéogrammes: L'Apport de la Chine ou "Voie par l'écriture"', pp. 173-4.

<sup>64</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements, OC II*, p. 599.

The structuralist takes an object and breaks it down into its constituent parts; he then reconstructs it so as to reveal the rules by which it functions, and which are invisible in its 'natural' state. The object is thus denaturalized, because its reconstitution produces it as *intelligible*, shows at work within it the human ability to make sense of the world.<sup>65</sup>

These 'constituent parts' and the relations between them are considered more important than the actual object. Hence, if language is broken down, its very form and subject matter will reflect the ideological stance<sup>66</sup> and the 'historical conjuncture'<sup>67</sup> of the writer, which in turn make any objective representation of reality using language impossible.

This lack of freedom imposed by linguistic conventions is observed in the polemical statement made by Barthes in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1977:

Mais la langue, comme performance de tout langage, n'est ni réactionnaire, ni progressiste; elle est tout simplement: fasciste; car le fascisme, ce n'est pas d'empêcher de dire, c'est d'obliger à dire.<sup>68</sup>

After making this now famous comment, Barthes goes on to formulate his ideas on the authoritative nature of language, which is intrinsically linked to the danger of stereotype through repetition, as each individual is both master and slave to linguistic expression. The individual can assert him/herself however or as much as he/she pleases but, in order to be understood by others, he/she must repeat all that is familiar. In this way, the democratic idea of free expression becomes defunct within language: 'il ne peut donc y avoir de liberté que hors du langage.'<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Michaux considers freedom within language to be impossible:

Destinée à être UNE ADMINISTRATION, où toute conscience va devoir entrer.  
Maîtresse, la langue couvrira tous les besoins (!): Ainsi font les tyrannies.  
Les menottes des mots ne se relâcheront plus.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 58, Moriarty's italics.

<sup>66</sup> As Moriarty points out: 'the writing itself is a stance', in *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> Roland Barthes, *Leçon* (Paris: Seuil, Collection 'Points Essais', 1978), p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits, OC III*, p. 1281.

He hopes that his graphic experimentation will lead to a form of expression in which those who dare will be able to ‘enfin s’exprimer loin des mots, des mots, des mots des autres’.<sup>71</sup> The litanic form of this quotation from the postface to *Mouvements* points to one of Michaux’s characteristic literary devices, used generally to provide the text with speed and rhythm. In this case, however, the repetition gives rise to a possible phonetic interpretation that reflects the content of the text: ‘des mots démodés’. Content appears to meet form as words are considered to be outmoded and no longer adequate for semantic purposes. And yet, ironically, from this point of view, this quotation is in fact highly expressive and even polysemic, far from the actual phonetic implications of the words.

Consequently, Barthes’s line of thought seems to be very close to Michaux’s own reflections on language and, indeed, can be placed within a questioning of language initiated around the time of Mallarmé’s *Crise de vers*<sup>72</sup> and the invention of modern linguistics by Saussure. Barthes goes on to claim that literature must ‘tricher la langue’<sup>73</sup> in order to abolish its power, and this act has to take place within language. Prior to his experimentation with signs, Michaux had also investigated the possibilities of neologisms, onomatopoeia and *mots démontés*, underlining an interest in primitive or childlike linguistic expression. This experimentation takes place within language, following certain phonetic rules and yet containing little or no semantic value, which in turn indicates the emptiness of linguistic conventions.

The primal utterances contained in a poem such as ‘Glu et Gli’ indicate clearly how Michaux aimed to ‘tricher la langue’:

et glo  
 et glu  
 et déglutit sa bru  
 gli et glo  
 et déglutit son pied  
 [...]

<sup>71</sup> Michaux, ‘Postface’ to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 599.

<sup>72</sup> This is the title of a text in prose by Mallarmé that comments on the *vers libre* and its expressive possibilities at the end of the nineteenth century. See Mallarmé, ‘Crise de vers’, in *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 360-68.

<sup>73</sup> Barthes, *Leçon*, p. 16.

l'ordure n'est pas faite pour la démonstration  
un homme qui n'aurait que son pet pour s'exprimer...<sup>74</sup>

The onomatopoeic nature of the meaningless 'glo' and 'gli' imitates the sound of swallowing announced by the repetition of the verb 'déglutit'. This lexical experimentation suggests a desire to escape the conventional limitations of language, by rejecting any symbolic function and instead exploring the possibilities of primal forms and sounds, going back as far as 'le pet' towards the end of the poem.<sup>75</sup> These neologisms follow the basic grammatical, orthographic and phonetic rules of the French language, but they have no semantic value. They are, however, surrounded by words that have specific meanings, such as 'glu', 'déglutit' and 'bru'. Indeed by placing 'glu' and 'déglutit' in close proximity, this verb seems to take on a new signification. 'Glu' means literally 'strong glue' and should remind the reader of the references to 'colle' in the very first lines of *Mouvements*: 'contre la colle', and in the postface of this same text: 'des mots, ces collants partenaires'. The existence of this noun in the verb 'déglutit' alongside the prefix 'dé-' appears to reverse the sticking process, to 'unglue' or 'unstick'. The invented words contaminate the authentic words by taking them out of their usual context and placing them in new linguistic situations where their conventional meaning no longer has the upper hand. Michaux adds in 'Glu et gli':

l'homme seulement attend, il attend  
il y a des siècles qu'il attend perdu dans le taillis de signes  
s'affairant à de nouveaux alphabets.<sup>76</sup>

These lines point to the human obsession with representing the world through signs and alphabets, as well as the perpetual dissatisfaction with such attempts, anticipating Michaux's own experimentation with alphabets and eventually, after his trip to Asia in 1932, figures resembling ideographs. 1927, the year that 'Glu et Gli' was published in *Qui je fus*, was also to see the composition of both *Alphabet* and

<sup>74</sup> Michaux, 'Glu et gli', *Qui je fus*, *OCI*, pp. 110-12 (p. 110).

<sup>75</sup> See Elza Adamowicz's perceptive comments on Michaux's neologisms in 'Visions on the edge: Faces in the work of Henri Michaux', *Aura*, 3 (Summer 1995), 67-83 (pp. 74-75).

<sup>76</sup> Michaux, 'Glu et gli', *OCI*, p. 111.



*Narration.* Almost sixty years later, Michaux's longstanding preoccupation with the visual sign used for communicative and signifying purposes was still evident in *Par des traits*: 'Après des millénaires, l'envie du signe pictographique, toujours pas disparue'.<sup>77</sup>

'Rencontre dans la forêt', published in 1935, was one of the last texts by Michaux to contain what René Bertelé termed his 'espéranto lyrique'.<sup>78</sup>

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.  
[...]  
Il la déjupe; puis à l'aise il la troulache,  
la ziliche, la bourbouse et l'arronvesse,  
(lui gridote sa trilitte, la dilèche).<sup>79</sup>

This poem is full of neologisms that are so close to the actual French language that the reader feels able to understand them, and thus decipher this barely disguised and troubling account of a rape in a forest. The reader senses and is repulsed by the violence of the acts described through the phonetic character of the neologisms and by association, for example: 'humine' (*humer* / *humide* / *miner*); 'saligoron' (*sale* / *saliver* / *saligaud* / *gore* / *rond*); 'en nalais' (*en aller* / *en allée* / *haler* / *haleter* / *halener*); and 'bourbouse' (*bourbe* / *bourrer* / *bouse*). The physical violence implied by these neologisms is also present in 'Le Grand combat':

Il l'emparouille et l'endosque contre terre;  
Il le rague et le roupète jusqu'à son drôle;  
Il le pratèle et le libucque et lui barufle les ouillais;  
Il le tocarde et le marmine,  
Le manage rape à ri et ripe à ra.<sup>80</sup>

The visual and verbal content of the books incorporating signs also contains this ferocity and tumultuousness. It could be suggested that many of the pages of signs represent squabbling glyphs, battling

<sup>77</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1284.

<sup>78</sup> See René Bertelé, *Henri Michaux* (Paris: Seghers, Collection 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui', 1975, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, 1946), p. 12.

<sup>79</sup> Michaux, 'Rencontre dans la forêt', OC I, p. 416.

<sup>80</sup> Michaux, 'Le Grand combat', *Qui je fus*, OC I, pp. 118-19 (p. 118).

anthropomorphic figures, which connote a sense of combative opposition. This aggressive element is rendered in verbal form in *Mouvements* through the litanic introduction of a range of weapons: ‘pour l’opération sagaie / pour l’opération harpon’.<sup>81</sup> The textual matter of *Saisir* also contains violent vocabulary, epitomised by the following question: ‘Qui en peinture donna jamais une gifle? un coup? (de poing ou de bâton ou de lance?)’<sup>82</sup>

Bellour comments on the use of neologisms in the first volume of Michaux’s collected works, using the metaphor of battle:

Ce langage informel, ou déformé (‘déformel’ ferait bien l’affaire), est le langage d’un combat entre vie et mort: c’est accepter ou non – avoir depuis l’origine accepté ou non – de manger, de parler, puis de lire et d’écrire, et retrouver chaque fois le théâtre entier du drame du corps, de l’accès douloureux que toute altérité ouvre à la sensation comme à la pensée.<sup>83</sup>

This invented language with its utopian implications attracts inevitable comparisons with the ‘nonsense’ languages playfully developed by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, the *zaoum* language created by the Russian formalists and Velimir Khlebnikov, Futurist *parole in libertà* and various phonetic and lexical innovations created and often performed by poets and artists linked to the Dada tendency, including Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters. It also bears witness to the presence of another language, which, in Michaux’s case, hails back to his Belgian childhood and that nation’s second language, Flemish. Gilles Deleuze, in his *Dialogues* with Claire Parnet, mentions the significance of being aware of the presence of other languages in one’s native tongue. The mother tongue loses importance, our relationship to it changes, so we are able to ‘parler dans *sa langue à soi* comme un étranger.’<sup>84</sup> Deleuze goes on to quote Marcel Proust who writes in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*: ‘Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère...’<sup>85</sup> Michaux’s neologisms pay tribute to this idea of being foreign to one’s own language, but they above all attempt to transcribe the physical nature

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<sup>81</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 436.

<sup>82</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 962.

<sup>83</sup> Bellour, ‘Notice’ to ‘Rencontre dans la forêt’, OC I, pp. 1156-66 (p. 1158).

<sup>84</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, Collection ‘Dialogues’, 1977), p. 11, their emphasis.

<sup>85</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *ibid.*, p. 11.

of words and writing and their close link to the body through their primal nature.

This experimentation with nonsensical words within language can be compared to linguistic stuttering or stammering,<sup>86</sup> the importance of which is again evoked by Deleuze in *Dialogues*:

Un style, c'est arriver à bégayer dans sa propre langue. C'est difficile, parce qu'il faut qu'il y ait nécessité d'un tel bégaiement. Non pas être bègue dans sa parole, mais être bègue du langage lui-même. Faire une ligne de fuite.<sup>87</sup>

Michaux's invented languages, both verbal and visual, could be considered as 'lignes de fuite', a type of stammer, a hesitation in conventional literary production. Contemporary American poet Susan Howe comments on the etymological origins of 'hesitate' in her study of the nineteenth-century American poet, Emily Dickinson, a vital precursor of modernist poetry and prose:

Pulling pieces of geometry, geology, alchemy, philosophy, politics, biography, biology, mythology, and philology from alien territory, a 'sheltered' woman audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking.<sup>88</sup>

Howe shows how Dickinson portrays these hesitations in her use of the dash and her suppression of accepted punctuation. Dickinson's famous dashes have often been compared to stitches to emphasise a supposedly feminine activity. Howe revokes this interpretation

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<sup>86</sup> A fellow Belgian, the visual artist, Pierre Alechinsky tells an amusing anecdote about a taxi-driver who Alechinsky thought was Belgian and ashamed of his accent, but in fact suffered from a stutter:

'- Êtes-vous du Nord?

- ... du tout. Vous ne devinez jamais. Parfois un client me prend pour un Suisse, souvent je passe pour un Alsacien, Luxembourgeois. Personne n'est encore tombé juste, à l'exception d'un ancien...

- Belge?

- Bègue, Monsieur. Je fus bègue. On nous apprenait à parler ains-si: en ar-ti-cu-lant tou-tes les syl-labes; nous de-vions chan-ter les mots.' When Alechinsky told this story to Michaux, he reportedly replied: 'De tous les peuples de la Gaule, les bègues *fortissimi sunt*.' 'En manque d'Henri Michaux', in *Henri Michaux: Peindre, composer, écrire*, pp. 94-100 (pp. 98-99).

<sup>87</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1985), p. 21.

entirely, stating: ‘Who is this Spider-Artist? Not *my* Emily Dickinson. This is poetry not life and certainly not sewing.’<sup>89</sup> She continues:

Conventional punctuation was abolished not to add ‘soigné stichery’ but to subtract arbitrary authority. Dashes drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem. Hush of hesitation for breath and for breathing.<sup>90</sup>

This idea of hesitant pausing is also present in Michaux’s poetry in his neologistic experimentation and his signs. In the second line of *Mouvements*, as we have already seen, Michaux writes that he is ‘contre la colle’, against sticking, and, by implication, hesitation. But over thirty years later, in the text in prose in *Par des traits*, he appears to condone hesitation in language in his description of the development of pictographic languages: ‘La préécriture pictographique, elle, probablement une curiosité quand d’abord on la vit, avec des tâtonnements, avec bien des hésitations quand on la fit.’<sup>91</sup> Moreover, he considers hesitation to be a positive quality in music, which, as we will see in the final chapter, he regarded as the perfect expressive form for rendering the chaotic mobility of the inner self:

Ici sont exposés ses tâtonnements, ses hésitations, ses brusqueries, ses accentuations, ses brouillons, ses reprises, ses retours en arrière que les autres arts tiennent soigneusement cachés. [...] Musique, opération du devenir, opération humaine la plus saine.<sup>92</sup>

As a result, the introduction of the blank page in Michaux’s books incorporating experimentation with signs could be interpreted as a pause for breath.

Michaux appears to have stopped this experimentation with invented words, which attempted to render the physical dimension of the writing process, after ‘Rencontre dans la forêt’.<sup>93</sup> The first

<sup>89</sup> Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, p. 14, Howe’s emphasis.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>91</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits, OC III*, p. 1282.

<sup>92</sup> Michaux, ‘Un certain phénomène qu’on appelle musique’, *Passages, OC II*, pp. 364-70 (p. 365).

<sup>93</sup> Neologisms do exist in Michaux’s drug narratives, but these appear to operate in a different fashion to the earlier ‘espéranto lyrique’. Bowie states on this subject: ‘The neologisms which frequently occur in Michaux’s reports on mescaline [...] represent attempts to accommodate within language sensations and concepts for which words do not already exist; for example: *infinisation, fagocité, encharnement,*

question in *Saisir* refers to this abandoned neologistic and onomatopoeic experimentation and bears witness to the signifying possibilities of the graphic sign: ‘Qui n’a voulu saisir plus, saisir mieux, saisir autrement, et les êtres et les choses, pas avec des mots, ni avec des phonèmes, ni des onomatopées, mais avec des signes graphiques?’<sup>94</sup> The mention of an alphabet primer, an ABC book in the second question, alludes to Michaux’s experimentation with *mots démontés*: ‘Qui n’a voulu un jour faire un abécédaire, un bestiaire, et même tout un vocabulaire, d’où le verbal entièrement serait exclu?’<sup>95</sup> This is confirmed by the first letters of the neologisms in the first clause of the following aphorism from ‘Tranches de savoir’: ‘Quand vous ameroseriez des bastres à clivettes, encore que cafouette n’en dore, venez glytons, venez gelés et lovogrammes, l’heure d’Orque a sonné, grand Listafu!’<sup>96</sup> The use of the interrogative in the opening questions of *Saisir* directly addresses the reader, incorporating him/her in the process of graphic creation from the very start and suggesting that Michaux’s desire for another signifying system within or beyond conventional language has not yet been fulfilled. Furthermore, the initial projects for an ABC book, a bestiary and a vocabulary in *Saisir* appear to point implicitly to Michaux’s plan of inventing his own organised signifying system. Incidentally, over forty years earlier, when *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur* was published, three projects in preparation were also announced. These were never to be published, but one of them is significant in this context: ‘Rudiments d’une langue universelle idéographique contenant neuf cents idéogrammes et une grammaire’,<sup>97</sup> thereby underlining Michaux’s interest in the possible universality of ideographic signifying systems as well as his objective of creating an ordered linguistic system.

Michaux’s desire for a graphic universal language, which would not depend on the syntactical and phonetic rules of conventional Western writing systems, is voiced once more in *Saisir*.

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*imagification, bilogé, omnirelié, infiniverti.* [...] In short, the neologisms to be found in poems such as ‘Le Grand Combat’ allow the poet, by means of connotation, to approach new varieties of experience, whereas those in the drug narratives allow him, by means of exact denotation, to withdraw.’ Bowie, *Henri Michaux*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>94</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 936.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 936.

<sup>96</sup> Michaux, ‘Tranches de savoirs’, *Face aux verrous*, OC II, pp. 448-71 (p. 451), my emphasis.

<sup>97</sup> Bellour and Tran, ‘Chronologie’, OC I, p. CIX.

Indeed, much of his experimentation with signs was carried out with a universal aim in mind, although he was fully aware of the utopian implications of this notion. This can be seen in the use of the word ‘mirage’ in the following quotation:

Enfant, je ne comprenais pas les autres. Et ils ne me comprenaient pas. Je les trouvais absurdes. On était étranger. Depuis, ça s’est amélioré. Néanmoins, l’impression qu’on ne se comprend pas réellement n’a pas disparu. Ah! s’il y avait une langue universelle avec laquelle on se comprît vraiment tous, hommes, chiens, enfants, et non pas un peu, non pas avec réserve. Le désir, l’appel et le mirage d’une vraie langue directe subsistent en moi malgré tout.<sup>98</sup>

This idealistic concern was by no means original, to discover a language that everyone could understand and use to communicate has been one of man’s dreams from the beginning of time.<sup>99</sup> Michaux’s fascination with signs is intrinsically linked to a utopian quest for a new form of expression. Although he quickly realised that this desire for a universal language incorporating signs was a ‘leurre’,<sup>100</sup> he kept coming back to them, dissatisfied with other forms of expression:

Bâton fou  
boomerang qui sans cesse revient  
revient torrentiellement  
à travers d’autres  
reprendre son vol.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Michaux, *Façons d’endormi, façons d’éveillé*, OC III, pp. 445-537 (p. 459).

<sup>99</sup> Umberto Eco’s *La Recherche de la langue parfaite dans la culture européenne* deals with this subject in great detail. Eco uses these famous words from Rimbaud’s ‘Lettre du voyant’ as an epigraph to the introduction: ‘Du reste, toute parole étant idée, le temps d’un langage universel viendra! (...) Cette langue sera de l’âme pour l’âme, résumant tout, parfums, sons, couleurs (...)’, Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871, in Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 252. In his book, Eco outlines the many European attempts at discovering or inventing a universal language throughout the centuries. He concludes, and Michaux would agree with this first assertion, that this project is in fact impossible for there is no single truth and no single language in which to express this truth. The multiple nature of human existence is portrayed through the richness and variety of the different languages we use. Eco realises that this conclusion leads us to another irreducible problem: translation, a direction that is not pursued by Michaux in his interdisciplinary output.

<sup>100</sup> Michaux, ‘Postface’ to *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 598.

<sup>101</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 439.

The above stanza from *Mouvements* appears to anticipate this constant return to experimentation with signs and to verbal language from visual expression. Michaux avoids the limitations of language through reference to language, and so he could be accused of committing *mauvaise foi*.

It can be suggested that Michaux's practical experimentation differs from Barthes's theoretical reflections on language, as the former attempts to leave language in order to investigate the creative possibilities offered by other forms of expression, such as drawing and painting. It goes without saying that Barthes also explored visual expression but, in contrast to Michaux, he essentially remained within language.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, Michaux's initial graphic experimentation is alphabetic, taking its inspiration from ancient writing systems, and thus remaining, in a certain manner, within language. And indeed, it has been asserted that he noted down archaic alphabets, especially from the Sumerian civilisation, and took great care when carrying out this meticulous task.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, when asked in an interview with Robert Bréchon if he read any poetry, Michaux replied somewhat ambiguously:

Je lis surtout ces textes archaïques de peuples étrangers où la poésie n'est pas mise à part, et où elle vient à l'improviste, on ne sait comment, alors qu'on n'était pas occupé d'elle. J'y reviens souvent.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Barthes did some drawing and painting too. The front cover of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, Collection 'Écrivains de toujours', 1975) is a drawing by him entitled *Souvenir de Juan-les-Pins*. He also talks about painting as a pastime, for instance, on page eighty-five of this text. 'R/B Roland Barthes', an exhibition with a catalogue of the same name at the Centre Pompidou from 27 November 2002 to 10 March 2003, included a collection of his drawings and paintings.

<sup>103</sup> 'Les manuscrits Saillet, dispersés chez Drouot en mai 1989, révèlent l'extrême soin porté par Michaux à relever les alphabets anciens, notamment ceux de Sumer.' Bernard Gheerbrant, 'L'œuvre graphique d'Henri Michaux', in *Henri Michaux: Les Estampes 1948-1984*, ed. by Rainer Michael Mason & Christophe Chérix (Geneva: Cabinet des estampes du Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Patrick Cramer, 1997), pp. 172-78 (p. 176). This essay was first published in *Henri Michaux 1899-1984: Œuvres graphiques*, ed. by Aliette Peligry-Armel (Toulouse: Artothèque de la ville de Toulouse, 1990), unpaginated. This care is not, however, apparent from the auction catalogue, *Bibliothèque Maurice Saillet et à divers amateurs* (Paris: Drouot Richelieu, 29/05/1989), in which no mention is made of Michaux studying and copying ancient alphabets.

<sup>104</sup> 'Entretien avec Robert Bréchon', *OC III*, pp. 1457-64 (pp. 1463-64).

The use of the word ‘texte’ rather than ‘poème’ implies a less specific textual form, but above all this comment emphasises the importance of archaic writing systems to Michaux. For this reason, the intricate design of each pictographic character of *Alphabet* (Fig. 1) and *Narration* was most probably influenced by hieroglyphs and other calligraphic techniques from the earliest recorded civilisations. This interest in ancient writing systems also clearly foreshadows Michaux’s experimentation with signs and, in particular, the textless *Par la voie des rythmes*, in which the poetry is not to be found in the words of a text but rather in the forms, rhythm and movement of the visual content. Accordingly, Barthes’s idea of remaining within language to ‘tricher la langue’ is present in Michaux’s works incorporating experimentation with signs through their innovative layout and their conception as creative expressions published in book form.

The alphabets and invented words, which have no obvious semantic value, are the first rupture by Michaux with Western writing systems. They are the precursors of the experimentation in the books incorporating signs in which conventional words and letters have been almost totally forsaken. Michaux’s objective is to return to the stage preceding the invention of a language or a writing system, before language can assert its tyrannical power, when drawing and writing are one and the same. His signs aspire towards a direct gestural source of expression that can be felt but not necessarily understood by everyone at a prelinguistic level. In *Saisir*, Michaux expresses this desire for the ‘pré-geste’, the starting point of a gesture, the energetic source of movement and not the end result:

J’aurais voulu dans un homme représenter le geste, partant de l’intérieur, le déclenchement, l’arrachement, l’*irruption* coléreuse de cette intense, subite, ardente concentration d’où va partir le coup, plutôt que le coup arrivé à destination.<sup>105</sup>

This notion of the ‘pré-geste’ will be developed in Chapter 4, for after all it is an attempt at direct expression of the self and the body. By composing the signs, Michaux is attempting to transcend traditional communicative means in order to escape any form of classification and express himself freely. Yet paradoxically, he still resorts to

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<sup>105</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 963, Michaux’s italics.



conventional textual production to express himself. As he writes in the poem accompanying the signs in *Mouvements*:

Signes pour retrouver le don des langues  
 la sienne au moins, que, sinon soi, qui la parlera?  
 Écriture directe enfin pour le dévidement des formes  
 pour le soulagement, le désencombrement des images  
 dont la place publique-cerveau est en ce temps particulièrement engorgée.<sup>106</sup>

This quotation points to a clear sense of *dépouillement*, stripping images and language, that is to say, both the visual and the verbal, of their clutter, their artifice and formality in order to gain access to the inner self. Indeed, before experimenting with visual elements, Michaux had also investigated the idea of reducing language to its bare minimum by suppressing, for example, the indefinite article and other such determiners. And yet, in this quotation, there is a layering and accumulation of clauses and images in the last three lines, finishing with a metaphor that can only be described as the opposite of *dépouillement*, which in turn exemplifies Michaux's paradoxical approach to textual creation.

### ***Saisir*: A Different Project?**

In this final section of Chapter 2, the third book incorporating signs, *Saisir*, will be examined in order to demonstrate how it participates in the creative itinerary formed by the series of books composed of signs, whilst presenting some major conceptual differences. Although it provides analogies with the three other volumes, the tone of *Saisir* is not as resolutely opposed to conventional Western signifying systems. The text in poetry and prose cannot be described as litanic, and indeed the reader witnesses Michaux's struggle with all forms of representation in the visual and verbal elements of this publication. The content, structure and tone of *Saisir*, like those of *Par des traits*, are not as mystical as some of Michaux's other publications in the late 1970s, for example, 'Vers la complétude' or 'Jours de silence'.

*Saisir*, whose very title points to the book's main objective of grasping and rendering an object or emotion, differentiates itself from

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<sup>106</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 441.

the three other books incorporating signs from the very beginning because it includes a dedication:

*à Micheline Phan Kim Chi,  
premier témoin à tout autre préféré,  
premier assentiment.  
Je vis ses yeux sur les signes s'animer, recevoir.  
Le parcours pouvait continuer.<sup>107</sup>*

This moving inscription immediately underlines the importance Michaux placed on the communicative nature of his graphic signs, which is highlighted in the above quotation by the description of his reader's reaction to these enigmatic squiggles.<sup>108</sup> As we have seen, the opening questions in *Saisir* underline Michaux's familiar aim of a universal language and introduce the notion of creating an organised sign system, suggesting a vocabulary or a bestiary. And indeed, the graphic signs in *Saisir* appear to conform to this project as they are for the most part ordered vertically or horizontally into groups that resemble insects, animals or humanoid figures in various positions, undertaking different activities (Fig. 13). The idea of a bestiary using both text and image was by no means original. It had been explored many times before Michaux's *Saisir* in various collaborative projects, for example, *Histoires naturelles* (1899) by Jules Renard with lithographs by Toulouse-Lautrec; *Le Bestiaire ou Cortège d'Orphée* (1911) by Apollinaire with woodcuts by Raoul Dufy; and *Bestiaire* (1948) by Paul Eluard with etchings by Roger Chastel.<sup>109</sup> More recent examples include *Bestiaire* (1985) by Pierre Lecuire with copperplate engravings by Pierre Tal Coat, and *Bestiaire* (1995) by Richard Wilbur with illustrations by Alexander Calder.

*Mouvements* and *Par la voie des rythmes* also contain signs that resemble human figures, animals and insects. Moreover, Bernard Gheerbrant refers to the sequence of lithographs by Michaux that accompanied the first editions of *Par la voie des rythmes* as:

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<sup>107</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 933.

<sup>108</sup> More will be said about the reading process and Michaux's desire for an active reader in Chapter 5.

<sup>109</sup> For more information about these famous *livres illustrés* in the French tradition, see François Chapon, *Le Peintre et le livre: L'âge d'or du livre illustré en France 1870-1970* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987). The concept of the *livre d'artiste* in relation to Michaux's books incorporating signs will be examined in Chapter 5.

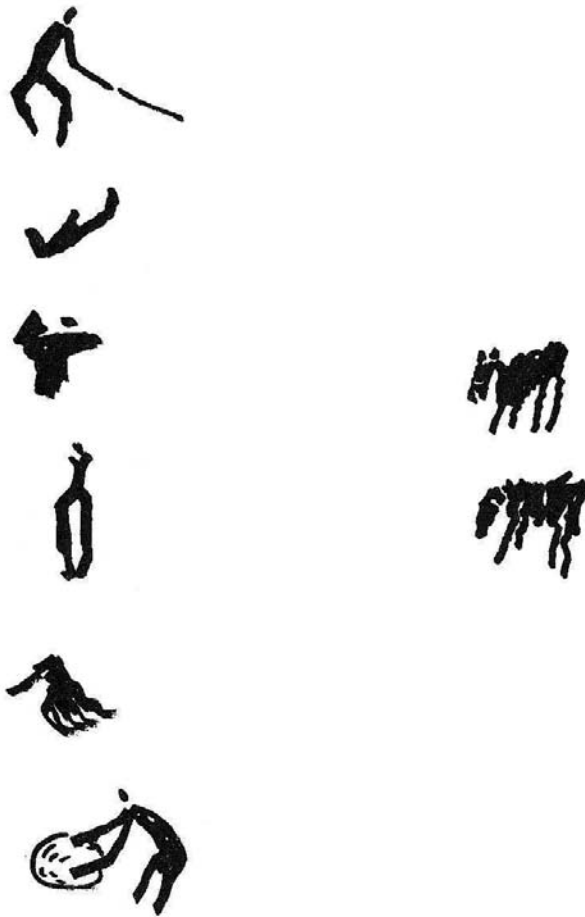


Fig. 13: *Saisir, OC III*, p. 945  
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un ‘argumentaire’ en quelque sorte, résumant le nouvel apport graphique: aux symboles rupestres déjà exprimés s’ajoutent un bestiaire (le crocodile, les ébauches de cervidés et autres quadrupèdes) et une entomologie (l’abeille, le mille-pattes), des ‘traces’ également.<sup>110</sup>

For Michaux, this concern with animals and insects was far from new.<sup>111</sup> To his surprise, however, the insect form, which he had examined closely as a child, seems particularly favourable to the project expressed in *Saisir*: ‘Des insectes, des insectes surtout m’arrivaient. Curieux, je devenais insecte de plus en plus. Je pensais pourtant les avoir bien oubliés.’<sup>112</sup>

A few pages later, he again mentions the act of becoming an insect, which enables him to see and understand the nature of the external world from an insect’s eye view:

Me faire insecte pour mieux saisir  
avec pattes à crochets pour mieux saisir  
insecte, arachnide, myriapode, acarien  
s’il le faut, pour mieux saisir.<sup>113</sup>

Through this depersonalisation, he escapes the human body and mind, and enters a universe in which everything is new to him. This reacquired childlike innocence allows him to see and express all that is around him, unhindered by habitual social and linguistic conventions. In *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d’existence*, writing of the period just before the First World War spent in Brussels, Michaux alludes to ants:

<sup>110</sup> Gheerbrant, ‘L’Œuvre graphique d’Henri Michaux’, p. 176.

<sup>111</sup> Evelyne Grossman links Michaux’s interest in insects to his poetry through the notions of metamorphosis, incest and the invention of forms: ‘L’homme-insecte qui hante l’écriture de Michaux serait le corps-signe dont il rêve: entre signe-peint et signe-écrit, il incarne la recherche constante de formes hybrides, provisoires et instables (signe et tache, trait et trace, écriture et peinture...). Inscription dans l’écriture et le dessin d’un inceste archaïque sans cesse rejoué, *le corps-lettre-insecte devient l’image sublimée de l’accouplement interdit.*’ Evelyne Grossman, ‘L’Écriture insectueuse d’Henri Michaux’, in *Altérations, créations dans la langue: Les Langages dépravés*, ed. by Anne Tomiche (Clermont-Ferrand: Centre de Recherches sur les Littératures Modernes et Contemporaines, Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2001) pp. 167-79 (p. 173), Grossman’s italics.

<sup>112</sup> Michaux, *Saisir, OC III*, p. 938.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 944.

Combats de fourmis dans le jardin.

Découverte du dictionnaire, des mots qui n'appartiennent pas encore à des phrases, pas encore à des phraseurs, des mots et en quantité, et dont on pourra se servir soi-même à sa façon.<sup>114</sup>

Michaux follows this allusion to ants directly with his discovery of the dictionary and the power of words before they are oppressed by the grammatical and syntactical constraints of sentence structure.

This parallel between ants and words is far from random and it appears to have found its form in the bestiary of *Saisir*. In the latter, Michaux states: 'Quant à la vision des choses et des êtres, on voit en excluant autant qu'en recevant. / *Il n'y a pas de regards innocents.*'<sup>115</sup> The significance of this last sentence is highlighted by its italicisation. It underlines the fact that all verbal and visual matter has to be interpreted and thus filtered by a reader or viewer with his/her own unique store of knowledge, which is different to the author's. No one is able to read a text or look at a picture in a completely objective fashion, that is to say, without bringing their experience and knowledge, however vast or limited, to their textual or visual appreciation. This of course implies that these insects have a particular role to play in *Saisir*. Anne-Élisabeth Halpern defines them in the following terms:

L'insecte, par la calligraphie immédiate à laquelle la morphologie de son exosquelette fait inévitablement rêver, conduit à une dynamisation du geste d'écriture [...]. La compréhension par la préhension en somme. L'insecte est à la fois origine de l'interrogation et instrument de sa résolution.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements, OC I*, p. CXXX. Ants also figure frequently in Salvador Dalí's works, for example, in his early poetic texts: 'One morning I painted with *Ripolin* a newly-born baby which later I let dry on the tennis court. Two days later I found it bristling with ants that made it move in the anesthetized and silent rhythm of sea urchins.' Dalí, 'My Girlfriend and the Beach', in *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, ed. and trans. by Haim Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 24-5 (p. 25). A locust covered in ants shields what should be the mouth of 'The Great Masturbator' dated 1929. Dalí writes on this same theme: 'the Great Masturbator / his immense nose leaning on the onyx-inlaid floor / his enormous eyelids closed / his brow furrowed with horrible wrinkles / and the neck swollen by the renowned boil seething with ants.' Dalí, 'The Great Masturbator', in *ibid.*, pp. 179-90 (p. 180). Ants swarm from the palm of a man's hand in a scene from the famous film, *Un Chien andalou*, written and directed by Dalí and Luis Buñuel.

<sup>115</sup> Michaux, *Saisir, OC III*, p. 938, Michaux's italics.

<sup>116</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 150.

She adds that Michaux had compared the writer to the insect long before *Saisir* in texts, such as *Qui je fus*, in which the idea of chasing butterflies is used as a metaphor for expressing reality through the writing process.<sup>117</sup> Halpern continues:

La chasse aux papillons est une quête du signe, d'une langue du corps dont les lois, si différentes de celles du langage articulé, laisseraient des possibilités d'expression plus variées et convaincantes.<sup>118</sup>

It is true to say that Michaux's signs do in some ways share the form of an insect. In an article entitled 'Des fourmis et des mots', Jean-Claude Mathieu compares the pictographic signs of *Narration* and *Alphabet* to tiny fly or ant legs.<sup>119</sup> Michaux even makes the analogy between the signs used in the Chinese writing system and insect tracks in *Idéogrammes en Chine*:

Ce qui, paraissant gribouillis, fut comparé à des passages d'insectes, à d'inconsistantes traces de pattes d'oiseaux dans le sable, continue de porter, inchangée, toujours lisible, compréhensible, efficace, la langue chinoise, la plus vieille langue vivante du monde.<sup>120</sup>

Furthermore, the incessant movement of insects in their nests could be compared to the dynamism rendered in Michaux's signs. As he writes in *Mouvements*, which also contains insect-like forms: 'unité qui fourmille / bloc qui danse'.<sup>121</sup> As a result, the image of signs and lines on a page could be said to resemble that of insects and the minuscule traces they leave on the ground.

Michaux's signs, contained in *Saisir*, conform to all three of C. S. Peirce's categories of representation concerning the sign in relation to its object. To summarise, Peirce established a complex system composed of nine different sections in order to differentiate between semiotic groups. For our purposes, the category on the sign

<sup>117</sup> 'La littérature est un gosse qui, poursuivant un papillon invisible d'une tierce personne, voudrait par ses propres zig-zag, représenter le parcours du papillon', in Michaux, 'I. Qui je fus', *Qui je fus*, *OC I*, pp. 73-79 (p. 78).

<sup>118</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 150.

<sup>119</sup> Jean-Claude Mathieu, 'Des fourmis et des mots', in *Henri Michaux: Plis et cris du lyrisme*, ed. by Catherine Mayaux (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), pp. 11-27 (p. 26).

<sup>120</sup> Michaux, *Idéogrammes en Chine*, *OC III*, p. 816.

<sup>121</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 435.

and its object, which includes the classifications of the icon, the index and the symbol, is of utmost importance. According to Peirce, the icon directly resembles the object that it represents; the index functions through a physical or causal relationship to its object, for example, smoke and fire, clouds and rain; and the symbol conducts an arbitrary relationship with its object based on convention.<sup>122</sup> It can therefore be deduced that Michaux's insect-like signs in *Saisir* have both an iconic and an indexical function, for they physically resemble insects, and yet, at the same time represent another way of apprehending reality as well as an attempt at rendering the dynamism of the inner self. They are symbolic in the fact that they rely on convention to a certain extent in Michaux's desire to communicate with the reader.

This external resemblance to insects and human figures rekindles one of Michaux's long-forgotten refusals: his opposition to Western figurative art. Indeed, until discovering the non-figurative works of Klee, Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico in 1925, he admitted, in *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence*, to hating: '[...] 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!"'<sup>123</sup> This aversion to imitation now alternates in *Saisir* with a burning need to represent, to render. By setting these personal desires in opposition, the difference between representing and presenting an object, situation or emotion, between the iconic and indexical status of the signs, is underlined. In *Saisir*, it soon becomes obvious that Michaux is concerned with the latter activity:

Refus de la représentation, refus de les faire ressemblants, refus de me soumettre à la ressemblance en général, refus de me rendre semblable, et volonté de 'rendre' s'interrompaient et se succédaient.<sup>124</sup>

The refusal to submit to any resemblance, coupled with the wish to render, in the sense of capturing and giving back, unsettles the poet-

<sup>122</sup> See C. S. Peirce, '[from] On the Algebra of Logic: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Notation', in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 1 (1867-1893), pp. 225-28.

<sup>123</sup> Michaux, *Quelques renseignements*, OC I, p. CXXXII. It is for this reason that the allusions to figurative painting in the two poems entitled 'Magie' examined in the second section of this chapter can be considered surprising.

<sup>124</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 938.

artist as he struggles with his task in a long development in prose and a central section in verse divided irregularly by pages of signs. This paradoxical conflict between acceptance and refusal was also revealed in *Connaissance par les gouffres* in a rather more life-threatening form, provoked by the effects of mescaline:

Cependant on est pris d'envies d'avaler le pot de colle, ou encore le paquet de trombones d'acier, de se jeter par la fenêtre, d'appeler au secours, de se tuer ou de tuer, mais seulement une demi-seconde, et puis la suivante plus aucune envie, la suivante à nouveau envie folle, et ainsi des centaines de fois passe tantôt le 'oui', tantôt le 'non', sans nuances, irréfléchi, avec la régularité d'un piston de moteur.<sup>125</sup>

In *Saisir*, this disorientation in turn gives rise to doubts concerning his aims:

Un je ne sais quoi depuis des dizaines d'années me barre le chemin de la ressemblance, de toute ressemblance.  
Confrontation négative.  
Je n'en suis pas toujours gêné. Qu'est-ce qui, tel quel, est acceptable?

Je combats le parallélisme, tout parallélisme.

Rendre les formes, les modèles, est-ce tellement l'opération à faire?<sup>126</sup>

And, with these questions, he remembers how 'J'avais toujours eu des ennuis avec les formes / J'étais tout antipathie pour les formes'.<sup>127</sup> It can, however, be deduced from much of Michaux's visual and verbal output that his concern lies not so much with forms, which can be destroyed or transgressed, but with the physical act of rendering.

In the whole of this section in verse and prose in *Saisir*, Michaux explains, mostly using the imperfect tense, how this book came into being. As Mihailovich-Dickman suggests, the difficulty of creating this vocabulary is reflected in the language and style used.<sup>128</sup> Michaux realises very early on that to create a type of lexicon would

<sup>125</sup> Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres*, OC III, p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 955.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 948.

<sup>128</sup> 'Les effets poétiques sont toujours présents: le style encombré, enchaîné, mime les efforts fournis.' Mihailovich-Dickman, 'Idéogrammes: L'Apport de la Chine ou "Voie par l'écriture"', p. 179.



in fact be impossible for him because of his disinclination towards resemblance and mimesis:

Mon projet d'une nomenclature s'estompait, s'oubliait.

A vouloir les saisir, les insectes, *saisir était devenu dominant*, saisir en moi si peu naturel (acquis tardif), saisir dont le contraire est 'se recueillir', ne pas s'incliner sur, demeurer réservé.<sup>129</sup>

Curiously, physical movement is implied in the action of the verb-title, *Saisir*, but not in the result, which seems to connote some type of constraint, unlike *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes* and *Par des traits*, whose titles are all direct expressions of movement. Indeed, Michaux asks, what is the use of representing outer reality figuratively, when the dynamic, invisible actions of the inner self are infinitely more interesting? Using Peirce's terminology, he rejects the icon in favour of the index:

Une ressemblance interne, ce serait plus excitant à attraper, non par ruse, mais à bras-le-corps si je puis dire; ce serait aussi plus redoutable.

Qu'est-ce qu'une ressemblance sans dissemblance?  
Un dessin sans combat ennui.  
Il est incomplet. Qui ne le sent?<sup>130</sup>

In many of Michaux's drawings, the tussling figures could be said to refer to this tension between figuration and abstraction. This alternating theme in *Saisir* emphasises the fact that the debate and, indeed, the separation between mimesis and abstraction are far from clear-cut for Michaux. His scathing comments and abrupt refusal of the tradition of Western figurative painting in *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence* appear to be reinforced when he states, many years later in an interview with Jean-Dominique Rey, about Chinese painting:

C'est l'une des premières peintures qui compta pour moi, mais surtout parce que j'étais très ignorant. Par une sorte d'innocence, je n'avais aucune envie de connaître la peinture occidentale.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 939, Michaux's italics.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 958.

This quotation suggests, however, that in the intervening years Michaux has perhaps changed his stance and lost his earlier naivety.

The tension described in the text between a figurative urge and a visceral impulse to produce marks free of mimetic representation is reflected in the fact that the signs are on the whole figurative, but almost as if against Michaux's will. Indeed, the graphic signs contained in *Saisir* are the most figurative of all the books composed of signs. Some figures, for a few pages towards the middle of the book, even have their own separate outline, rather like his brightly coloured gouaches (Figs. 14-15). This obviously removes some of the spontaneous aspect from his graphic production because, even if the original sign were produced without premeditation and then outlined, it would still imply that Michaux had to spend longer composing each sign. In the written text, however, Michaux affirms: 'Pas de contour. / Pas faire le tour. / Traverser!'<sup>132</sup> If taken literally to refer to his graphic work, this appears to contradict what is actually being drawn, and yet it could be interpreted as a cry against the lack of dynamism invested in these outlined signs. On the other hand, they could be expressing a different type of movement, a deceleration, as evoked in the verbal text.<sup>133</sup> This use of the outline by Michaux could also be said to evoke the influence of Chinese signifying systems on his artistic production, for the outline plays an important role in Chinese art in defining surfaces and giving a sense of the object that is radically different to representation in Western art.

Michaux experiments with the visual potential of the page and the word throughout *Saisir*. Not only does he structure the page vertically, horizontally or diagonally and use different typographical formats, he also divides the page in an unconventional manner, which leaves more blank space than in the traditional layout of the printed page. It has already been established how the line annihilates the verbal sign in the space of the page at the end of this volume, taking the reader full circle back to the original aim expressed in the opening question, to grasp and render objects and beings, not with words, but with graphic signs. In the final section of *Saisir*, Michaux goes one

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<sup>131</sup> Jean-Dominique Rey, *Henri Michaux* (Mont-de-Marsan: L'Atelier des Brisants, Collection 'Rencontre', 2001), p. 24.

<sup>132</sup> Michaux, *Saisir, OC III*, p. 959.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 937.

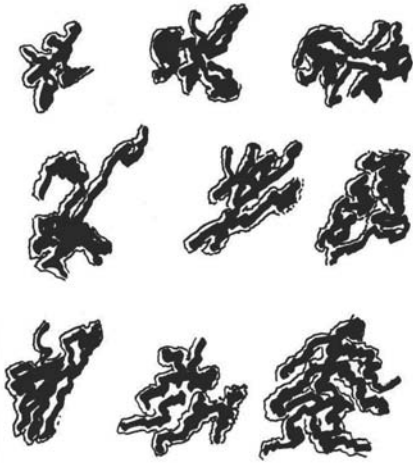


Fig. 14:  
*Saisir, OC III* p. 957  
 © ADAGP, Paris and  
 DACS, London 2007

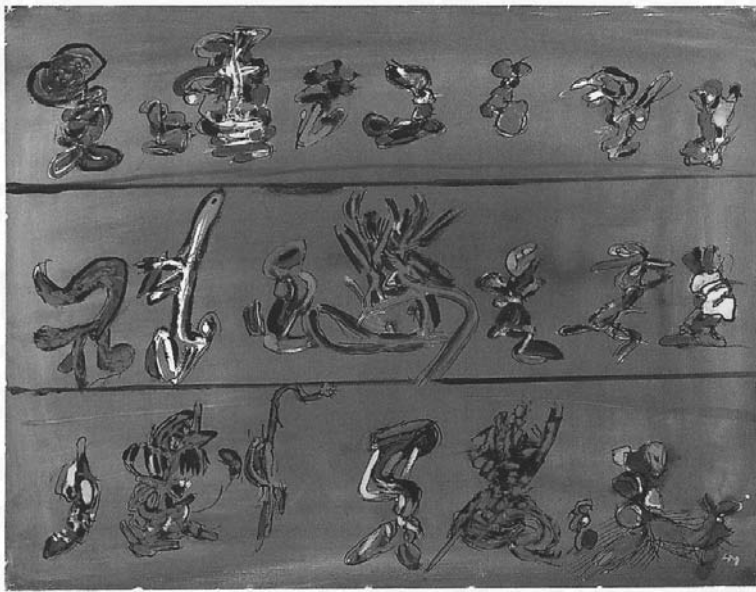


Fig. 15: Untitled, 1952 (Gouache, 50 x 85 cm)  
 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007

step further and aims to represent dynamic situations, thus investing the signs with a symbolic function, and this is what above all differentiates this book from the three others.

Michaux decides that his graphic signs should be used to represent something other than animals, men and gestures, and this is highlighted by the use of sigmatism in the following passage:

Animaux, hommes, gestes ne sont plus le problème mais les situations le sont à présent.  
Signes significatifs d'une situation. J'aurais dû en faire davantage.  
Impréparé hélas.

Par des signes, saisir une situation, quelle merveille! Quelle transformation!<sup>134</sup>

This aim of capturing a situation is unusual for, in the other books incorporating signs, Michaux has essentially been preoccupied with rendering the motions of the body and the inner self. In 'Signes', when evoking the semiotic possibilities of works by Georges Mathieu and Guisepe Capogrossi, he states in relation to his own signs: 'Le signe, sans la représentation de l'homme, le signe "de situation", voilà ce que je n'avais pas même commencé à trouver.'<sup>135</sup> The last passage of *Saisir* bears witness to this desire to grasp and translate the most abstract situation. Bellour states about this passage:

A discussion heard on the radio about the composition of matter and the birth of the universe immediately modified the various drawings, lines, and signs, already under way for several months (almost as if the book were 'live') – and the last drawings of the volume, stratigraphic, pointillist, immediately bear proof of this change.<sup>136</sup>

And indeed, it would seem that Michaux has succeeded in his aim of representing a situation, as his signs undergo a significant transformation when the situation changes. Although there are still hints at an upward movement, his mark-making has become more fragmented and abstract, perhaps referring to actual radio waves. On

<sup>134</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 971.

<sup>135</sup> Michaux, 'Signes', OC II, pp. 429-31 (p. 431).

<sup>136</sup> Bellour, 'The Utopia of the Sign', p. 202. On the back of one of the original drawings representing this situation, Michaux has written Costa de Beauregard. He is most probably referring to the French physicist, Olivier Costa de Beauregard, who could have participated in such a radio programme (Visit to Michaux archives).

the first three pages that are supposedly drawn by Michaux during this radio broadcast, the lines and signs are organised horizontally, vertically and diagonally in a type of zigzag ladder.<sup>137</sup> Two pages follow, which are made up of dots and could be said to have the topographical aspect of a runway or a town map.<sup>138</sup> After two pages of text, five pages of signs represent homunculi climbing up vertical lines (Fig. 16). This of course implies that Michaux has not been able to eradicate human representation in his signs. At first, there appears to be a horizontal summit, but this soon disappears, and the detail gradually diminishes as the traced vertical lines accelerate. These last few pages, however, also remind the reader of the undulating, symmetrical drawings produced under the influence of mescaline, emphasising the continuing influence of this decade of experimentation on Michaux's verbal and visual production.

*Saisir*, then, charts the struggle between a mimetic drive and a physical impulse to produce marks free of figurative representation. This tension, coupled with a desire to represent situations rather than the dynamism of the body and the inner self towards the end of the book, underlines the differences between this and the three other publications incorporating signs. The *raisons d'être* for Michaux's experimentation with signs, which were outlined at the beginning of the chapter, remain basically the same. The four books are all expressions of a radical questioning of Western signifying systems, characterised by the word 'contre', which is repeated for its litanic qualities in both *Mouvements* and *Par des traits*. Much of Michaux's early literary and artistic production relates to this opposition, for example, his neologistic experimentation, which could be seen as a forerunner to his books incorporating signs, as both the invented words and the signs radically question traditional signifying systems from within. The ascetic sign and line are considered to be more efficient expressive forms, able to render the momentum of the inner self, on account of their liberating capacities.

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<sup>137</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, pp. 976-77.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 978.



Fig. 16: *Saisir*, OC III, p. 982  
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## Chapter 3

### **An Oriental Imaginary: The Forms and Functions of Chinese Characters in Michaux's Signs**

Certain elements common to all four books incorporating signs need to be developed in order to find a way of interpreting their generic status. This chapter will evaluate the forms and functions of the Chinese writing system in Michaux's signs in order to determine whether they can be justly described as ideographic. The physical appearance of these signs as well as their layout on the page underline a close affinity with the characters used in this writing system. And indeed Michaux, like many of his contemporary artists and writers, was fascinated by this signifying system, which functions in a radically different manner to the Western alphabetic system. His use of the Chinese writing system, amalgamated with certain aspects of Western culture, to serve his own purposes will be examined, taking into consideration his appropriation of a long Orientalist tradition.

Michaux's interest in Chinese signifying systems and philosophy stems from a general aversion to his own European systems at both verbal and visual levels. Although he had been fascinated by Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese calligraphy since his childhood, it was not until an eight-month journey to various countries in Asia in 1932 that he found an answer to his questions concerning representation, signification and communication in language. The revelations produced by his trip and another culture's signifying system led to the publication of Michaux's famous and polemical *Un Barbare en Asie*. Many critics and specialists have commented on this book as well as the influence of Oriental culture on Michaux's literary and artistic production in general.<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Bowie states that Michaux:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Quelques Orientes d'Henri Michaux*, ed. by Anne-Élisabeth Halpern and Véra Mihailovich-Dickman (Paris: Findakly, 1996).



[...] found useful if not definitive answers in China to questions that had perplexed him in Europe: how can the minute inflections of subjective experience be recast within a public, pre-established system of meaning? How can the external message be firm enough to be transmissible to others, yet at the same time fluid enough to suggest the ever-changing atmosphere of inwardness? How can one system be used repeatedly yet remain flexible?<sup>2</sup>

In Chinese painting and writing, Michaux discovered means of expression that aspired above all to signification, and not to imitation. He writes in *Un Barbare en Asie*:

La peinture chinoise est principalement de paysage. Le mouvement des choses est indiqué, non leur épaisseur et leur poids, mais leur linéarité si l'on peut dire. Le Chinois possède la faculté de réduire l'être à l'être signifié (quelque chose comme la faculté mathématique ou algébrique). Si un combat doit prendre place, il ne livre pas le combat, il ne le simule même pas. Il le signifie. Cela seul l'intéresse, le combat lui-même lui paraîtrait grossier.<sup>3</sup>

Although Michaux never painted landscapes in the Chinese style, it could be suggested that some of his watercolours from the 1940s resemble Chinese paintings on account of their fluidity and simplicity (Fig. 17). He was mostly interested in the direct signifying capacity of ideograms and calligraphy. He admired this signifying system in which the gap between the signifier and the signified is reduced by comparison with European languages.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, his experimentation with signs is clearly inspired by Chinese characters.

<sup>2</sup> Bowie, *Henri Michaux*, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie, OC I*, pp. 275-409 (p. 364).

<sup>4</sup> Although the official language is Mandarin, there exist numerous different dialects, but only one writing system, in China. This means that two people will be able to read the same text, and yet not understand each other in spoken communication. Roy Harris cites the opinion of F. Coulmas on this subject in *La Sémiologie de l'écriture* (Paris: CNRS, 1993), p. 96: 'Beaucoup d'Occidentaux s'émerveillent du fait que ce qui est écrit en caractères chinois peut être lu partout en Chine, malgré les différences accusées entre les dialectes parlés, qui ne se laissent pas comprendre réciproquement. Mais cet argument n'est pas très pertinent pour deux raisons. En premier lieu, jusqu'à ces derniers temps, une maîtrise de l'écriture chinoise était le privilège d'une élite peu nombreuse, et cette maîtrise était toujours accompagnée de l'étude de la langue mandarine. En second lieu, pour trouver des dialectes qui ne se laissent pas comprendre mutuellement, mais qui partagent une norme écrite en commun, il n'est pas nécessaire de diriger son attention vers les écritures non-alphabétiques. L'anglais fournit un exemple parfait. Quelqu'un qui parle l'anglais indien de Bombay aura du



Fig. 17:  
*Emportez-moi*, 1943 (Watercolour on paper, 24 x 31 cm)  
*Peintures et dessins, OC I*, p. 923  
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mal à comprendre la voix traînante d'un Texan du Sud, et celui-ci à son tour aura du mal à comprendre le dialecte de Glasgow. Et pourtant tous les deux sont parfaitement capables de lire l'anglais écrit des îles Britanniques ou des États-Unis, et d'établir un rapport chacun avec son propre dialecte.'

## Orientalism

It has been suggested that Michaux's attraction to and reading of the 'Orient' could be interpreted as the idealistic continuation of a long French Orientalist tradition including such writers as Alphonse de Lamartine, Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, Victor Segalen and Paul Claudel to name but a few.<sup>5</sup> Anne-Élisabeth Halpern comments on this tradition, drawing some significant parallels between travelling to the 'Orient', to the land of the rising sun, and a return to one's origins:

La tradition du voyage en Orient est bien ancienne et obéit à des motivations connues, à commencer par celle d'un retour vers l'origine: *Ex oriente lux*, sait-on, et aller vers l'Orient équivaut à une remontée vers le lever du soleil, vers un état neuf de la mystique et un en-deça [*sic*] de la technique. C'est aussi, et plus encore, le rêve d'une fixité temporelle, d'éternité: nier le déroulement du Temps en allant vers son point de départ, comme à l'envers, c'est s'installer dans un non-temps qui épargne la vie et permet d'échapper à la mort. Enfin, l'Orient, extrême, est le lieu du bouddhisme vers lequel se dirige celui qui veut lutter contre la perte du sens divin et moral dont souffrirait l'Europe.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, as we know, Michaux was resolutely opposed to the idea of belonging to a literary movement, let alone continuing a tradition. Furthermore, he travelled in pursuit of expatriation and self-discovery, very much following his own concerns and appearing not to conform to the pre-ordained colonial mindset. The nature of some of his descriptions, however, can only be perceived by the modern-day reader as far from politically correct and often Eurocentric.

Raymond Bellour attempts to justify the insulting nature of some of these evocations in the following disappointing terms:

Directe et comme sans calcul, parfois triviale dans son expression, une telle vivacité a pu paraître insultante. Elle le serait si Michaux ne montrait une égale ou plus grande violence envers lui-même comme envers sa propre civilisation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Adelia V. Williams, *The Double Cipher: Encounter Between Word and Image in Bonnefoy, Tardieu and Michaux* (Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Paris, Vienna: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 144-45.

<sup>6</sup> Halpern, 'L'espace dans *Un barbare en Asie*', in *Quelques Orientes d'Henri Michaux*, pp. 53-86 (pp. 53-54).

<sup>7</sup> Bellour, 'Notice' to *Un Barbare en Asie, OC I*, pp. 1106-17 (p. 1110).

Bellour adds in a footnote that Michaux's statements in *Ecuador* are no less shocking:

Il suffit de se trouver dans une situation de conférencier à Quito pour se rendre compte de l'humiliation que ressentent encore aujourd'hui les Équatoriens face à certains passages d'*Ecuador*, en particulier touchant les Indiens et les Noirs ('Trapus, brachycéphales, à petits pas, / Lourdemment chargés marchent les Indiens dans cette ville', *OC I*, p. 153; 'Le nègre a dans la tête une étrange expression. Comme les oranges-outangs', *OC I*, p. 149).<sup>8</sup>

Michaux realised with the benefit of hindsight that his opinions and descriptions in *Un Barbare en Asie*, and in particular those related to Japan, were not always justified. He therefore added an apologetic preface, which affirms: '*Il date, ce livre. De l'époque à la fois engourdie et sous tension de ce continent; il date. De ma naïveté, de mon ignorance, de mon illusion de démystifier, il date.*'<sup>9</sup> He also talks about his experience in China in an interview, underlining the length of time it took him to come to terms with this discovery:

Il m'a suffi de voir l'air de la Chine pour avoir le coup de foudre. J'ai été extrêmement frappé par la Chine. Quelque chose m'était ouvert. Après une longue incubation, j'ai digéré cela. Le choc a été inversement proportionnel à la distance.<sup>10</sup>

Michaux continued to reflect on the Chinese signifying system for many years following his trip. This is corroborated by the long period over which his books containing graphic experimentation were published. Furthermore, there exists a notebook, which attests to Michaux's study of the Chinese language nearly forty years after his first trip there in 1932, perhaps in preparation for *Idéogrammes en Chine* (Fig. 18). In this notebook:

Michaux copied out, over thirty-seven pages, various sequences of ideograms, complete with explanatory comments, using a textbook written in English and designed for people studying Japanese, or more precisely, for people learning the simple Chinese characters (ideograms and pictograms)

<sup>8</sup> Bellour, 'Notice' to *Un Barbare en Asie*, *OC I*, p. 1110.

<sup>9</sup> Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie*, *OC I*, p. 279, Michaux's italics.

<sup>10</sup> Rey, *Henri Michaux*, p. 24.

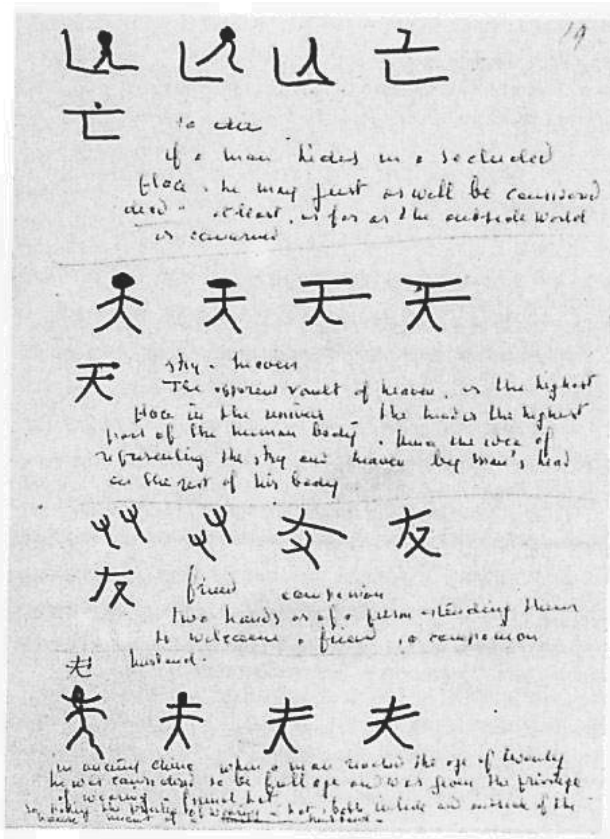


Fig. 18:

Page from Michaux's 1969 notebook recording his study of Chinese calligraphy © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007

used in Japanese. What's more, the Michaux archives contain a linguaphone with a Chinese workbook and records.<sup>11</sup>

Michaux's notes have been described as being clumsy and careless,<sup>12</sup> but what is most important in this context is that these notes actually exist. For they point to a continued interest in learning about the Oriental ideographic signifying system.

Some commentators have likened Michaux's *Un Barbare en Asie* to Roland Barthes's *L'Empire des signes* and it is true to say that both texts focus on a desire for self-knowledge through the exploration of another culture.<sup>13</sup> For our purposes, this comparison is relevant as it underlines both Barthes's and Michaux's fascination with the visual nature of Oriental signifying systems. It is not by chance that both writers described the Japanese custom of drawing a map rather than giving directions orally. Barthes describes this graphic process in the following terms:

On peut figurer l'adresse par un schéma d'orientation (dessiné ou imprimé), sorte de relevé géographique qui situe le domicile à partir d'un repère connu, une gare par exemple (les habitants excellent à ces dessins impromptus, où l'on voit s'ébaucher, à même un bout de papier, une rue, un immeuble, un canal, une voie ferrée, une enseigne, et qui font de l'échange des adresses une communication délicate, où reprend place une vie du corps, un art du geste graphique: il est toujours savoureux de voir quelqu'un écrire, à plus forte raison dessiner [...]).<sup>14</sup>

After a similar experience, Michaux describes how he is shocked to have discovered 'une civilisation du dessin et plus spécialement de la représentation par le graphisme'.<sup>15</sup> Many years later, in *Émergences-*

<sup>11</sup> Bellour, 'The Utopia of the Sign', p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> Bellour writes: 'L'originalité de l'Orient de Michaux, qui préfigure par exemple, le mouvement plus ténu que tracera, quarante ans plus tard, le Japon dans la vision de Barthes, est de fournir à la pensée un ébranlement attendu, qui permet avant tout à celui qui le vit de se décrocher de lui-même et de se retrouver ainsi, à jamais, autre.' Bellour, 'Notice' to *Un Barbare en Asie, OC I*, p. 1107. Adelia V. Williams states: 'Michaux's idea of the pleasure of the sign is identical to that of Roland Barthes in his semiological study, *L'Empire des signes*.' Williams, *The Double Cipher*, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>15</sup> Michaux, 'Japon 1929', in Michaux, *Parenthèse*, suivi de 'Faut-il vraiment une déclaration?' (Paris: L'Echoppe et la Maison des Amis des livres, Micheline Phan Kim, 1998), p. 26.

*Résurgences*, he continues to enthuse over this culture anchored in the visual when relating a historical anecdote about the meeting of Commodore Perry and the Japanese:

Après un court échange de vues officiel en un lieu préparé non loin du rivage, et sans avoir été autorisés à un contact plus ample, les Américains reprirent la mer, décidés à venir chercher la réponse au printemps suivant. Ils n'étaient pas encore partis que des estampes circulaient à Tokyo, proprement dessinées, montrant les étranges navires hauts sur l'eau, les mâts et leurs vergues, haubans et agrès, la cheminée, les canots au bordé impeccable, enfin les barbares eux-mêmes au long nez, officiers chamarrés et matelots roux et poilus.

Dans quel autre pays, pareille 'réception'?<sup>16</sup>

The Oriental culture therefore offers much to these two creators through its visual and gestural communication.

Michaux's initial writings about Asia are in fact less to do with Asia than with his own efforts to represent Asia, thus with his own conception of inner subjectivity and outer reality as well as his own fascination with their visually-anchored culture. This is why he remains the 'barbare' of the title. As Edward Said has argued:

Orientalism imposed limits upon thought about the Orient. Even the most imaginative writers of an age, men like Flaubert, Nerval, or Scott, were constrained in what they could either experience or say about the Orient. For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them').<sup>17</sup>

In seeking to escape the constraints of Western linguistic structures so as to express the 'espace du dedans', Michaux comes up against limits imposed by centuries of Orientalism, that is, an appropriation of Oriental culture to serve one's own purposes.

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<sup>16</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, pp. 547-48.

<sup>17</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 43.

### Michaux's Appropriation of Chinese Characters

The assimilation of the Chinese signifying system is clearly present in all of Michaux's books incorporating signs. As we have already mentioned in Chapter 1, the very layout of *Mouvements* mirrors that of the ancient Chinese text, *The Book of Changes*. Michaux's signs, like the Chinese writing system, are both writing and drawing. Their interdisciplinary nature emphasises the visual dimension of the written line and the signifying, communicative capabilities of the drawn line. This fascination with Chinese and Japanese calligraphic techniques to further the expressive possibilities of the line was relatively common amongst other Western artists in the 1950s, such as Georges Mathieu, Hans Hartung and Jackson Pollock.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the way in which Michaux composes his figures shows how he borrowed from this system. The art of calligraphy follows certain ancient rules that the calligrapher would not consider changing. For example, each line constituting a character has to be drawn in a certain order, which differs from Chinese to Japanese. As Henri-Alexis Baatsch suggests in *Henri Michaux: Peinture et Poésie*, Michaux adapted the calligraphic technique to his own purposes:

Michaux fait à la manière de la calligraphie, mais il n'est pas limité par le *genre* de la calligraphie. Il n'accepte pas purement et simplement des caractères déjà donnés que l'on interprète ensuite avec art, il se met devant la *nécessité* de créer des caractères. Soucieux d'exactitude, il se suppose comme tâche de créer une langue visuelle.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, for the first book incorporating signs, *Mouvements*, he drew his signs with a brush in true calligraphic style. This can be seen from photographs by Maurice Fourcade of Michaux working on the *Mouvements* series (Fig. 19).

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on this subject, see Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Henri-Alexis Baatsch, *Henri Michaux: Peinture et Poésie* (Paris: Hazan, 1993), p. 164, Baatsch's italics.



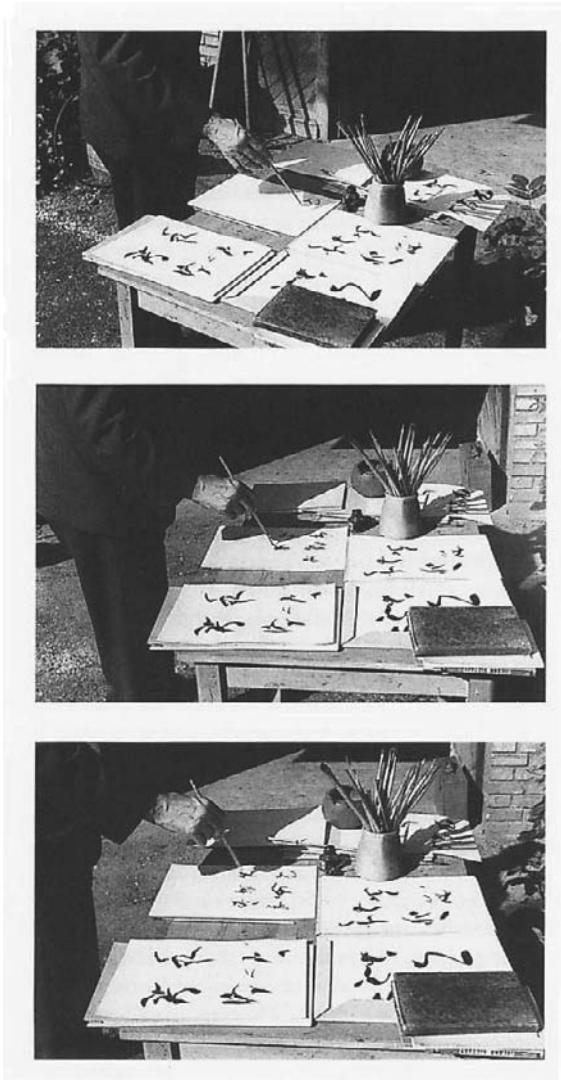


Fig. 19:  
Photographs of Michaux working on *Mouvements*  
(Maurice Fourcade, c. 1950)  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007

Léon L.-Y. Chang quotes Sou Che on this subject in *La Calligraphie chinoise: Un Art à quatre dimensions*:

Il n'y a pas de règle établie pour tenir un pinceau. L'essentiel est que la paume de la main soit bien creusée et les doigts rigides et fermes... Avant que la pointe ne touche le papier, le pinceau doit être tenu verticalement. Mais une fois que l'artiste a commencé son œuvre, il doit pouvoir permettre à son pinceau de s'incliner librement.<sup>20</sup>

The only rule for holding the brush is that the calligrapher's arm cannot lean on a support.<sup>21</sup> This implies a total physical and mental control, which in turn will reveal the artist's inner self. From the photographs, it is evident that Michaux has adhered to this calligraphic practice. And yet, as has been established, he soon abandoned the brush for the fibre-tipped pen in *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*. This implement makes the signs less fluid, but, from a practical point of view, the fibre-tipped pen dries more quickly than paint or Indian ink and so it would allow Michaux to alter and add to his figures faster than brush and ink where there would be a continued risk of smudging. Although Michaux's signs no longer appear to resemble Chinese characters composed in the calligraphic tradition, they still do in the gestural process of their composition and their final material appearance on the page.

This interest in calligraphy was also fuelled by Michaux's study of Oriental philosophies. Calligraphers were expected to nurture and maintain a high level of concentration and detachment, close to Zen meditation techniques, whilst composing their ideographic figures.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the very first line of *Tao-te-ching*, the principal text of Taoism by Lao-Tzu, reads 'The Tao that can be spoken is not

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<sup>20</sup> Léon L.-Y. Chang, *La Calligraphie chinoise: Un Art à quatre dimensions* (Paris: Le Club Français, 1971), pp. 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> This absence of support draws attention to a major difference between techniques in Western and Oriental art. Since the sixteenth century, following the introduction of oil painting, Western artists have used what is known as a mahlstick, a stick with a pad at one end, which the artist uses to steady the hand and keep it clear of the painting's surface. Although its usage is not so current in modern artistic practice, the mahlstick has a long association with oil painting and appears regularly in seventeenth-century portraits, for instance, Diego Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and Rembrandt's *Self Portrait* (1664). Jonathan Stephenson, 'Mahlstick', *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, ed. by L. Macy, <<http://www.groveart.com>>.

<sup>22</sup> See Baatsch, *Henri Michaux: Peinture et Poésie*, p. 119.

the true Tao.<sup>23</sup> It is an intangible concept that aims for a truth beyond expressive means and cannot be evoked using words. Tao is both being and becoming, the very notions that Michaux attempted to convey in his signs. Michaux was definitely familiar with this ancient text. He even used a quotation from it as an epigraph to *Un Barbare en Asie* which underlines his attention to the infinitely small detail: ‘Gouvernez l’empire comme vous cuirez un petit poisson.’<sup>24</sup> Later on in this text, he quotes the famous first line amongst others from the *Tao-te-ching*:

*Lao-tseu* est un homme qui sait. Il touche le fond. Il parle le langage de l’évidence. Néanmoins, il n’est pas compris. ‘Le *Tao* qui s’exprime en mots n’est pas le véritable *Tao*. Combien petit! Combien grand! Combien insondable!...

“Comment l’eau des fleuves fait-elle pour régner sur les torrents des hautes montagnes et les rivières?

“Parce qu’elle sait se tenir plus bas.”

‘Travaillez par l’inaction.

‘À l’inaction tout est possible...’<sup>25</sup>

The influence of Taoist thought on Michaux’s work becomes more evident when considering the notion of unity, which is based in Taoism on the balance between the receptive Yin and the active Yang. François Cheng quotes an important passage from Lao-Tzu in *Vide et plein*:

Le Tao d’origine engendre l’Un  
 L’Un engendre le Deux  
 Le Deux engendre le Trois  
 Le Trois produit les dix mille êtres  
 Les dix mille êtres s’adossent aux Yin

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<sup>23</sup> Cited in Caroline Douglas, ‘Henri Michaux: The Distant Interior’, in *Henri Michaux*, ed. by Anthony Spira (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1999), unpaginated. This text varies in translation, which underlines its hermetic nature, for example, one French translation is as follows: ‘La vérité que l’on peut exprimer / N’est pas la vérité absolue’, in Lao Tseu, *Tao Te King: Le Livre de la voie et de la vertu*, trans. by Ma Kou (Paris: Albin Michel, Collection ‘Spiritualités’, 1984), no. 1, unpaginated. Another translation by Liou Kia-hway differs dramatically: ‘Le Tao qu’on saurait exprimer / n’est pas le Tao de toujours.’ Lao Tseu, *Tao-tō king*, in *Philosophes taoïstes: Lao-tseu, Tchouang-tseu, Lie-tseu*, ed. by René Étiemble (Paris: Gallimard, Collection ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1980), pp. 1-84 (p. 3).

<sup>24</sup> Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie*, OC I, p. 278.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381, Michaux’s italics.

Et embrassent le Yang  
L'harmonie naît au souffle du Vide médian.<sup>26</sup>

This idea of 'dix mille êtres' seeking balance is echoed in the poetic text in *Mouvements*: 'Signes des dix mille façons d'être en équilibre dans ce monde mouvant qui se rit de l'adaptation',<sup>27</sup> highlighting a direct Taoist influence on Michaux and one of his major concerns: an equilibrium between multiplicity and unity.

In addition, when studying the contents page of *Par la voie des rythmes*, it soon becomes obvious that Michaux has borrowed the Chinese concept for signifying numbers (Fig. 7). He has used a single horizontal line to represent 'one', two horizontal lines for 'two', three horizontal lines for 'three', and so on, for the five different chapter headings. The Chinese writing system uses exactly the same horizontal lines up to the number three. Indeed, the whole signifying system is based on this single horizontal line:

Le premier idéogramme est fait d'un trait horizontal. Celui-ci, le plus important sans doute parmi les traits de base, peut être considéré comme le 'trait initial' de l'écriture chinoise. Son tracé, selon l'interprétation traditionnelle, est un acte qui sépare (et unit en même temps) le ciel et la terre. Aussi le caractère – veut-il dire à la fois 'un' et 'unité originelle'.<sup>28</sup>

If the double purpose of this horizontal line in the Chinese signifying system is examined using the semiotic paradigm set up by C. S. Peirce, it can be said to comply with his tripartite classification system for the sign. The horizontal line functions in both an iconic and an indexical manner in the Chinese language in that it signifies directly 'one', and is also the starting point for the entire Chinese signifying system. It also has a symbolic function because it is a linguistic sign, as Umberto Eco points out in *Le Signe*: '*Le Symbole*, enfin, est un

<sup>26</sup> Cheng, *Vide et plein*, p. 59. An example of another translation of this text: 'La voie engendre le un / Le un engendre le deux / Le deux engendre le trois / Trois engendre la multiplicité des êtres. / La multiplicité des êtres porte le yin / Et embrasse le yang. / Chaque être est le mélange engendré / Par ces deux forces', in Lao Tseu, *Tao Te King*, trans. by Ma Kou, no. 42. Kia-Hway translates this passage as: 'Le Tao engendre Un. / Un engendre Deux. / Deux engendre Trois. / Trois engendre tous les êtres. / Tout être porte sur son dos l'obscurité / et serre dans ses bras la lumière, / le souffle indifférencié constitue son harmonie', in *Philosophes taoïstes*, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 440.

<sup>28</sup> François Cheng, *L'Écriture poétique chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, Collection 'Points Essais', 1996), p. 13.

signe arbitraire, dont le rapport avec son objet est défini par une convention: l'exemple le plus frappant est celui du signe linguistique.<sup>29</sup> Michaux's borrowed system of horizontal lines, which signify numbers, emphasises yet again the notable influence of Chinese characters on his literary and artistic production and his preference for this writing system to Western models.

Around forty years after his journey to China, Michaux was still expressing his admiration for Chinese calligraphy in *Idéogrammes en Chine*. This text was written as a preface to Léon L.-Y. Chang's *La Calligraphie chinoise: Un Art à quatre dimensions*.<sup>30</sup> It includes examples of Chinese characters that inspired a commentary by Michaux on the process of formation of Chinese writing and its unique balance of completeness and incompleteness, of presence and absence and of representation and signification. There is no doubt that Michaux knew a lot about this culture. Bellour points out in his notes on Michaux's collaboration with the contemporary Chinese visual artist, Zao Wou-Ki, that for the latter:

Michaux est l'homme qui connaît la Chine et sa culture, et qui témoigne dans tout ce qu'il fait d'une capacité permanente de transition entre peinture et écriture, poésie et dessin. Il est 'un ami sacré [...] un des seuls qui comprennent vraiment le sentiment oriental.'<sup>31</sup>

And yet despite this extensive knowledge and sensitivity towards Chinese culture, Michaux was sometimes inaccurate. Étiemble proffers wise words when he mentions the poet and artist in his foreword to the Pléiade edition of Taoist philosophers:

Aussi devons-nous considérer avec admiration, mais prudence, ceux qui, sans être versés en chinois, vont affirmant tout de go que Lao-tseu 'ne dit chose qui ne soit claire, certaine': Michaux, par exemple. Plus sages, beaucoup plus, ceux qui savent assez bien le chinois pour oser se mesurer avec ce texte 'souvent obscur', comme le reconnaissent deux des plus

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<sup>29</sup> Umberto Eco, *Le Signe: Histoire et analyse d'un concept* (Brussels: Labor, 1988), p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Idéogrammes en Chine* was published in its own right in 1970 as a limited edition by the Club français du livre. Fata morgana saw the importance of this short text and published it again in 1975. Between then and now, fata morgana has also re-edited it in a different format and reprinted it numerous times.

<sup>31</sup> Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' for *Lecture de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki, OC II*, pp. 1142-46 (pp. 1145-46).

habiles traducteurs en ce siècle: le père Houang Kia-tcheng, et Pierre Leyris, qui s'associèrent pour produire leur *Tao-tō king*.<sup>32</sup>

Étiemble was very perceptive about the way in which some scholars had appropriated and adapted Chinese philosophy, in particular Taoism, to their own Western customs and ideologies. But above all, he was exceedingly wary of writers, like Michaux, who spoke knowledgeably on these texts without access to the originals. Lao-Tzu's text might appear beautifully simple, but, according to its translators, this apparent transparency could not be more misleading.

In an article published in the issue of *L'Esprit créateur* dedicated to Michaux in 1986, Richard Sieburth brings together the graphic experimentation of Michaux and the 'ideogrammic' research of the American poet, Ezra Pound.<sup>33</sup> Both poets appropriated ideographic writing systems on account of their potential to escape the traditions and conventions of the Western world, but they were also well aware of the profoundly traditional or archaic aspect of these writing systems for another civilisation. Parallels can be drawn between these investigations, joining the modern and the traditional, and Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, published in 1918. Apollinaire was interested in the pictorial aspect of the written word, but his attempts at amalgamating the visual and the verbal call on a tradition of figurative writing that can be traced back to ancient Greece, where it was considered a type of poetic and intellectual exercise.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Étiemble, 'Préface' to *Philosophes taoïstes*, p. XXXIII. We do not agree with Jérôme Roger when he writes: 'Cette captation de la langue chinoise justifie sans doute la place éminente qu'Étiemble accorde à Michaux dans son introduction aux *Philosophies taoïstes*: il serait, avec Queneau et Paulhan, l'un des très rares écrivains français à avoir "compris" de l'intérieur l'idiome ouvert du *Tchouang Tseu*', in Roger, *Henri Michaux: Poésie pour savoir* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2000), p. 311.

<sup>33</sup> 'Ideogrammic' is the adjective employed by Ezra Pound to determine his poetics. Cited in Richard Sieburth, 'Ideograms: Pound/Michaux', *L'Esprit créateur*, XXVI, 3, *Henri Michaux* (1986), 15-27 (p. 16). A slightly different version of this article has also been published in the catalogue for the exhibition of Michaux's drawings held at The Drawing Center in New York at the end of 2000. See Richard Sieburth, 'Signs in Action: The Ideograms of Ezra Pound and Henri Michaux', in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, pp. 207-16.

<sup>34</sup> For more information on this subject, see the article by Antoine Coron, 'Avant Apollinaire, vingt siècles de poèmes figurés', in the valuable catalogue for the exhibition held at the Vieille Charité in Marseilles on the interaction of poetry and the

Sieburth demonstrates how Michaux understood the evolution of the Chinese character as taking place over several stages. Michaux traces this progression in *Idéogrammes en Chine*. It starts with a close resemblance to its natural object. With time this resemblance lessens until the ideogram no longer directly evokes the object and has thus become destined for an educated elite. Then comes a period of etymological redefinition when the sign attempts to return to its natural source. This ultimately leads towards abstraction, which appears at first glance paradoxical in relation to the second stage of the development since the sense may elude the uninitiated reader even more. But in fact, this abstraction is the carrier of the physical gesture of drawing, where the sign rediscovers its natural origins. In this way, signs can now *signify* nature rather than just imitate it:

Ne plus imiter la nature. La signifier. Par des traits, des élans.  
 Ascèse de l'immédiat, de l'éclair.  
 Tels qu'ils sont actuellement, éloignés de leur mimétisme d'autrefois, les signes chinois ont la grâce de l'impatience, l'envol de la nature, sa diversité, sa façon inégalable de savoir se ployer, rebondir, se redresser.  
 Comme fait la nature, la langue en Chine propose à la vue, et ne décide pas.  
 [...]  
 Caractères ouverts sur plusieurs directions.  
 Équilibration.  
 [...]  
 La calligraphie, son rôle médiateur, et de communion, et de suspens.<sup>35</sup>

The first line of this quotation obviously contains the title of the fourth book incorporating signs, *Par des traits*, highlighting Michaux's continued interest in the line as a means of direct expression. The process evoked in *Idéogrammes en Chine* does not signify a distancing from the outside world but rather another way of perceiving it, a kind of distillation of the essence, free from the conventions of figurative representation.

At this point, a useful parallel can be drawn between the evolution of the Chinese character away from mimesis and the reflections of Michel Leiris on the works of Joan Miró. In an attempt to understand the childlike and primitive nature of Miró's compositions, Leiris calls on a technique used by Tibetan ascetics in

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visual arts, *Poésure et Peintrie: D'un art, l'autre* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1993), pp. 24-45.

<sup>35</sup> Michaux, *Idéogrammes en Chine, OC III*, p. 843.

order to attain 'la *compréhension du vide*'.<sup>36</sup> This consists of observing a scene, in Leiris's text, a garden (a particularly pertinent example, we shall see, in this context for its relationship to nature), and taking note of every single detail until this scene is perfectly engraved on one's mind, even with one's eyes shut. Once this stage has been reached:

Il s'agit de soustraire un à un tous les éléments qui composent le jardin, sans que l'image perde en rien de sa force, ni qu'elle cesse, si faiblement que ce soit, de vous halluciner. [...] Mais c'est alors qu'il faut que sol et ciel disparaissent eux aussi, le ciel d'abord, abandonnant le sol à un terrible soliloque, puis ce dernier lui-même, qui ne laisse place à rien, ultime absence permettant à l'esprit de réellement voir et contempler le *vide*.<sup>37</sup>

Now that the mind is totally empty, one has to reconstruct the scene, blade of grass by blade of grass, detail by detail, until the image of the garden is once more complete. This process of progressive destruction followed by gradual reconstruction is repeated and accelerated until one has 'acquis l'entière compréhension du vide physique, première étape vers la compréhension du véritable vide, - celle du vide moral et métaphysique'.<sup>38</sup> As François Cheng points out when considering the Taoist conception of painting:

C'est seulement lorsque l'artiste possède la vision et les détails du monde extérieur qu'il commence à peindre. L'exécution, instantanée et rythmique, devient alors une projection à la fois des figures du Réel et du monde intérieur de l'artiste. C'est dans ce sens que Shih-t'ao, en parlant du Trait unique, dit qu'il est le trait d'union entre l'esprit de l'homme et l'univers; le Trait, tout en révélant les pulsions irrésistibles de l'homme, reste fidèle au Réel.<sup>39</sup>

This conflation of inner and outer perception produces a clearer image that is able to render both the reality of exterior objects and the artist's inner pulse through the drawn line. Leiris believes that Miró:

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Leiris, 'Joan Miró', in Michel Leiris, *Brisées* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Folio/Essais', 1992), pp. 38-44 (p. 39), Leiris's italics. This article was first published in *Documents*, Vol. I, 5 (1929), pp. 263-69.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40, Leiris's emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> Cheng, *Vide et plein*, p. 77.



[...] a dû réaliser un vide bien complet en lui pour retrouver une pareille enfance, à la fois si sérieuse et si bouffonne, brochée d'une mythologie si primitive, reposant sur les métamorphoses des pierres, des plantes, des animaux, un peu comme dans les contes des peuplades sauvages, où tous les éléments du globe traversent de si invraisemblables avatars.<sup>40</sup>

This idea of 'peuplades sauvages' evoked in Miró's paintings reminds the reader of the imaginary tribes and races that Michaux creates, for example, in *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*. Moreover, the humanoid figures or insect-like creations that fill the books incorporating signs also allude to both primitive and childlike creation.

According to Sieburth, Ezra Pound had contemplated translating *Idéogrammes en Chine* later on in his life but, after several failed attempts, this task had instead fallen into the hands of another American poet, Gustaf Sobin. Interestingly, this translation was published in 1984 and marketed as a complement to Ernest Fenollosa's and Ezra Pound's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. This latter text was first published by Pound, who was responsible for editing the original manuscripts, which he had received from Fenollosa's widow in 1913, in four instalments in the *Little Review* from September to December 1919. This text by Fenollosa was of seminal importance for Pound. Not only did he edit, annotate and publish it but his involvement with it also served to nourish his own conception of poetics, which derived from the ideas presented by Fenollosa and resulted ultimately in the monumental *Cantos*. As Laszlo Géfin has pointed out in his chapter devoted to Fenollosa in *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method*, this essay was much appreciated by some,<sup>41</sup> whilst others have been pleased to '[...] discredit Fenollosa's aesthetics and Pound's subsequent ideogrammic method, or at least to show that the method is based on false assumptions and deficient scholarship.'<sup>42</sup> It has been suggested that Michaux would have been familiar with Fenollosa's ideas, as the French translation by Georgette Camille was published in October

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<sup>40</sup> Leiris, 'Joan Miró', pp. 40-41.

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Kenner underlines its importance in *The Pound Era* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 137.

<sup>42</sup> Laszlo Géfin, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 24.

1937 in *Mesures*, a review on whose editorial board Michaux sat around this time.<sup>43</sup>

*The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* is both an informative and a beautifully written text, although it is difficult to say how much this owes to Pound's input. It formulates Fenollosa's opinion that Chinese was the perfect natural language, a common sinologist's theory since the seventeenth century, as it was thought to represent the visible hieroglyphs of nature itself rather than speech:

Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. In the algebraic figure and in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method follows natural suggestion.<sup>44</sup>

Pound followed Fenollosa's reasoning that the meaning of individual Chinese characters was visibly created by the composition and juxtaposition of their graphic components. As Sieburth has pointed out, Fenollosa's 'picture theory of Chinese'<sup>45</sup> was ultimately concerned with how groups of signs function together in the process of signification. He was interested in the constantly moving dimension of nature:

A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things, and so the Chinese conception tends to represent them.<sup>46</sup>

According to Fenollosa, Chinese characters recreate this motion and process through their visual materiality. This idea is closely linked to Pound's attempts, with the famous and hermetic *Cantos*, to create action poems that aim to express their own creative process, in other

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<sup>43</sup> See Jérôme Roger, 'L'Idéogramme dans la phrase', in *Quelques Orient d'Henri Michaux*, pp. 191-228 (p. 208), or Jérôme Roger, 'Henri Michaux: Malaise dans la pensée', in *Henri Michaux, le corps de la pensée*, pp. 55-67 (p. 64).

<sup>44</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (Washington: Square Dollar Series, no date), pp. 53-96 (p. 58).

<sup>45</sup> Sieburth, 'Ideograms: Pound/Michaux', p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, p. 60.

words, the poem in the making, in progress. Artists involved in Action Painting, the expression coined by Harold Rosenberg for the paintings of Jackson Pollock and some of his contemporaries, were preoccupied with this same notion of expressing the process of making art in the physical line of a painting. It is at this point that Michaux's aims converge with those of Fenollosa, Pound and the exponents of Action Painting, for he considered gesture to be central to his visual and verbal experimentation. According to Michaux, the wandering line, through its physiological genesis, that is, its links with the movements of both the body and the mind, was able to reflect the dynamism of the inner self.

Although it is impossible to assert categorically whether Michaux had or had not read Fenollosa's essay, Sieburth has no qualms about stating at the beginning of his article:

Pound, Eisenstein, Michaux – a critical ideogram comprised of three names working in three different media, here assembled merely to indicate the extent to which the Chinese character, from the time of Leibniz all the way up to Sollers, has tended to speak primarily to Western *eyes* (and this despite the fact that 90% of Chinese characters are in fact *phonetic* compounds).<sup>47</sup>

Sieburth makes the important point that Chinese characters are regarded as being essentially visual from a Western point of view when, in fact, only ten per cent of these characters represent reality through a purely visual signifying process. Many artists, writers and scholars, such as Fenollosa, refused to acknowledge this. The majority of signs actually consist of visual compounds made up of a root that gives the meaning and another element that alludes to the pronunciation of the word. This is not, however, as simple as it may at first appear. Emilio Alarcos Llorach corroborates the fact that ninety per cent of Chinese characters contain elements that relate to both their meaning and their pronunciation. But he goes on to state that:

En fait, au cours de leur longue histoire, les éléments phonétiques de ces graphèmes ont souvent cessé de se référer au son, par suite de l'évolution de la prononciation; et ils sont redevenus de simples idéogrammes.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Sieburth, 'Ideogram: Pound/Michaux', p. 18, Sieburth's emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> Emilio Alarcos Llorach, 'Les Représentations graphiques du langage', in *Le Langage*, ed. by André Martinet (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Encyclopédie de la Pléiade', 1987), pp. 513-68 (p. 528).

Alarcos Llorach concludes that the Chinese writing system remains basically ideographic.

An ideal ideographic system would represent each component of a sentence differently and therefore contain an infinite number of signs, much like Michaux's glyphs, as not one sign in the four books containing this experimentation is ever repeated. From a pragmatic point of view, this is obviously impossible to achieve in a language because of the considerable problem of memorisation.<sup>49</sup> It is for this reason that all languages are schematised and based on convention. Likewise, the Chinese language is represented by a highly formalised sign system. Michaux, unlike Fenollosa, was fully aware of this conventional aspect, which he expresses in the following terms in *Saisir*:

Mais autrement que dans les langues d'avant l'écriture où, peut-être pour des raisons de commodité, les idéogrammes et pictogrammes sont généralement statiques, au contenu, au rendu statique, de façon à pouvoir être recopié couramment par n'importe qui, à n'importe quel moment, sans nécessiter un élan spécial.<sup>50</sup>

And yet, a link with nature is still maintained through an understanding of the evolution of the visual aspect of the signs. It has, however, already been suggested in relation to the abstraction of Chinese characters evoked by Michaux in *Idéogrammes en Chine* that only a highly educated elite would be aware of this evolution, rather like Latin and Greek etymology in the West. Indeed, the Chinese writing system still tends towards an ideographic system as many thousands of characters are in everyday use. The characters may sometimes allude to the phonetic expression of an object through the use of homophones, but this is nearly always in juxtaposition with other phonic or visual elements in order to evoke the meaning. This

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<sup>49</sup> It is for this reason that calling Chinese characters 'ideograms' complicates matters further for they do not function in a purely ideographic fashion. Viviane Alleton states: 'Le terme encore le plus couramment employé de nos jours pour désigner les caractères chinois est *idéogramme*. Or une telle appellation ne peut qu'engendrer des confusions. Elle semble indiquer que les graphies chinoises évoquent directement des idées. En fait, on ne connaît aucune écriture d'une langue naturelle qui réponde à cette définition.' *L'Écriture chinoise* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, Collection 'Que sais-je?', 1977), p. 7, Alleton's emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 962.

would imply that the Chinese writing system is in fact composed of characters that contain both phonetic and ideographic elements.

Consequently, analogies can be formed between the reflections of Michaux, Fenollosa and Pound on the Chinese character. It is clear that the role of nature in this writing system, and especially in the limited number of simple ideographic characters, is highly significant as well as an idea of language in progress, reflecting the perpetual motion of nature. Michaux is, nonetheless, ultimately concerned with problems of signification rather than representation. The signifying function of these signs rather than their purely visual aspect points to his major concern. It can thus be suggested that Michaux's use of graphic signs, although without doubt inspired by the Chinese writing system, aspires to an even purer form of ideography, which is inconceivable in conventional linguistic terms.

The direct, signifying aspect of the Chinese writing system was not the only element that appealed to Michaux, and, in *Un Barbare en Asie*, he also expressed his admiration for the sonority of Chinese dialects, once again establishing correlations with nature and the referential world in general:

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.

Enfin, pour être encore plus près de la nature, cette langue est chantée. Il y a quatre tons en langue mandarine, huit dans les dialectes du Sud de la Chine. Rien de la monotonie des autres langues. Avec le chinois, on monte, on descend, on remonte, on est à mi-chemin, on s'élançe.<sup>51</sup>

The belief that the Chinese language is monosyllabic is also based on a misunderstanding. Whilst it is true to say that every Chinese syllable contains a meaning, it must be remembered that this syllable does not coincide with the Western concept of the word.<sup>52</sup> The major structural

<sup>51</sup> Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie*, OC I, p. 361.

<sup>52</sup> 'The close correspondence of the syllable to the morpheme is the sense in which Chinese is a monosyllabic language. Every syllable is not what we would call a word – if that were taken as the criterion of monosyllabism, we would be hard-pressed to find any monosyllabic languages at all in the world. But because every syllable usually means something, the label "monosyllabic" can indeed be a useful way to describe Chinese.' S. Robert Ramsey, *The Languages of China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 60.

differences between these two signifying systems have led to some confused, false generalisations as it is very difficult to describe a system that is not composed of the same components as one's own.

According to Hugh Kenner, Pound omitted the few comments that Fenollosa made about the sonority of the Chinese language when editing *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. Nevertheless, when this text was reprinted in 1936, Pound shows a more developed understanding of the value of sound in a 'terminal note':

Whatever a few of us learned from Fenollosa twenty years ago, the whole Occident is still in crass ignorance of the Chinese art of verbal sonority. I now doubt if it was inferior to the Greek. Our poets being slovenly, ignorant of music, and earless, it is useless to blame professors for squalor.<sup>53</sup>

Michaux's own experimentation with graphic signs does not contain any indicators as to how to pronounce a certain sign and we can assume that they were supposed to be 'read', rather than contemplated like a painting, because of their publication in book form. This absence of phonetic markers could be because they also pin down meaning, trapping the reader in a text bound to conventions and in the need to memorise the meaning of a sign.

Dong Qiang analyses the influences as well as the references that Michaux used when writing *Idéogrammes en Chine* in 'Acérer la plume "lacérer le vide": Une lecture d'*Idéogrammes en Chine*', an article published in the issue of *Littérature* dedicated to Michaux.<sup>54</sup> Ernest Fenollosa is not mentioned. Qiang shows how Michaux made extensive use of Léon Wieger's work on this subject published in 1963, entitled *Caractères chinois: Étymologie. Graphes, lexiques*, through the repetition of the term 'caractère chinois' and certain illustrations that were borrowed from this book. He also points to some weaknesses in Michaux's text if taken as an objective account of the evolution of Chinese characters:

Il est pourtant significatif que le texte qui veut suivre l'évolution de l'art calligraphique chinois n'est pas accompagné par des calligraphies prises

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<sup>53</sup> Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, p. 83.

<sup>54</sup> Bellour's thorough and insightful notes to *Idéogrammes en Chine* (*OC III*, pp. 1654-70) contain a fascinating analysis of Michaux's use of the colour red in this text by Yolaine Escande.

dans un bon ordre historique, chronologique: les styles dits archaïques sont placés parfois après les styles plus tardifs. Les pages blanches, là où il y aurait dû avoir une illustration, en disent long: l'œuvre calligraphique est un point de départ pour la méditation et n'est en aucun cas une obligation. Les critères de choix sont d'ailleurs aléatoires: autant certaines calligraphies sont reconnues, célèbres, réputées comme des chefs-d'œuvre, autant d'autres sont médiocres, peu représentatives de l'art calligraphique chinois.<sup>55</sup>

In this quotation, Qiang comments on how *Idéogrammes en Chine* highlights Michaux's appropriation of Chinese culture. The order of the calligraphic illustrations shows that he has disregarded any notion of chronology although he respects this in his written text. The earlier illustrations are abstract, whilst the characters that follow are more figurative, which, according to Michaux's verbal account of the development of the Chinese character, means that they are more ancient and should logically come first. This subjective order could be said, on the one hand, to emphasise Michaux's preference for abstraction and more recent non-figurative forms. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as an attempt at disrupting the historical chronology of the formation of Chinese writing. Qiang affirms that *Idéogrammes en Chine* is not strictly about the evolution of Chinese characters; these characters instead provide an inspirational yet arbitrary starting point for Michaux's own reflection on this theme. He compares it to another text by Michaux entitled *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques* in which Michaux takes several paintings by René Magritte and, rather than writing about them objectively, turns them into his own fictional narratives.<sup>56</sup>

Qiang also suggests the influence of Xu Shen's *L'Écriture c'est comme*, which describes the history of Chinese writing that Michaux evokes in his text. He also points out the way in which these ideographic signs, which appear abstract, function through a series of comparisons or similes, expanding on the ideas explored by Xu Shen:

C'est avec ce détachement que les traits obtiennent leur indépendance et leur *matérialité* car grâce à leurs propriétés (rythme, lié/délié, courbé/droit, foncé/clair, épais/mince, etc.), le monde matériel réapparaît, *appelé* par une

<sup>55</sup> Dong Qiang, 'Acérer la plume "lacérer le vide": Une lecture d'*Idéogrammes en Chine*', in *Littérature*, 115, *Henri Michaux* (September 1999), 55-69 (p. 56).

<sup>56</sup> Michaux, *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, *OC III*, pp. 693-716.

série de ‘comme’: tel trait est *comme* un animal, tel trait est *comme* un épi, un ensemble de traits est *comme* un paysage de printemps, etc.<sup>57</sup>

The immaterial becomes material in the physicality of the Chinese character through a comparative process by association, which can be likened to Fenollosa’s idea of the metaphorical juxtaposition between the visual elements of a sign or a compound creating meaning.<sup>58</sup>

From the development described in *Idéogrammes en Chine*, it is apparent that the link between signs and nature was primordial for Michaux. The Chinese writing system has its own grammar and syntax, but these may appear non-existent to the Western eye as the two respective systems follow very different rules.<sup>59</sup> The importance of the link between nature and signs is underlined in ‘Signes’:

Toute la nature est signes, signes sur signes, macle de signes. C’est pourquoi elle est si difficilement, si lentement déchiffrable, et pareillement les hommes, jusqu’à pouvoir sans cesse se mystifier eux-mêmes et leurs semblables.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout *Paix dans les brisements*, Michaux extols the virtues of the Chinese writing system and its proximity to nature especially in relation to the Oriental book form, the scroll:

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<sup>57</sup> Qiang, ‘Acérer la plume “lâcérer le vide”’: Une lecture d’*Idéogrammes en Chine*, p. 60, Qiang’s emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> This idea is underlined by Géfin, making reference to Pound’s poem from 1913, ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (‘The apparition of these faces in a crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough.’), which was directly inspired by the Japanese poetic form, the haiku: ‘The image interprets; it does not interpose or encroach. In the “Metro” poem, the apparition of faces *is not* a black bough with petals. In the ideogrammic composition the mind *re-creates*, or rather *creates*, in accordance with nature’s processes; it tries not to “break the universe”.’ Géfin, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method*, p. 21, Géfin’s italics.

<sup>59</sup> ‘When people say that Chinese has no grammar, they usually mean that it is not inflected for case, number, person, tense, and so forth. But inflection is not the only kind of grammar. The parts of Chinese are put together in a fashion every bit as orderly as that of any other language. Sound units are combined to make morphemes; these form words; and words are carefully ordered to make meaningful utterances. That is to say, Chinese does have grammar. This grammar is very different from that of languages with what is traditionally called inflection.’ Ramsey, *The Languages of China*, p. 57.

<sup>60</sup> Michaux, *Signes, OC II*, p. 429.



Les Chinois, qui eurent pendant longtemps une inclination, un vrai génie de la modestie pour imiter la nature, suivre le sens, l'allure des phénomènes naturels et leur rester conjoints en sympathie par une sorte d'intelligence poétique, ont, à l'inverse de presque tous les autres peuples de cette terre, conçu et utilisé une écriture qui suit la pensée de haut en bas suivant son débouché naturel.<sup>61</sup>

Michaux realises that man has become accustomed to living in a world made up of signs and constantly having to interpret them in order to assess situations. The reductive nature of words and language, however, signifies an inability to interpret and understand these signs correctly.

This preoccupation with nature and origin is present from the beginning of Michaux's textual and artistic production. In the account of his journey in *Ecuador*, which oscillates between poetry and prose, he writes:

Semblable à la nature, semblable à la nature, semblable à la nature,  
A la nature, à la nature, à la nature,  
Semblable au duvet,  
Semblable à la pensée,  
Et semblable aussi en quelque manière au globe de la terre,  
Semblable à l'erreur, à la douceur et à la cruauté,  
A ce qui n'est pas vrai, n'arrête pas, à la tête d'un clou enfoncé,  
[...]  
Semblable à moi enfin,  
Et plus encore à ce qui n'est pas moi.<sup>62</sup>

The repetition of 'semblable' and 'nature' in this stanza draws attention to two major concerns from the outset of Michaux's literary and artistic career. He attempts to remain close to nature, but he abhors the concept of mimesis proposed by traditional Western art. He is instead seduced by the signifying capacity offered by ideographic languages, and, in particular, Chinese. Moreover, Michaux's adaptation of the Chinese signifying system to suit his own needs draws attention to a desire for a return to the gestural in order to explore reality without being encumbered by the fixed dimension of Western languages with their rigid, logical constructs of syntax and grammar.

<sup>61</sup> Michaux, *Paix dans les brisements*, OC II, p. 997.

<sup>62</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, OC I, pp. 204-05.

### Traces of Western Culture

Although a resemblance to Chinese calligraphy is evident in Michaux's books incorporating graphic signs, they cannot by definition exist in a hermetic, mono-cultural environment. They retain some traces of Western culture. Indeed, it must be remembered that this was their intended audience. Links have already been suggested with, on the one hand, Georges Bataille and his notions of 'informe' and 'altération', and, on the other hand, with the Informal artists, many of whom were also interested in Asian art and philosophy. Analogies can also be made with Victor Hugo's ink blots and perhaps with the techniques of surrealist automatism:

It was André Breton who, in the twenties, coined the phrase *Rêves d'encre* to make it the title of his first published tachist book made up of random splashes of ink. But this very phrase, *dreams of ink*, was certainly inspired by Victor Hugo's poetic description of his own abstract inkblots as *soleils d'encre*. Concerning Hugo's work, there is no doubt that many of the half-abstract blots and stains, as well as the other random drawings he produced with the help of 'spiritist' techniques, are related to dreams and to his endeavour to reach the depths of the oneiric world.<sup>63</sup>

Although accurate when considering Hugo in this quotation, Claude Gandelman appears to have made a mistake by attributing *Rêves d'encre* to André Breton.<sup>64</sup> The author of this strange text was in fact the editor, José Corti. *Rêves d'encres* contains twenty-five ink drawings by the latter with texts on these drawings by Paul Eluard, René Char, Julien Gracq and Gaston Bachelard.<sup>65</sup> The drawings consist of formless blobs produced in ink and were composed by Corti as a reaction to his son's death in the Second World War.

Parallels can also be drawn between Michaux's signs and the Rorschach test, which became fashionable in the 1940s in Saint Germain des Prés. Michaux was aware of this psychodiagnostic test

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<sup>63</sup> Claude Gandelman, 'The Artist as "Traumarbeiter": On Sketches of Dreams by Marcel Proust', in *Yale French Studies*, 84, *Boundaries: Writing and Drawing*, 118-135 (p. 122).

<sup>64</sup> See Michael Sheringham, *André Breton: A Bibliography* (London: Grant & Cutler, Collection 'Research bibliographies & checklists', 1972); Elza Adamowicz, *André Breton: a Bibliography (1972-1989)*, Supplement no. 1 to the former bibliography (London: Grant & Cutler, Collection 'Research bibliographies & checklists', 1992).

<sup>65</sup> José Corti, *Rêves d'encre* (Paris: José Corti, 1945).

depending on the interpretation of ink blots, invented in 1921 by the Swiss psychiatrist, Hermann Rorschach. He even mentions this technique when describing his struggle with the interpretation of his so-called ‘taches’:

Telles quelles, elles me sont odieuses et vraiment seulement des taches, qui ne me disent rien. (Je n’ai jamais pu lire quoi que ce soit dans un ‘Rorschach’.) Donc je me bats avec elles, je les fouette [...].<sup>66</sup>

Another Western influence can be discerned in Michaux’s ‘Aventures de lignes’. In this text, Michaux reflects upon Klee’s pictures composed of lines and considers their relationship to nature, in this case, referred to as Mother Earth:

On peut les suivre mal ou bien, sans jamais risquer d’être conduit à l’éloquence, toujours évitée, toujours évité le spectaculaire, toujours dans la construction, toujours dans le prolétariat des humbles constituants de ce monde.

Sœurs des taches, de ses taches qui paraissent encore maculatrices, venues du fond, du fond d’où il revient pour y retourner, au lieu du secret, dans le ventre humide de la Terre-Mère.<sup>67</sup>

According to Michaux, the lines in Klee’s work also symbolise a return to nature, to one’s origins. And indeed, Klee, like Michaux, placed great importance on the role of nature in art: ‘Le dialogue avec la nature reste pour l’artiste condition *sine qua non*. L’artiste est homme, il est lui-même nature, morceau de nature dans l’aire de la nature.’<sup>68</sup> This statement does not mean that a work of art should necessarily resemble an object from nature. Klee believed that it should instead represent the inner and the outer world as well as its own genesis. Klee’s sinuous lines function in a similar fashion to both the Chinese signifying system and Michaux’s own artistic output.

Michaux greatly admired Klee’s visual production. As we have seen, he is one of only three visual artists cited in *Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d’existence* as having introduced a surprised Michaux to the joys of non-figurative art. It can also be deduced from ‘Aventures de lignes’ that he was familiar with

<sup>66</sup> Michaux, ‘[Faut-il vraiment une déclaration?]', *OC II*, p. 1030.

<sup>67</sup> Michaux, ‘Aventures de lignes’, *Passages, OC II*, pp. 360-63 (pp. 362-63).

<sup>68</sup> Paul Klee, ‘Voies diverses dans l’étude de la nature’, in Klee, *Théorie de l’art moderne*, pp. 43-47 (p. 43).

Klee's theoretical writings too. Indeed, he quotes directly and accurately from a translation of Klee's *De l'art moderne*: 'Quel artiste ne voudrait s'établir là, où le centre organique de tout mouvement dans l'espace et le temps – qu'il s'appelle cerveau ou cœur de la Création – détermine toutes les fonctions?'<sup>69</sup> In his notes to the second volume of Michaux's collected works, Bellour indicates how Michaux's 'Aventures de lignes' was in fact inspired by 'Esquisses pédagogiques' in which Klee 'y décompte différents types de lignes: actives, passives, secondaires, intermédiaires, etc., dont il donne en chaque cas un schéma dessiné, selon une véritable géométrisation des qualités imaginaires.'<sup>70</sup> In 'Aventures de lignes', Michaux enumerates in turn wandering, travelling, penetrating, allusive and repetitive lines with regard to Klee's visual output.

Christian Dotremont, a member of the CoBra group,<sup>71</sup> carried out apparently similar experiments to Michaux's *Mouvements* series in the 1970s with Indian ink, calling them 'logogrammes', 'typogrammes' or 'gaëligrammes' (Fig. 20). Other members of CoBra, such as Asger Jorn, Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel and Corneille, also explored the possibilities of calligraphy. Alechinsky incorporated calligraphic forms into many of his works, often mixing them with decipherable text and images, pointing to the desire for a new form of interdisciplinary expression. This interface between different media, particularly the visual and the verbal, characterises much of the work of the CoBra group.

We are fortunate enough to have a witness to Michaux's reaction to Dotremont's 'logogrammes'. Pierre Alechinsky relates the following:

En 1978, gravissant l'escalier quatre à quatre, s'ouvrant la porte, Michaux marchant à moi: 'C'est un traquenard, Alechinsky, vous l'avez fait exprès, m'inviter à cette exposition. Je ne veux aucun fils.' Mais il était arrivé tard, la galerie déjà fermée; dans la demi-obscurité il n'avait dû apercevoir de

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<sup>69</sup> Michaux, 'Aventures de lignes', *OC II*, p. 360. In the current revised translation, this quotation is as follows: 'Ce lieu où l'organe central de tout mouvement dans l'espace et le temps – qu'on l'appelle cœur ou cerveau de la création – anime toutes les fonctions, qui ne voudrait y établir son séjour comme artiste?', in Klee, 'De l'art moderne', in Klee, *Théorie de l'art moderne*, pp. 15-33 (p. 30).

<sup>70</sup> Bellour, 'Notes et variantes' to *Passages*, *OC II*, pp. 1166-99 (p. 1191).

<sup>71</sup> The name 'CoBra' comes from the combination of the first letters of the three capital cities in which this artistic tendency was born: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam.

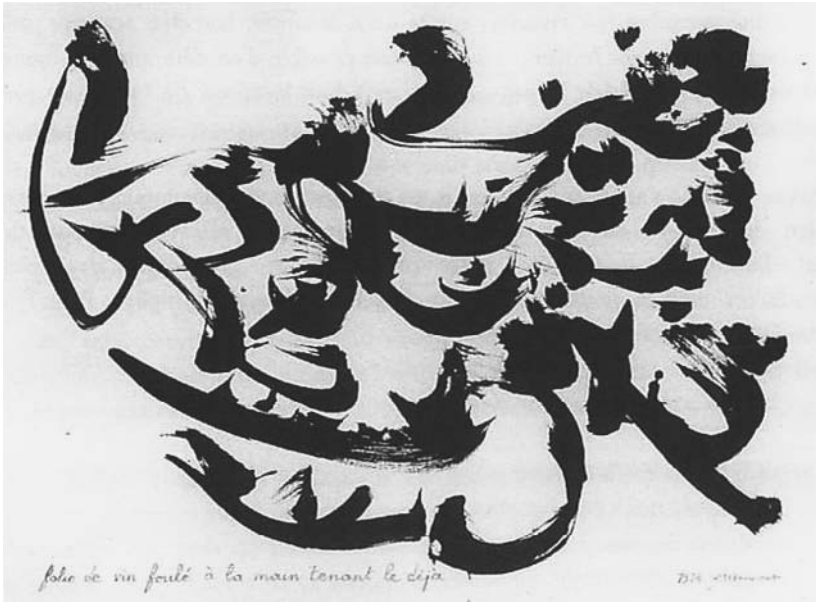


Fig. 20:  
Christian Dotremont, *Folie de vin foulé à la main tenant le déjà*, 1974  
(Indian ink and black lead on paper, 56 x 76 cm)  
© DACS, London 2007

Dotremont que des rubans d'encre sur écrans de papier. Traits, taches et vivacités proches... 'sans que vous ayez pu par la porte vitrée distinguer leurs transcriptions minuscules, d'un crayon calme, dominé, chaque image ou plutôt chaque mot d'abord illisible offrant à tous les coups du pinceau son texte réel'. L'avais-je rassuré? Sourire.  
'Des logogrammes? Alors c'est autre chose. Il écrit, lui.'<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, Dotremont's 'logogrammes', unlike Michaux's signs, always contain a line of text or a few words at the bottom of the page, for example, 'Folie de vin foulé à la main tenant le déjà' (Fig. 20). These constitute a type of title that orients the spectator's interpretation. Although Michaux's books made up of signs do contain text, they are not linked in the same manner. The texts rather evoke how the signs came into being and what they aim to do. They are mostly kept very separate from the signs because of the material layout of the book. Furthermore, Dotremont's 'logogrammes' are not systematised on the page. In fact, they may be closer to Michaux's larger Indian ink paintings which are clearly not as structured as *Mouvements*, for example. These paintings still, however, appear to have some horizontal organisation, and, more importantly, the physical gesture remains central to their dynamic aspect. Dotremont's 'logogrammes' and Michaux's signs are both influenced by calligraphic forms. Furthermore, speed, movement and spontaneity are paramount to both of these artists' creative activities.

From Chinese calligraphy to Dotremont's 'logogrammes', Michaux's alphabets and signs can be described as a meeting-point for Eastern and Western cultures. Barthes introduces the term 'intertexte' when examining Masson's semiographic output which, like Michaux's signs, can be situated in between different cultural practices:

Tout d'abord, Masson établit délibérément ce qu'on appelle un *intertexte* : le peintre circule entre deux textes (au moins): d'une part le sien (disons: celui de la peinture, de ses pratiques, de ses gestes, de ses instruments) et d'autre part celui de l'idéographie chinoise (c'est-à-dire d'une culture localisée): comme il se doit dans toute inter-textualité véritable, les signes asiatiques ne sont pas des modèles inspireurs, des 'sources', mais des conducteurs d'énergie graphique, des citations déformées, repérables selon le trait, non selon la lettre; ce qui se déplace dès lors, c'est la responsabilité de l'œuvre : elle n'est plus consacrée par une propriété étroite (celle de son

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<sup>72</sup> Alechinsky, 'En manque d'Henri Michaux', p. 97.

créateur immédiat), elle voyage dans un espace culturel qui est ouvert, sans limites, sans cloisons, sans hiérarchies.<sup>73</sup>

This idea of an intertext, which is applicable when evoking Michaux's signs in relation to his appropriation of Chinese characters, opens the original text to a much wider receptive process. Some contemporary visual artists are still carrying out experimentation that appears to be in a similar interstitial vein. For example, Pierrette Bloch fills pages with small, sharp, repetitive blobs much like those contained in *Par la voie des rythmes* and *Par des traits*.<sup>74</sup>

Steeped in the traditions of the Chinese signifying system, Michaux uses this knowledge freely in order to render a form that combines drawing and writing. Rather than a mere return to the gestural trace, Michaux's experimentation with signs expresses the rhythm and movement of the thought process as well as the gestural operation that has produced it. The examination of the ideographic nature of these signs leads to an important paradox and the shattering of a received idea, for the Chinese writing system no longer functions ideographically. The majority of the characters in fact contain phonetic elements. Michaux's signs can be described as ideographic as not one sign is the same; each component is represented differently. But, this infinite number of signs, added to the absence of any phonetic markers, means that they cannot be used to communicate. Many other Western artists and writers, with no knowledge of Mandarin or other languages used in China, were still fascinated by the formal aesthetic qualities of Chinese calligraphy. The same goes for Michaux's signs: even though the full semantic content of the sign cannot be derived, the image can still be appreciated. This understanding of Michaux's assimilation of the Chinese signifying system paves the way for the next chapter, which will examine in greater detail gestural and corporeal expression in his signs.

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<sup>73</sup> Barthes, 'Sémiographie d'André Masson', pp. 142-43, Barthes's italics.

<sup>74</sup> See *Pierrette Bloch: dessins, encres et collages*, ed. by Gilles Fage et Laurence Barbier (Grenoble and Paris: Musée de Grenoble & Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1999).

## Chapter 4

### Writing/Drawing Movement and the Body

The title of *Mouvements*, with its intriguing footnote in *Face aux verrous* reminding the reader that this is an ‘écrit sur des signes représentant des mouvements’, points to one of the main *raisons d’être* of the signs. This footnote does not appear in the first two editions of *Mouvements*, and was added to *Face aux verrous* in 1954 when the signs and the postface, which assist in orienting the reader’s interpretation of the signs, were removed. The idea of movement plays a major role in the titles of many of Michaux’s texts, for example, *La Nuit remue*, *Passages*, *L’Infini turbulent*, *Parcours* and *Déplacements, dégagements*. As has already been argued, all four of the texts containing signs have titles that are linked to movement, emphasising the dynamic aim of Michaux’s experimentation with signs. Indeed, the idea of movement is central to Michaux’s creative impetus, be it in visual arts, music or literature: ‘J’écris pour me parcourir. Peindre, composer, écrire: me parcourir. Là est l’aventure d’être en vie.’<sup>1</sup> This dynamism is inextricably linked to Michaux’s conception of life and expression in general.

From a general viewpoint, Michaux’s experimentation with neologisms, non-figurative art and mind-altering drugs, to name but a few, indicates that he was far from satisfied with conventional imitative means of representing external phenomena or mental states. A text in prose from the section ‘Difficultés’ in *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur* underlines Michaux’s fascination with the rapidity and dynamism of the thought process through its very title: ‘Mouvements de l’être intérieur’. The differing speeds of this movement are also brought to the fore in this text:

Comme un cil pointant au bord d’une paupière y est mieux à sa place qu’au bout d’un nez, la vélocité est à sa place dans l’être intérieur. Elle y est plus naturelle que dans la patte d’une tortue atteinte de paralysie. [...] L’être

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<sup>1</sup> Michaux, ‘Observations’, *Passages*, *OC II*, p. 345.



intérieur à tous les mouvements, il se lance à une vitesse de flèche, il rentre ensuite comme une taupe, il a d'infinies hibernations de marmotte. Quel être mouvementé!<sup>2</sup>

Michaux's signs are composed with the aim of rendering these different movements, as connoted by the title of the first book incorporating signs, in a visual form contained in a literary space.

Michaux's glyphic marks can be situated between two extreme poles of the writing spectrum. At one pole, there exist signs, letters and characters whose legibility depends upon adherence to conventions, for example, a typewritten business letter or a sonnet. The other pole consists of illegible gestural traces such as the marks made in caves by prehistoric man or Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. Michaux's rows of dancing and fighting figures succeed in referring overtly to both the conventions of Western writing systems as well as their gestural nature. Indeed, he aims to extricate his figures from conventional writing systems through the speed and dynamism of the gesture. In 1954, in 'Signes', he calls them:

[...] des gestes, les gestes intérieurs, ceux pour lesquels nous n'avons pas de membres mais des envies de membres, des tensions, des élans et tout cela en cordes vivantes, jamais épaisses, jamais grosses de chair ou fermées de peau. [...] C'étaient des mouvements.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Michaux's appropriation of Chinese characters and his interest in primitive forms of expression take account of the body as a vehicle for the mind. Roland Barthes declared in his essay on Masson:

La vérité de l'écriture n'est ni dans ses messages, ni dans le système de transmission qu'elle constitue pour le sens courant (...), mais dans la main qui appuie, trace et se conduit, c'est-à-dire dans *le corps qui bat* (qui jouit).<sup>4</sup>

The strong presence and influence of ideographic characters in the figures and signs of artists such as Masson and Michaux bear witness to the possibility of rendering the dynamics of the body, and the thought process that is embedded physiologically in this movement, in

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<sup>2</sup> Michaux, 'Mouvements de l'être intérieur', *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur*, *OCI*, pp. 620-21.

<sup>3</sup> Michaux, *Signes*, p. 431.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, 'Sémiographie d'André Masson', p. 143, Barthes's italics.

the fixed line of a page or canvas. This in turn underlines the importance of the physical dimension of the writing process.

The gestural aspect of the line, implicit in Chinese characters, is of utmost importance to Michaux's aim of capturing and rendering the dynamism of the inner self. In the previous chapter, the way in which Michaux strove to realise this objective by borrowing certain calligraphic techniques from the Chinese signifying system was analysed. In this chapter, corporeal presence and movement will be examined in greater detail. It has already been suggested, when studying the mescaline experiments, that Michaux had no hesitations in using his own body as a site of experimentation. Indeed, repeated unconscious allusions are made to the outer human form in much of Michaux's visual output, but the main aim of his experimentation with signs is in fact to render the immaterial inner self in a universal graphic form. He attempts to go beyond the gestural in order to find a form of expression unencumbered by linguistic and societal conventions, which could go some way towards explaining the influence of children's and primitive creation on his signs.

Movement and spontaneity are obviously vital to the functioning of Michaux's signs. And yet, in *Mouvements*, much is made of the fact that these signs are often produced when Michaux is tired. Fatigue is an underestimated physical and mental state in a modern society obsessed with efficiency, and this surprising interaction of movement and fatigue in Michaux's graphic signs will be studied in order to underline its creative nature. Michaux's desire for a prelinguistic state can appear at first glance similar to the surrealist aim of expressing the unconscious in automatic writing. There are definite similarities to be established between their respective influences and concerns, but we shall see how Michaux was critical of surrealist automatic creation due, in part, to what he considered to be an absence of physical materiality in the latter's verbal production.

### Corporeal Presence

The presence of corporeal movement in the line is highlighted playfully by Michaux in his signs, as many of them resemble human figures in action. Michaux describes these enigmatic glyphs in the text in verse in *Mouvements* as ‘homme’:

Homme arc-bouté  
 homme au bond  
 homme dévalant  
 homme pour l’opération éclair.<sup>5</sup>

This word is repeated throughout the text, thus reassuring the reader in his interpretation of the signs as simplistic drawings of human figures, echoing primitive or childlike attempts at representation. Roger Cardinal states in his review of the exhibition of a selection of calligraphic works, watercolours and mescaline drawings by Michaux, which took place at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 1999:

By half-closing one’s eyes, one can make out a whole team of archers, skiers, dancers, gymnasts, high-divers, high-kickers and swaggerers, whereupon these uncaptioned and irresponsible ‘movements’ become recognizably human.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, this constant allusion to the human figure in his signs demonstrates Michaux’s ‘solidarité avec l’espèce humaine’.<sup>7</sup> In ‘Idées de traverse’, he even suggested a new term to describe a certain unity between human beings, which could only take place when faced with a common enemy:

Pour la paix des hommes, qu’on leur trouve un ennemi!  
 Supposons cet ennemi. Par l’effet du danger commun, les querelles interhumaines disparaissent et surgit un sentiment exaltant, dépassant le patriotique ou le racique: l’Hommisme.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 436.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Cardinal, ‘The sage of disintegration’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 March 1999, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Entretien avec Robert Bréchon’, OC III, p. 1462.

<sup>8</sup> Michaux, ‘Idées de traverse’, *Passages*, OC II, pp. 283-98 (p. 294).

Anne Brun sees these constant references to ‘homme’ in *Mouvements* as allusions to Michaux’s bisexual fantasy and his identification with both men and women.<sup>9</sup> And indeed, several of Michaux’s poems are written in the first or third person singular with a feminine agreement, for example, *La Ralentie* and *Je vous écris d’un pays lointain*.<sup>10</sup> This adoption of a feminine voice is only surprising, however, if we make a rigid equation between the writer and his narrative voice. Michaux, as an artist and writer, is perfectly entitled to adopt whatever persona he wants, in the first or third person. Although the repetition of the word ‘homme’ in *Mouvements* suggests the depiction of the male form, the accompanying graphic signs can only be described as androgynous. They cannot be said to be male or female, much like the wash drawings by Apel les Fenosa, which intersperse Bernard Noël’s and Bernard Vargaftig’s texts in *Suite Fenosa*.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis remains on the human form in general rather than in the representation of either sex. In this respect, ‘homme’ is also quite simply a way of

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<sup>9</sup> Brun analyses a passage from *L’Infini turbulent* in which Michaux, under the influence of mescaline, exchanges identities with a woman in a photograph (*L’Infini turbulent*, OC II, pp. 878-89): ‘En fait, cette identification à une femme met en évidence des motions pulsionnelles contradictoires, que Michaux relie à des traits masculins ou féminins, voués semble-t-il, à une impossible coexistence. Le féminin se constitue comme l’envers ou le négatif du vécu sensoriel masculin qu’il annule; ainsi, Michaux oppose perte d’énergie, goût du laisser-aller, de l’abandon, de la dissolution dans un élément liquide, besoin de séduction passive, à la vitalité, à l’énergie galvanisée de l’élan, de la tension; de même, il oppose les sensations douces et lisses fantasmées comme féminines au mordant d’un homme hérissé de piquants. Il est tout à fait frappant de constater que Michaux en revient ainsi aux premières différenciations établies par l’enfant à partir de son vécu corporel. Cette double polarité se retrouve à l’œuvre dans maints poèmes de Michaux et dans ses créatures imaginaires explicitement liées à une identification sexuée: par exemple, le poème *Mouvements* fait écho à la représentation du masculin dans cet extrait de *L’Infini turbulent*.’ Brun, *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné*, p. 266.

<sup>10</sup> Both texts are in *Plume précédé de Lointain Intérieur*; Michaux, *La Ralentie*, OC I, pp. 573-80; Michaux, *Je vous écris d’un pays lointain*, OC I, pp. 590-95. Anne-Élisabeth Halpern presented a paper on this subject at the Colloque de Cerisy devoted to Michaux in the summer of 1999. See Halpern, ‘Elles parlent d’un pays lointain’, in *Henri Michaux est-il seul?: Cahiers Bleus*, 13, pp. 57-63.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Noël and Bernard Vargaftig, *Suite Fenosa* (Marseille: Ryôan-ji, 1987). Michaux and Apel les Fenosa apparently knew each other: ‘Apel les Fenosa, un sculpteur catalan, a réalisé cette année-là [1949] une tête en bronze de Michaux. Selon la veuve du sculpteur, il se seraient rencontrés chez Supervielle avant 1929, puis se seraient perdus de vue, et retrouvés par hasard sur les Champs-Élysées.’ Bellour and Tran, ‘Chronologie’, OC II, p. XXIV.

distinguishing the human from other species, as Michaux writes: ‘le fait que nous soyons hommes et non gazelles.’<sup>12</sup>

It is also significant that Michaux’s artistic creation, be it painting or drawing, often contains emerging humanoid figures or faces. In ‘Signes’, Michaux describes his own signs as men dancing, metamorphosed into all forms of nature - crayfish, demons, spiders and snakes: ‘Leur danse faisait l’homme-écrevisse, l’homme-démon, l’homme-araignée, l’homme dépassé, cent mains, cent serpents lui sortant de tous ses côtés en fureur’.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in *Émergences-Résurgences*, Michaux also makes the link between his signs and the human form from a representational perspective ‘du type homme’:

Signes revenus, pas les mêmes, plus du tout ce que je voulais faire et pas non plus en vue d’une langue – sortant tous du type homme, où jambes ou bras et buste peuvent manquer, mais homme par sa dynamique intérieure, tordu, explosé, que je soumets (ou ressens soumis) à des torsions et des étirements, à des expansions en tous sens.<sup>14</sup>

In this quotation, he emphasises an innovative, rhythmic viewpoint, underlining once more his desire to render man’s inner movement. The visual artist, Francis Bacon, who was obsessed with recording and recreating the human form, states that Michaux’s paintings:

[...] have always been about delayed ways of remaking the human image, through a mark which is totally outside an illustrational mark, but yet always conveys you back to the human image – a human image generally

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Entretien avec Robert Bréchon’, *OC III*, p. 1462.

<sup>13</sup> Michaux, *Signes*, *OC II*, p. 431. This idea of metamorphosis is reminiscent of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*, 1916), in which the main character is transformed into a giant insect. Furthermore, many epic works, dating from Antiquity, for example, Ovid’s famous fifteen book-long poetic work composed in hexameters, are entitled *Metamorphoses* and deal with the transformation of men into animals, trees and other diverse objects. It should be mentioned that Michaux is often compared to Kafka. Bellour writes in his introduction to the first volume of Michaux’s collected works, p. XXVI: ‘C’est la première fois que l’importance et la qualité propre d’un “poète” sont mesurées aussi massivement à l’aide de comparaisons empruntées à l’art de la grande prose, classique et moderne. De Kafka (le plus souvent cité) à Swift, de Montesquieu à Rabelais, de La Rochefoucauld à Musil, la liste est longue.’

<sup>14</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, *OC III*, p. 580.

dragging and trudging through deep ploughed fields, or something like that. They are about these images moving and falling and so on.<sup>15</sup>

Bacon owned one of Michaux's large Indian ink paintings, but this comment is easily applied to the pages filled with anthropomorphic figures in *Mouvements* and the other books containing signs.

Michaux even admits that faces appear on the paper as soon as he starts drawing or painting:

Dessinez sans intention particulière, griffonnez machinalement, il apparaît presque toujours sur le papier des visages.

Menant une excessive vie faciale, on est aussi dans une perpétuelle fièvre de visages.

Dès que je prends un crayon, un pinceau, il m'en vient sur le papier l'un après l'autre dix, quinze, vingt. Et sauvages la plupart.<sup>16</sup>

Michaux battles with these faces, as he has already done with the written word, for they are a corporeal constraint because of their social and identifying capacity. Nathalie Roelens examines the use of the face in Michaux's work, relating it to Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concept of 'visagéité':

En malmenant le visage, Michaux dénonce la 'machine abstraite de visagéité', selon le concept de Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, qui 'surcode' la tête avec un visage, qui visagéifie le corps physique et social, une machine despotique qui épingle, identifie, produit des visages conformes et écarte les déviances. [...] Aussi incitent-ils précisément à échapper au visage, à le défaire, à le libérer du joug des significations et des subjectivations imposées. De façon analogue, Michaux déplore le fait qu'on ait toujours privilégié la tête par rapport aux autres parties du corps, qu'on l'ait toujours considérée comme sommet de l'être, comme l'endroit où l'on préfère se tenir.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), pp. 61-63.

<sup>16</sup> Michaux, 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture', *OC II*, p. 320. Johanna Buisson underlines the importance of the face in Michaux's poetry: 'If we try to locate a central area in this kingdom of dispersion and circulation that is the body in Michaux's poetry, we find ourselves driven towards the head, or the face, or the eye, or the mouth', in 'The Search for a Centre: the Mouth as a Crossroads between Body and Poetry in the Poetry of Henri Michaux', in *Corporeal Practices: (Re)figuring the Body in French Studies*, ed. by Julia Prest & Hannah Thompson (Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Paris, Vienna: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 121-34 (p. 128).

<sup>17</sup> Nathalie Roelens, 'Henri Michaux à visage découvert', in *Henri Michaux est-il seul?: Cahiers Bleus* 13, pp. 89-101 (p. 89).

Roelens's analysis implies that the face is yet another constraint from which Michaux wished to escape.

In the first volume of his study on cinema concerned with image and movement, Deleuze expands on this idea, identifying three major functions of the face:

D'ordinaire, on reconnaît au visage trois fonctions: il est individuant (il distingue ou caractérise chacun), il est socialisant (il manifeste un rôle social), il est relationnel ou communicant (il assure non seulement la communication entre deux personnes, mais aussi, dans une même personne, l'accord intérieur entre son caractère et son rôle).<sup>18</sup>

According to Deleuze, as soon as a face is in a close-up shot, it instantaneously loses these three functions. Roelens, in turn, shows how cinematographic use of the close-up has radically transformed modern representations of the face in both twentieth-century literature and art:

La déconstruction du visage au vingtième siècle est impensable sans sa saisie en gros plan, sans ce grossissement, garant de sa *déterritorialisation* irréversible. La mutation vers l'affect pur et l'impersonnel en est un des effets majeurs.<sup>19</sup>

Michaux's portraits, produced unconsciously, avoid all social and communicative constraints and instead remind us of the ghost-like or inhuman qualities of the close-up as evoked by Deleuze:

Le gros plan, c'est le visage, mais précisément le visage en tant qu'il a défait sa triple fonction. Nudité du visage plus grande que celle des corps, inhumanité plus grande que celle des bêtes. [...] Mais, plus encore, le gros plan fait du visage un fantôme, et le livre aux fantômes.<sup>20</sup>

Several close-up shots of big toes and an open mouth by J. A. Boiffard in *Documents* emphasise the depersonalising effect of this technique, as the viewer can hardly imagine that these monstrous images could

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1: L'Image-mouvement* (Paris: Minuit, Collection 'Critique', 1983), p. 141.

<sup>19</sup> Nathalie Roelens, 'Écrire le visage: Michaux, Blanchot, Klossowski, Genet', *Word & Image*, Vol. 15, 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1999), 309-22 (p. 311), Roelens's italics.

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze, *Cinéma 1: L'Image-mouvement*, p. 141.

form part of our bodies.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, if Michaux's portraits and experimentation with signs are interpreted as a destruction or dissection, rather than an emergence, of the human form, their proximity to Bataille's notion of 'altération', which is defined by Georges Didi-Huberman as 'le processus par lequel *une forme est rendue autre* – déformée, vouée, fût-ce pour un instant seulement, à la décomposition, à l'informe',<sup>22</sup> should be reiterated.

In the poetic text in *Mouvements*, Michaux continues his reflection on the human figure and the body and it soon becomes obvious that he is attempting to evoke, using the corporeal form, the movements of sounds and physical states that are generally considered intangible:

Au vacarme  
 au rugissement, si l'on donnait un corps...  
 [...]  
 à la soif  
 à la soif surtout  
 à la soif jamais étanchée  
 si l'on donnait un corps...<sup>23</sup>

Michaux makes the tension rise throughout the stanza, which emphasises the impossibility of the creator's task, as the reader realises that noise or physical needs cannot be represented or signified visually. This tension comes to the fore in the repetition and extension of the line 'à la soif'. But this explosion is quelled, this desperate thirst quenched, in the last line with the repetition of the suggestion put forward in the second line, 'si l'on donnait un corps'.

'Mouvements' is also a recurrent word in the poetic text and echoes the title and Michaux's aim of representing the mobile nature of the thought process:

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<sup>21</sup> Three photographs of big toes by J. A. Boiffard accompany Bataille's article, 'Le gros orteil', in *Documents*, Vol. I, 6 (1929), pp. 297-302. Boiffard's photograph of the open mouth illustrates Bataille's dictionary entry for mouth in *Documents*, Vol. II, 5 (1930) (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), p. 298. Bataille believed the form of a big toe to be less monstrous than an open mouth: 'La forme du gros orteil n'est cependant pas spécifiquement monstrueuse: en cela il est différent d'autres parties du corps, l'intérieur d'une bouche grande ouverte par exemple.' 'Le gros orteil', p. 302.

<sup>22</sup> Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le Gai Savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, p. 269.

<sup>23</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements, OC II*, p. 437.



Mouvements d'écartèlement et d'exaspération intérieure plus que  
 mouvements de la marche  
 mouvements d'explosion, de refus, d'étirement en tous sens  
 [...]  
 Mouvements sans tête  
 À quoi bon la tête quand on est débordé?  
 Mouvements des replis et des enroulements sur soi-même  
 et des boucliers intérieurs

mouvements à jets multiples  
 mouvements à la place d'autres mouvements  
 qu'on ne peut montrer, mais qui habitent l'esprit.<sup>24</sup>

This repetition gives an internal rhythm to the text based around the soft sounds of the bilabial nasal phoneme, 'm', and the labio-dental fricative phoneme, 'v', which are placed in juxtaposition to the violent images of 'mouvements' being described. The explosive, aggressive and multiple nature of the 'mouvements' that come from within is needed to escape the uniform 'mouvements de la marche' where a conventional exterior order is followed. These images appear to evoke the signs, these anthropomorphic figures that inhabit the book's unnumbered pages, battling against the linear organisation in which they are trapped. In *Émergences-Résurgences*, Michaux comments on the liberating aspect of this movement in relation to his signs:

Je vois surtout leur mouvement. Je suis de ceux qui aiment le mouvement, le mouvement qui rompt l'inertie, qui embrouille les lignes, qui défait les alignements, me débarrasse des constructions. Mouvement, comme désobéissance, comme remaniement.<sup>25</sup>

His graphic signs could therefore be seen as a dynamic reshaping of conventional writing systems.

Visual analogies have been made by some commentators between the figures from *Mouvements* and 'cariotypes' from Jérôme Lejeune's early research on trisomy-21, the most common form of Down's syndrome, which also dates from the beginning of the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> This also alludes to Michaux's fascination with scientific and

<sup>24</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 438.

<sup>25</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 595.

<sup>26</sup> See *Plume*, 11, *Bulletin de la Société des Lecteurs d'Henri Michaux*, ed. by Anne-Élisabeth Halpern, (Paris: Findakly, September 1996), p. 15.

medical developments, which has already been briefly examined in Chapter 1. Halpern states on this subject:

Nombre de ces dessins s'apparentent, du fait de leur tracé souvent schématique, on l'a vu, à des représentations scientifiques. Mais la différence radicale entre les dessins scientifiques et ceux de Michaux tient au dynamisme de ces derniers, l'interaction entre les figures, autant que leur juxtaposition, entraînant le regard et produisant ce continuum que rêve d'atteindre le peintre.<sup>27</sup>

Michaux's enigmatic figures differentiate themselves from these scientific drawings through their continuous, pulsating movement.

'Gestes' is another word that is often repeated in *Mouvements*, drawing attention to the gestural dimension of writing that Michaux aimed to convey in his signs, and linking the written word to the body through movement:

Gestes  
gestes de la vie ignorée  
[...]  
Gestes du défi et de la riposte  
et de l'évasion hors des goulots d'étranglement  
Gestes de dépassement  
du dépassement  
surtout du dépassement  
(*pré-gestes* en soi, beaucoup plus grands que le geste, visible et pratique qui va suivre).<sup>28</sup>

The idea of a '*pré-geste*' is introduced in brackets as if an afterthought at the end of this stanza that has provided many variations on the '*geste*'. It is highlighted typographically through its italicisation, and is crucial when considering the creation of Michaux's signs. The '*pré-geste*' constitutes the state before the realisation of any notion of linguistic construct, before grammatical and syntactical constraints are learnt or imposed, even before the gesture. The child who has not yet learnt to speak could be said to use the pregestural and the gestural for communicative purposes. Prehistoric man used '*pré-gestes*' to leave abstract signs and marks in Palaeolithic caves in an initial attempt at communication and representation of a culture, before any language systems, as they are recognised today, had been invented. Some of

<sup>27</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 349.

<sup>28</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements, OC II*, p. 439.

Michaux's signs could be said to resemble the human and animal representations in cave paintings (Fig. 21): for example, Roger Cardinal compares the figures in *Mouvements* to 'the preliterate motifs in Neolithic petroglyphs'.<sup>29</sup>

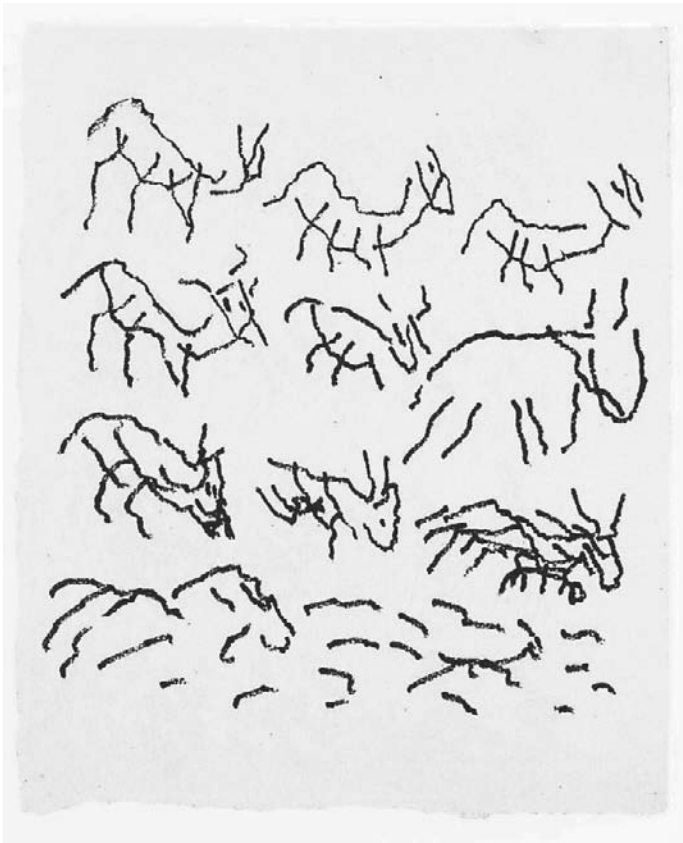


Fig. 21:  
Original drawing for *Par la voie des rythmes, OC III*, p. 804  
(Ink on paper, fibre-tipped pen, 32.5 x 26 cm)  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007

<sup>29</sup> Cardinal, 'The sage of disintegration', p. 18.

### A Return to Childlike and Primitive Creation

The 1950s witnessed an unmistakably nostalgic interest in childlike and primitive forms of expression, which was shared by many artists, and was directly inspired by the agenda set out by the Surrealists, the experimentation of visual artists such as Miró and the writings of Bataille. The latter agrees with M. G. H. Luquet's assertion in *L'Art primitif* that drawings by children and primitive art present similar characteristics:

En près de deux cents pages, M. Luquet accumule un nombre considérable d'exemples, empruntés aux arts des enfants ou des peuples sauvages, aux arts dits populaires (imageries d'Epinal, graffiti, etc.), parfois même aux arts préhistoriques. Il montre ainsi que ces différentes catégories d'art ont des traits communs tels que représentation de deux yeux ou de deux oreilles dans un profil, déplacement des pattes, des cornes ou des oreilles en largeur, transparence de la mer, d'une maison ou d'un œuf, laissant voir à l'intérieur les poissons, les habitants ou l'oiseau, groupement dynamique dans une représentation figurée d'éléments qui représentent une succession dans le temps.<sup>30</sup>

In order to examine Luquet's observations, Bataille makes reference to children's graffiti in Abyssinia, inserting several examples collected by Marcel Griaule as part of an ethnographic study as well as watercolours by André Masson's nine year-old daughter, Lili, into his review article. This study of children's and prehistoric man's creation is closely linked to the aims of *Documents*, which include a reassessment of primitive expression from an ethnographic point of view, and is present in the very title of this avant-garde journal, *Documents: Doctrines, Archéologie, Beaux-Arts, Ethnographie*. Denis Hollier states on this subject:

Chacune renvoie à un domaine indépendant: l'ethnographie échappe géographiquement et l'archéologie historiquement à la tutelle des beaux-arts. Mais cette relativisation des valeurs esthétiques occidentales s'aggrave d'une relativisation encore plus radicale, celle des valeurs esthétiques en tant que telles. C'est elle qui marque le choix du terme ethnographie de préférence à l'expression d'arts primitifs. Il a valeur de manifeste: il affiche

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<sup>30</sup> Bataille, 'L'Art primitif', p. 391.

que *Documents* n'est pas une autre *Gazette des beaux-arts*, et surtout pas une *Gazette des beaux-arts primitifs*.<sup>31</sup>

Bataille argues for a reevaluation of the opposition between fine art and so-called primitive art, calling into question the ways in which works of art are judged from aesthetic and utilitarian points of view.

Jean Dubuffet, along with members of the CoBra group, was also sensitive to the creative activities pursued by children. Although disliking both children and their drawings, he appreciated their mindset when creating:

Donc les dessins d'enfant, d'une façon générale, j'y donne peu d'attention, je les trouve très faibles. Mais je trouve que la position d'esprit dans laquelle un enfant dessine est bonne. Et ce que j'aimerais, ce que je souhaiterais, ce que peut-être j'ai recherché dans mon art, c'est de faire des peintures ou des dessins, des œuvres d'art qui soient faites par un homme adulte, un homme fait, et qui cependant conservent les qualités de liberté et d'invention que les enfants mettent en œuvre dans les leurs.<sup>32</sup>

Michaux wrote specifically about children's unique perception of reality in 'Principes d'enfant' from *Qui je fus*, published in 1927, 'Enfants' from *Passages*, first published in 1938 and *Les Commencements: Dessins d'enfants, Essais d'enfants*, published in 1983, these dates revealing a life-long interest in the subject. 'Principes d'enfants' consists of a series of maxims supposedly told from a child's point of view whilst *Les Commencements: Dessins d'enfants, Essais d'enfants* describes a child's first attempts at representing the inner and outer world through drawing and painting. Both Michaux and Dubuffet admired the spontaneous and inventive creativity of children's drawings that they believed an adult was no longer capable of expressing:

Spontanément, non comme une recette d'atelier, les enfants, traducteurs d'espaces, montrent ce qu'avec bonheur on retrouve, la *coexistence du vu et*

<sup>31</sup> Denis Hollier, 'La valeur d'usage de l'impossible', in *Documents*, Vol. I, (1929), pp. VII – XXIV (p. VIII). In this preface, Hollier also underlines the similarities between Bataille's and Walter Benjamin's ideas on the unique presence, the 'aura', of a work of art and its links to an original context.

<sup>32</sup> 'Quelques propos sur la peinture: Conversation avec Jean Dubuffet, Jean Amrouche, Georges Limbour et René de Solier, 1954', in Dubuffet, *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, Vol. IV, pp. 9-18 (p. 12).

*du conçu*, qui a lieu en tout cerveau qui évoque. On commence par là. C'est l'enfant et non l'homme fait, qui ici est fidèle à la réalité.<sup>33</sup>

According to them, this spontaneity was equalled by the vibrant vitality of children's creation:

Il ne rend plus un visage ni ne l'évoque, il répand un visage et ce faisant répand un monde. Visage dilaté, béat ou rayonnant, comme il n'en fera plus un pareil plus tard, exprimant sans vergogne son plaisir, y compris celui de sa santé, de sa vitalité débordante, étant à l'âge où on n'a pas honte de montrer son plaisir.<sup>34</sup>

In 'Enfants', Michaux makes a direct link between children's first attempts at expression and the utopia of an ideographic language:

Première tête dessinée par l'enfant, si légère, d'une si fine charpente! Quatre menus fils, un trait qui ailleurs sera jambe ou bras ou mât de navire, ovale qui est bouche comme œil, et ce signe, c'est la tentative la plus jeune et la plus vieille de l'humanité, celle d'une langue idéographique, la seule langue vraiment universelle que chaque enfant partout réinvente.<sup>35</sup>

He goes on to express his very pessimistic view of adult life: 'Adulte – achevé – mort: nuances d'un même état. On a jeté ses atouts.'<sup>36</sup> The adult, burdened by various responsibilities, has forgotten his childhood and the freedom of expression that once prevailed, unencumbered by the rules, codes and conventions of adult communication and expression.

At this point, a parallel can be drawn with the ideas of William Blake, the visionary poet and artist, who believed that the innocence of children was the ultimate state of perfection, which was tainted forever by the experience of adulthood. This juxtaposition is exemplified by his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, a book containing poems accompanied by fifty-four of his etched and coloured plates. Poems included in the first section, *Songs of Innocence*, are generally of a positive nature, singing the joys and innocence of childhood, for example, in 'Nurse's Song':

<sup>33</sup> Michaux, *Essais d'enfants, Dessins d'enfants*, in *Déplacements, dégagements*, OC III, pp. 1327-41 (p. 1337), Michaux's italics.

<sup>34</sup> Michaux, *Essais d'enfants, Dessins d'enfants*, pp. 1338-39.

<sup>35</sup> Michaux, 'Enfants', *Passages*, OC II, pp. 301-03 (p. 302).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
 And laughing is heard on the hill,  
 My heart is at rest within my breast  
 And every thing else is still

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down  
 And the dews of night arise  
 Come come leave off play, and let us away  
 Till the morning appears in the skies.<sup>37</sup>

The poem continues with the children's indignant refusal to stop playing until darkness falls, which they are allowed to do by the nurse. In *Songs of Experience*, the atmosphere evoked by Blake changes dramatically. The tone becomes much more violent, tolling the bells of doom and despair. In the corresponding poem, 'NURSES Song', the opening verses of each stanza remain the same. Each poem is reminiscent of nursery rhymes in terms of form and yet, in *Songs of Experience*, there is no longer any mention of children leaping, shouting and laughing. Instead they are told: 'Your spring & your day, are wasted in play',<sup>38</sup> by the nurse whose 'face turns green and pale',<sup>39</sup> when she remembers her childhood. This poem could be said to be a parody of the happy irresponsibility of childhood evoked in 'Nurse's Song', and the difference is emphasised by the typographical form of the title. The transformation in tone is also present in the engraved plates: for example, in *Songs of Experience*, the adults are bowed down under the weight of experience. This correlation between Michaux and Blake clearly indicates that exploration of a childlike state of mind in the work of writers and artists of the twentieth century was by no means a new or modern concern.<sup>40</sup>

When Michaux first turned to painting, he expressed his surprise at regaining a childlike outlook of the world:

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<sup>37</sup> William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 7-32 (p. 15).

<sup>38</sup> Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> William Blake was born in 1757 and died in 1827.

Étrange émotion. On retrouve le monde par une autre fenêtre. Comme un enfant, il faut apprendre à marcher. On ne sait rien. On bourdonne de questions. On essaie constamment de deviner... de prévoir...<sup>41</sup>

The word *enfant* has its etymological origins in the Latin word *infans*, which means not yet able to speak.<sup>42</sup> Thus, to encourage a return to an innocent childlike state is to favour an existence free from the restricting codes of spoken and written communication enforced by adult civilisation. In 'Aventures de lignes', Michaux makes a comparison between the travelling lines in Klee's visual compositions and children's drawings, referring to the use of arrows:

Les voyageuses, celles qui font non pas tant des objets que des trajets, des parcours. (Il y mettait même des flèches.) Ce problème des enfants qu'ils oublient ensuite, qu'ils mettent à cet âge dans tous leurs dessins: le repérage, quitter ici, aller là, la distance, l'orientation, le chemin conduisant à la maison, aussi nécessaire que la maison... était aussi le sien.<sup>43</sup>

This analogy underlines once again Michaux's admiration for Klee's drawings, which not only recall nature but also the innocent gesture of the child. And yet, Klee's drawings are highly formalised. His theoretical writings on the line, tonality and colour, which date from his teaching period at the Bauhaus, draw attention to the influence of the ideas generated by this school of art and design on his work. As Will Grohmann states in his monograph on Klee:

Le Bauhaus favorise l'épanouissement des forces de construction chez Klee. Dans le cercle des collègues et des visiteurs qui défendent les idées du 'constructivisme' oriental et du 'Stijl' occidental, dans l'enseignement théorique et dans les classes de tissage et de peinture sur verre, Klee découvre la valeur de la recherche exacte dans le domaine des arts plastiques. Il ne la surestime pas, tout en reconnaissant que les devoirs d'algèbre, de géométrie et de mécanique sont 'des éléments de la formation qui orientent vers l'essentiel, la fonction'.<sup>44</sup>

Michaux is not, however, unjustified in drawing this parallel between Klee's visual output and a child's artistic activity, for Klee maintained

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<sup>41</sup> Michaux, 'Peindre', *OC II*, p. 318.

<sup>42</sup> Picoche, Jacqueline, *Dictionnaire étymologique du français* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> Michaux, 'Aventures de lignes', *OC II*, p. 361.

<sup>44</sup> Grohmann, *Paul Klee*, p. 198.



that intuition, rather than the more formal techniques advocated by the Bauhaus, remains the fundamental basis for all creation.<sup>45</sup>

It is well known that tribal art and what is described as primitive culture influenced many avant-garde artists, including Pablo Picasso. One only has to examine the mask-like faces of the figures in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), a painting many consider to be the inaugural work of modern art, to measure this impact. The foundations for this interest in primitivism can be situated in contemporary thought in ethnography, archaeology and medical sciences alongside a radical rejection of traditional art, as has already been suggested regarding the full title of *Documents*. This fascination was not, however, solely restricted to European artists. Following the Second World War, the American Abstract Expressionists also explored this marginalised form of artistic output:

They eagerly looked at tribal artifacts in the American Museum of National History uptown. The Museum of Modern Art, in the 1930s and 1940s, regularly included 'primitive' art in its exhibition program from 1933 onward, in the belief that it was disclosing one of the main buried roots of modernism: Aztec, Mayan, Incan, African, American Indian, and even, in 1937, a show of large facsimiles of 'Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and America.' In cave paintings and petroglyphs one saw an apparent lack of interest in composition, with the sacred totemic signs overlaid across unconfined surfaces, not constricted by a framing edge: this influenced Pollock's work, and others' as well, such as Baziote's and Rothko's. The scale of cave paintings mattered too. They were very big, and encouraged their American admirers to paint big – confirming a hankering for size born of the Federal Art Project mural projects.<sup>46</sup>

In two of Pollock's monumental works, *Number 1A* (1948) and *Lavender Mist: Number 1* (1950),<sup>47</sup> the spectator is aware of the presence of the artist's own handprints underneath the drips and

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<sup>45</sup> 'Nous construisons et construisons sans cesse, mais l'intuition continue à être une bonne chose. On peut considérablement sans elle, mais pas tout. Sans elle, on peut réussir longtemps, réussir beaucoup et diversement, réussir des choses capitales, mais pas tout. Quand l'intuition s'unit à la recherche exacte, elle accélère le progrès de celle-ci de façon saisissante.' Klee, 'Recherches exactes dans le domaine de l'art', in Klee, *Théorie de l'art moderne*, pp. 48-52 (p. 48).

<sup>46</sup> Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pp. 468-69.

<sup>47</sup> *Jackson Pollock*, ed. by Kirk Varnedoe, with Pepe Karmel (London: Tate Gallery, 1999), pp. 242-43 & p. 273.

splashes of paint. And indeed, the handprint constitutes a widespread sign of man in cave paintings and petroglyphs from all over the world, for example, Pech Merle in France.<sup>48</sup> These handprints constitute an expression of the self and an overt reference to the body, thereby illustrating an age-old tradition of gestural painting, which persists in the latter half of the twentieth century and continues today.

When discussing the personal benefits of painting over writing as a creative activity, Michaux states: ‘Dans la peinture, le primitif, le primordial mieux se retrouve.’<sup>49</sup> In one of his earliest texts, published in *Cas de folie circulaire* in 1922 and in *Fable des origines* a year later, he even situates the origins of painting in the cave:

Il jeta dans la caverne des becs, et des têtes d’animaux rares et une bête très grosse cachée dans une coquille épaisse et la terre molle, qui était dedans, s’éparpilla sur les parois en masses inégales et diverses.

Alors Isiriél, femme de Brisgaieidiou, très agréable certes, car couchée contre l’homme robuste, elle n’est pas inactive quant au mouvement de ses fesses, considérant avec rapidité la paroi de la caverne frissonna, ayant reconnu la virilité rouge, très puissante mais un peu tordue, d’un gorille incliné – et aussi ses yeux – et son geste.

Ainsi fut établi parmi les hommes combien l’image des choses est délectable.<sup>50</sup>

This passage with its overt sexual references underlines Michaux’s fascination with the primeval and man’s obsession with images.<sup>51</sup> The

<sup>48</sup> ‘Although the cave was known throughout history, its wealth of Palaeolithic art, executed between c. 22,000 - c. 12,000 BP, was first discovered in 1922, while the associated Combel Gallery and its art were revealed in 1949, after a passage was forced through the rubble blocking access.’ *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 24, Pandolfini to Pitti, ed. by Jane Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 310.

<sup>49</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences, OC III*, p. 550.

<sup>50</sup> Michaux, ‘Origine de la peinture’, *Cas de folie circulaire, OC I*, pp. 7-8, Michaux’s italics. The same text appears in *Fable des origines*, also in *OC I*, p. 35. This second text contains some adjustments, but does not alter the content of the quoted passage.

<sup>51</sup> For another interpretation of ‘Origine de la peinture’, see Pierre Loubier’s entry for the ‘Dictionnaire du lointain intérieur’, entitled ‘Ochtiléou’, in *Plume*, 10, *Bulletin de la Société des Lecteurs d’Henri Michaux* (Paris: Findakly, May 1996). He concludes on p. 29: ‘La fonction de la fable serait plutôt allégorique, mais à usage fortement interne, à la limite comme version auto-analytique voire auto-programmatique du geste créateur: non pas origine de la peinture comme accident mais peinture de l’origine comme événement, apparition d’une authentique gestualité libératoire, comme refus de combler les attentes de la représentation, rupture avec les jeux de miroirs de la séduction et parcours créatif essentiellement énergétique et oblique, très puissant mais un peu tordu...’ (Loubier’s emphasis).

fact that an image has been recognised in what is merely loose earth splattered on the cave's walls recalls the ancient problematic of representation by chance as considered by Cicero, for example:

Pigments flung blindly at a panel might conceivably form themselves into the lineaments of a human face, but do you think the loveliness of the Venus of Cos could emerge from paints hurled at random?<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, during the High Renaissance in Italy, Leonardo Da Vinci told his students:

Si tu regardes des murs barbouillés de taches, ou faits de pierres d'espèces différentes, et qu'il te faille imaginer quelque scène, tu y verras des paysages variés, des montagnes, fleuves, rochers, arbres, plaines, grandes vallées et divers groupes de collines. Tu y découvriras aussi des combats et figures d'un mouvement rapide, d'étranges airs de visages, et des costumes exotiques, et une infinité de choses que tu pourras ramener à des formes indistinctes et bien connues.<sup>53</sup>

Georges Limbour revives Da Vinci's idea of a stain on a wall into which innumerable images can be read, comparing the works of Klee to it:

Léonard de Vinci propose comme excellent exercice de contempler longuement les plaques de fermentation produites par l'humidité sur les vieux murs: dans leurs dessins confus, l'œil arrive à deviner des formes qu'on dirait organisées et où l'imagination voit des combats de chimères, des visages de madones, etc. Quoique cette leçon soit généralement connue et citée, elle peut être rappelée ici, car certaines œuvres de Klee – qui peint sur cartons – semblent une plaque de métal corrodée savamment par de multiples acides successifs, jusqu'à faire éclore grâce à cette subtile chimie, cieux, fleurs, forêts, étangs.<sup>54</sup>

This adaptation of a celebrated artist's theory to the practice of a modern visual artist privileges the role of chance in artistic production. Consideration of chance as a creative principle, which was also vital to Dadaist and surrealist output, is relevant to a study of Michaux since much of his visual production, be it watercolour, ink or

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<sup>52</sup> Cited by Claude Gandelman in 'The Artist as "Traumarbeiter": On Sketches of Dreams by Marcel Proust', p. 199.

<sup>53</sup> *Les Carnets de Léonard de Vinci*, Vol. II, ed. by Edward Maccurdy, trans. by Louise Servicien (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 247.

<sup>54</sup> Georges Limbour, 'Paul Klee', in *Documents*, Vol. I, 1 (1929), pp. 53-54.

gouache, appears to have been produced following this practice. The recognition of an exterior reality in stains on a wall or, in Michaux's case, in lumps of earth on a cave wall, is also valuable when considering the complex relationship between figurative and abstract art.

Michaux's 'Origine de la peinture' contains a satirical critique of man's ever-present need to find meaning, to decipher abstract blobs using words, much like a children's guessing game. The spectator is at first confronted with formless *taches*, but is soon able to make out a figure or a landscape. As Michaux relates in *Ecuador*:

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.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, man's knowledge and experience as well as his constant desire to recognise an object will always influence his interpretation. Louis Marin states the following about the viewer's reception of paintings by Klee:

A mesure que l'ouvrage s'étoffe, il arrive facilement qu'une association d'idées s'y greffe – (n'est-ce pas la reconnaissance de la série paradigmatique?) – s'appêtant à jouer les démons de l'interprétation figurative. Car, avec un peu d'imagination, tout agencement un peu poussé prête à une comparaison avec des réalités connues de la nature. Une fois interprété et nommé, pareil ouvrage ne répond plus entièrement au vouloir de l'artiste (du moins pas au plus intense de ce vouloir) et ses propriétés associatives sont l'origine de malentendus passionnés entre l'artiste et le public.<sup>56</sup>

It is for this reason that Michaux appreciated children's creative and receptive innocence as they are yet to acquire a stock of learning. Throughout his creative trajectory, Michaux expresses nostalgia for a prelinguistic state, which childlike and primitive forms of expression appear to render successfully:

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<sup>55</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, OC I, p. 151.

<sup>56</sup> Marin, 'Éléments pour une sémiologie picturale', p. 28.

Quelle émotion ce sera quand l'époque étant arrivée au point désirable, ayant pris l'habitude de penser en signes, on échangera des secrets en quelques traits 'nature', pareils à une poignée de brindilles.<sup>57</sup>

In this passage, the quotation marks around 'nature' point to its colloquial meaning, when this noun form is used as an adjective to describe people as spontaneous or frank. This interpretation alludes to the immediate communicational dimension of these lines, as well as their ability to directly convey nature, which is evoked in the image of a handful of twigs that follows. Michaux's aim is to communicate a pregestural form, directly linked to the body and to nature and, for this reason, some of his signs resemble humanoid, animal-like and insect-like figures that could have been drawn by either prehistoric peoples or children.

### Movement and Fatigue in Michaux's Signs

The radical emphasis placed on movement by Michaux can be considered surprising as he admitted to being 'né-fatigué' and, in surreal fashion, compared his life to having to 'traîner un landau sous l'eau', adding that 'Les nés-fatigués me comprendront.'<sup>58</sup> Jean-Pierre Martin has indicated in an article, which borrows its title from the above aphorism, that Michaux was forever tired as a child, a teenager and an adult. Martin also shows that, although this perpetual fatigue was not helped by Michaux's own heart condition, it also emanated from his propensity to overwork, quoting from a letter sent to his close friend, Robert Guiette, in 1926:

On t'aura dit que j'étais malade; et non sans cause. Je suis extrêmement fatigué, surmené, et suis décidé à me surmener de plus en plus. Je prends des leçons d'annamite, d'espagnol, d'anglais, je fais du dessin, j'écris, enfin, le strict minimum de relations. Donc mon temps est pris.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, as has already been mentioned in Chapter 1, many years later, in *Misérable miracle*, Michaux informed any reader likely to make

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<sup>57</sup> Michaux, *Signes*, *OC II*, p. 431.

<sup>58</sup> Michaux, 'Tranches de savoir', *OC II*, p. 455.

<sup>59</sup> Jean-Pierre Martin, 'Les Nés-fatigués me comprendront', *Littérature*, 115 (September 1999), *Henri Michaux*, 3-13 (p. 7).

moral judgements on his experimentation with drugs that: ‘La fatigue est ma drogue, si l’on veut savoir.’<sup>60</sup>

Michaux was not the only creator experimenting with this idea of fatigue in a century marked by technological innovations often involving frenetic speed and movement.<sup>61</sup> He writes: ‘Jean Epstein établit il y a quelques temps un diagnostic: la fatigue de l’époque, fatigue affleurant dans la littérature actuelle.’<sup>62</sup> Bellour’s notes to the first volume of Michaux’s collected works explain that Epstein, the filmmaker, had written an essay on this subject, taking Blaise Cendrars as his major example.<sup>63</sup> This can be considered surprising as Cendrars has often been linked to the Futurists on account of an apparent celebration of modernity and speed in his poetry, but Epstein prefers to classify him in relation to fatigue:

L’écriture de certains poètes de l’époque – hachée, elliptique, allant par grands sauts d’analogie – fournissait un exemple d’une assez soudaine évolution de la pensée, par accélération et relâchement du raisonnement, par fatigue intellectuelle.<sup>64</sup>

Jean-Pierre Martin goes even further to suggest that this fatigue is a trend common to all periods of the twentieth century in reaction to the rapid and dramatic changes brought about by modernity:

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<sup>60</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, *OC II*, p. 767.

<sup>61</sup> Jean-Pierre Martin suggests that a modern and contemporary history should be written including all the writers who have suffered from fatigue. He evokes in passing Charles Péguy and Georges Bernanos, as well as characters from the works of Herman Melville, Robert von Musil, Franz Kafka, Raymond Queneau, Samuel Beckett and Robert Pinget, in *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> Michaux, ‘Surréalisme’, *OC I*, pp. 58-61 (p. 59).

<sup>63</sup> Cendrars is one of the few poets whom Michaux openly admired. In a text entitled ‘Les poètes voyagent’, published in *Passages*, he writes: ‘Quand poème et voyage se sont rencontrés, la rencontre n’a généralement pas été heureuse, ni féconde à ce qu’il semble. [...] Il y a eu pourtant une mémorable exception: ce fut Cendrars. Lui et ses poèmes avaient le voyage dans le ventre. / Encore maintenant, *Le Panama ou les Aventures de mes sept oncles et Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France* se lisent comme un rapide vous prend, comme un hydravion amerrit dans un golfe des Tropiques. Une vertu voyageuse après vingt ans fort bouleversés y réside toujours, une incitation merveilleuse à traverser pays et peuples étrangers.’ *OC II*, pp. 307-09 (pp. 307-08).

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Bellour, ‘Notes et variantes’ to *Premiers écrits*, in Michaux, *OC I*, pp. 1022-43 (p. 1024).

Le dégoût du siècle, cette façon ostentatoire de tourner le dos au contemporain, de manifester sa lassitude et son dissentiment, est cyclique. Il n'est pas seulement 'fin-de-siècle'. Il fait de toute période une fin, un entre-deux-guerres, une impasse. La fatigue est alors son ombre et son horizon, son passé et son devenir.<sup>65</sup>

This idea of fatigue as being the opposite of participation and belonging suits Michaux's stance, as it implies a rejection of the very present.

Michaux's fatigue comes from constant attempts at finding an equilibrium of the inner self, which is multiple by nature:

La plus grande fatigue de la journée et d'une vie serait due à l'effort, à la tension nécessaire pour garder un même moi à travers les tentations continuelles de le changer.  
On veut trop être quelqu'un.  
Il n'est pas un moi. *Il n'est pas dix moi. Il n'est pas de moi. MOI n'est qu'une position d'équilibre.* (Une entre mille autres continuellement possibles et toujours prêtes.) Une moyenne de 'moi', un mouvement de foule.<sup>66</sup>

These oft-cited lines from the postface to *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur* highlight the difficulty of the task that Michaux has set himself, in rendering the mobile nature of the inner self in a unified fashion using graphic signs within the book form. The discrepancy between Michaux's own physical and mental lethargy, his desire to incorporate speed and movement into his signs, as well as keeping control over the multiple dimensions of the inner self, is suggested by the fragmentation of some of his signs into two, three or more figures fighting or dancing with each other. We shall see that *Mouvements* is the only text in which this disparity between movement and fatigue is transposed verbally.

Physical lethargy stems from the fact that all human beings and their multiple selves are ultimately trapped within one body. Michaux comments on the cumbersome nature of the body in a text in prose, entitled 'Danse', published in 1938 in *Verve*:

De tous les signes, de tout le matériel pictographique, le corps humain est le plus encombrant, le plus lourd, le plus destiné à influencer, à empiéter, à

<sup>65</sup> Martin, 'Les Nés-fatigués me comprendront', p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur*, OC I, p. 663.

fausser; celui qui vous fait dire plus que vous ne voulez, et moins, quand il fallait plus.<sup>67</sup>

In *Paix dans les brisements*, with the help of hallucinogenic substances, he manages to break free from his unwieldy body: 'j'ai brisé la coquille / simple je sors du carcel de mon corps',<sup>68</sup> and is thus able to experience the true multiplicity of the self in direct contact with the outer world:

le courant léger, omnipotent m'a dépouillé  
mes déchets ne collent plus à moi  
je n'ai plus de déchets

purifié des masses  
purifié des densités  
tous rapports purifiés dans le miroir des miroirs  
éclairé par ce qui m'éteint  
porté par ce qui me noie  
je suis fleuve dans le fleuve qui passe.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly, finding a way of evoking this fatigue poses many problems regarding expressive means, as it is a physical and mental state that is not generally valued by writers, artists or critics.

Roland Barthes remarks on the lack of attention accorded to this state in a postface dedicated to *Les corps étrangers* by Jean Cayrol, whose writings were profoundly affected by the Second World War and the experience of concentration camps:

La fatigue est un mode d'existence méconnu; on en parle peu; c'est une couleur de vie qui n'a même pas le prestige de l'atroce ou du maudit: quelle parole faire, avec de la fatigue? Elle est pourtant la dimension du temps: infinie, elle est l'infini même.<sup>70</sup>

From the postface to *Mouvements*, it can be ascertained that, for Michaux himself, this notion of fatigue is intrinsically linked to laziness:

<sup>67</sup> Michaux, 'Danse', in *Textes épars 1938-1939, OC I*, pp. 697-99 (p. 698).

<sup>68</sup> Michaux, *Paix dans les brisements, OC II*, p. 1008.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1009-10.

<sup>70</sup> Roland Barthes, 'La rature', in Jean Cayrol, *Les Corps étrangers* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), pp. 231-47 (p. 239).



Quoique cette – dois-je dire expérience? puisse être reprise par bien des gens, je voudrais avertir l'amateur d'explications personnelles, que je vois ici la récompense de la paresse.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, towards the end of *Saisir*, at the point where the figures shatter any horizontal or vertical linear constraints by ascending the page diagonally, Michaux uses 'fatigue' and 'paresse' as if they were interchangeable synonyms:

D'autres grimpaient, gravissaient une pente raide et plus loin recommençaient.

Je me serais plutôt attendu à des chutes.  
Où était ma paresse, ma fatigue?<sup>72</sup>

When considering Cy Twombly's graphic production, Barthes also introduces the idea of a certain 'paresse', which he considers to be one of the purest manifestations of the body:

Ce qui *semble* intervenir dans le trait de TW et le conduire au bord de cette très mystérieuse *dysgraphie* qui fait tout son art, c'est une certaine paresse (qui est l'un des signes les plus purs du corps). La paresse: c'est précisément ce que permet le 'dessin', mais non la 'peinture' (toute couleur lâchée, laissée, est violente), ni l'écriture (chaque mot naît entier, volontaire, armé par la culture). La 'paresse' de TW (je parle ici d'un effet, non d'une disposition) est cependant tactique: elle lui permet d'éviter la platitude des codes graphiques, sans se prêter au conformisme des destructions: elle est, dans tous les sens du mot, un *tact*.<sup>73</sup>

In the last sentence of this quotation, Barthes combines the adjective, 'tactique', with the noun, 'tact'. These words look as if they could be related, but 'tact' has Latin origins and connotes the physical sense of touch, as well as an intuitive awareness of the right thing to do or say when dealing with others, whereas 'tactique' comes from the Greek, *taktikhé*, and alludes to the art of planning and carrying out some type of operation, often military. In this context, this amalgamation therefore connotes a premeditated creative process, which does not conform to the everyday meaning of 'paresse', explaining Barthes's use of quotation marks and his insistence in brackets that he is

<sup>71</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 598.

<sup>72</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, *OC III*, p. 963.

<sup>73</sup> Barthes, 'Cy Twombly ou Non multa sed multum', p. 1046, Barthes's italics.

referring to a certain effect and not to a state of mind. This expressive form negotiates its way effortlessly between visual and verbal codes, challenging them without negating them, and figures a certain physical presence. Although similar in its interstitial status, Michaux's graphic experimentation differs from Twombly's in this respect because the former's is of a spontaneous, rather than deliberate, nature in which Michaux's tendency to fatigue plays a vital role.

The concept of fatigue can be seen in the context of the first half of the twentieth century as being creative in its own right, either in terms of leading to introspection, or as a first step towards innovation, through intolerance of the *status quo*. Jean-Pierre Martin affirms that, in Michaux's case, this fatigue can be most productive, especially when pushed to its limits, as it appears to start the creative process, escaping the confines of the body:

Ce qui le fascine dans ce passage de la fatigue, c'est qu'il dépasse toujours la corporéité, qu'il efface la limite entre le physiologique et le psychique. La fatigue profonde ne procède pas de l'effort. Elle inaugure toute velléité de mouvement, accompagne toute manifestation d'énergie.<sup>74</sup>

It could be suggested that it is at this moment of fatigue that the expression of the 'pré-geste' takes place. The cohabitation of these two apparently paradoxical states is described in the postface to *Mouvements*:

La plus grande partie de ma vie, étendu sur mon lit, pendant des heures interminables dont je ne me lassais pas, j'animais une ou deux ou trois formes, mais toujours une plus vite, plus en favorite, plus diaboliquement vite que tout autre. [...] Je lui infusais une inouïe mobilité, dont j'étais le double et le moteur, quoique immobile et fainéant.<sup>75</sup>

It soon becomes evident that these two extreme poles, one encouraging speed and dynamism, the other a general slowing down, are actually dependent on each other, thriving on a form of symbiosis. Michaux also evokes deceleration in *Saisir* when he starts grappling with the problems of figurative representation:

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<sup>74</sup> Martin, 'Les Nés-fatigués me comprendront', p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 598.

Il y avait des ralentissements, des reculs peu explicables, des arrêts d'origine inconnue, freinages inattendus s'agissant d'animaux connus, observés maintes fois en des contrées proches ou lointaines.<sup>76</sup>

This slowing down appears to hinder any attempt at rendering the inner self in the third book including signs, but it still makes up an essential part of the creative process that formed this visual and verbal text.

Hence, the pages of signs in *Mouvements* can be seen as the product of a coming-together of the states of fatigue and movement in a type of 'pré-geste'. The body and mind of whoever composes them are intrinsically linked in this process. Indeed, Michaux suggests in the postface that the signs are in fact evidence of the body overtaking the mind: 'mais progressivement les formes "en mouvement" éliminèrent les formes pensées, les caractères de composition.'<sup>77</sup> This could be seen as a process of emptying, whereby the idea is taken out of the ideogram and replaced by a more spontaneous gestural presence.<sup>78</sup> As we have seen in the preceding chapter, an ideogram is a character that symbolises the idea of an object without indicating the sequence of sounds in its name. As a result, if 'les formes pensées' no longer exist, the characters are free to use and distort the hollow shell that the ideogram has become, to express 'les formes "en mouvement"'. Again, in the postface to *Mouvements*, Michaux describes the effect on himself of creating these figures:

Leur mouvement devenait mon mouvement. Plus il y en avait, plus j'existais. Plus j'en voulais. Les faisant, je devenais tout autre. J'envahissais mon corps (mes centres d'action, de détente). Il est souvent un peu loin de

<sup>76</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 937.

<sup>77</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 598.

<sup>78</sup> Peter Handke, the Austrian writer, has also explored the creative possibilities of fatigue in his texts. This state of mind enables him to transcend words much like Michaux's experimentation with signs: 'Alors c'était ma fatigue qui les créait, et l'autre qui justement errait encore dans son vide, sentait en un instant l'aura de sa chose. – Et de plus: cette fatigue faisait que ces mille déroulements devant moi, sans rapport, allant en tous sens s'ordonnaient, par-delà la forme, en une suite; chacune entraînait en moi comme la partie exactement disposée d'un récit – merveilleusement agencé, subtilement construit; et c'étaient ces déroulements qui se racontaient eux-mêmes, sans l'intermédiaire des mots. Grâce à ma fatigue, le monde était grand et débarrassé de ses noms', in *Essai sur la fatigue, Essai sur le juke-box, Essai sur la journée réussie: Un songe de jour d'hiver*, trans. by Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Folio', 1998), p. 44.

ma tête, mon corps. Je le tenais maintenant, piquant, électrique. Je l'avais comme un cheval au galop avec lequel on ne fait qu'un. J'étais possédé de mouvements, tout tendu par ces formes qui m'arrivaient à toute vitesse, et rythmées.<sup>79</sup>

Once grammatical and syntactical structures are no longer imposed, the hand is able to convey the dynamism of thought patterns as well as retaining the individuality of the carrier of this movement, that is, the body. Composing the signs thus promotes a fusion between the rhythm of inner and outer worlds, between movement and fatigue, through the rhythm of drawing or writing.

### Speed and Automatic Writing

Speed is also intrinsically linked to movement in Michaux's concept of expression. Indeed, it is the only word written in capitals in *Mouvements*, thus drawing typographical attention to its important status in the text:

Abstraction de toute lourdeur  
de toute longueur  
de toute géométrie  
de toute architecture  
abstraction faite, VITESSE!<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, 'élan', a word that evokes both speed and movement, is another recurrent theme used to portray the dynamic graphic signs:

Élans en ciseaux  
en fourches  
élans rayonnés  
élans sur toute la Rose des vents.<sup>81</sup>

The verb form 'élané' is used by Michaux in the postface to describe his drawings in *Mouvements*, juxtaposing their lightness and flexibility with the burden imposed by words:

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<sup>79</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 598.

<sup>80</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 437.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 437.

C'est précisément au contraire pour m'avoir libéré des mots, ces collants partenaires, que les dessins sont élancés et presque joyeux, que leurs mouvements m'ont été légers à faire même quand ils sont exaspérés.<sup>82</sup>

As we know, an important leitmotif of Michaux's written production is his belief that language and words decelerate the thought process and impose structures in the interests of communicability, and this mediation not only fails to express the speed and multiplicity of thought, it also in fact distorts it. In the postface to *Mouvements*, Michaux replies to René Bertelé's query concerning the lack of similarity between the verbal and visual texts:

Quoi d'étonnant? Ils n'ont pas le même âge. Les dessins, tout nouveaux en moi, ceux-ci surtout, véritablement à l'état naissant, à l'état d'innocence, de surprise; les mots, eux, venus après, après, toujours après... et après tant d'autres.<sup>83</sup>

This quotation is symptomatic of Michaux's overfamiliarity with the written word, something the drawings do not share and, as a consequence, his hope of expressing speed and mobility in the latter.

In one of his first articles entitled 'Surréalisme', published in 1925 in *Le Disque vert*, Michaux examines the shortcomings of automatic writing, particularly in relation to the speed of the thought process. In this issue of *Le Disque vert*, a whole dossier on Surrealism was included in reaction to the publication, three months earlier, of André Breton's first *Manifeste du surréalisme*. Michaux's article is particularly concerned with this manifesto and with another of Breton's texts, *Poisson soluble*. He is thereby provided with the foundations for a critical analysis of Breton's application of his own theory, as expounded in *Manifeste du surréalisme*, to his own work, as exemplified by the automatic creation of certain texts in prose in *Poisson soluble*.

From Michaux's previous articles, mostly published in *Le Disque vert*, for example, 'Cas de folie circulaire', 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur', 'Notre frère Charlie', 'Réflexions qui ne sont pas étrangères à Freud' and his philosophical essay *Les Rêves et la*

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<sup>82</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 599.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 599.

*jambe*,<sup>84</sup> it soon becomes evident that his literary concerns were closely linked to those of Breton. An active interest in Freud, the nature of dreams and personality dissociation can be noted, as well as a fascination with the Dadaist antics of Charlie Chaplin and the transformations of society caused by modern technology. Moreover, it has been reported that Breton valued Michaux's work:

D'un auteur contemporain pour lequel il avait de l'estime (Michaux par exemple: ce fut Breton qui, le premier, me parla de lui) il disait: 'Il a *quelque chose*', et levait les sourcils, observait son interlocuteur du coin de l'œil, avec une expression bizarre, à la fois gourmande et penaude. Intrigué (par Michaux), il demeurait sur la défensive, je ne sais pourquoi. Demandait en quelque sorte à son interlocuteur la permission de s'abandonner.<sup>85</sup>

But, above all, both Breton and Michaux experimented with automatism as a creative means of representing the unconscious.

For our purposes, it is worthwhile taking note of the differences in the ideas of Michaux and Breton on automatic creation, which are apparent from the beginning of the former's article. It is important not to confuse Michaux's literary and artistic activities with those of the Surrealists.<sup>86</sup> As Bellour has pointed out in his 'Chronologie': "'Surréalisme" témoigne avec une ironie rageuse d'une volonté, qui ne cessera plus, de se démarquer et de Breton et du

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<sup>84</sup> All of these are published under the title *Premiers écrits* in the first volume of the 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' collected works.

<sup>85</sup> Charles Duits, who got to know Breton in the USA, is cited as the source of this quotation by Etienne-Alain Hubert in his editorial notes to *Anthologie de l'humour noir*. See André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. II, pp. 1745-76 (p. 1764), Duits's italics.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Sieburth writes rather unnecessarily in a review of Maurice Blanchot's essays on Michaux: 'Yet it is perhaps precisely by this double betrayal ["his unholy alliance with religion on the one hand and science on the other"] – which leaves the space of literature henceforth uncertain – that Henri Michaux emerges as one of the most extraordinary voices of our (post)modernity, a true technician of the sacred and perhaps the century's most genuine Surrealist', in 'Technician of the sacred: The internal and external voyages of Henri Michaux', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 February 2002, 4-6 (p. 6), my emphasis. Michaux's artistic activity is also often unjustifiably referred to as surrealist, for example, Helen Westgeest writes the following in *Zen in the Fifties*, p. 130: 'Several French artists tapped their pursuit of universal art at the end of the forties from Surrealists like Masson and Michaux who were already seeking to reach a universal *écriture automatique* in the nineteen-thirties.'

mouvement.<sup>87</sup> This irony can be noted in the rather tongue-in-cheek comment made towards the end of Michaux's article concerning literary experimentation and manifestos in general:

Une expérience fait déclin. [...] J'attends les expérimentateurs.  
Un jour peut-être, je verrai le manifeste des écrivains végétariens, ou de ceux qui veulent qu'on écrive après le café, ou après coït, ou la tête en bas.<sup>88</sup>

This quotation alludes quite clearly to the recent publication of Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* and his strict criteria for the conditions in which automatic writing should take place.

Jean-Claude Mathieu examines in detail the differences between Michaux's and Breton's ideas on automatism in the volume of *Les Cahiers de l'Herne* dedicated to André Breton.<sup>89</sup> From the very beginning, he shows how Michaux's article cleverly mimics Breton's manifesto through its layout. For example, Michaux has placed three dictionary definitions as an epigraph, an overt example of paratextuality, which points the reader to Breton's famous definition of 'Surréalisme' in the first manifesto.<sup>90</sup> Michaux has also divided his article under eight subheadings in much the same manner as Breton did when giving indications on automatic writing. Yet, in one of these definitions concerning automatism, Michaux instructs the reader: 'Prenez une large superficie de papier',<sup>91</sup> whilst, in the instructions in his manifesto, Breton does not make such specifications: 'Faites-vous

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<sup>87</sup> Bellour and Tran, 'Chronologie', *OCI*, p. LXXXVI.

<sup>88</sup> Michaux, 'Surréalisme', *OCI*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>89</sup> Jean-Claude Mathieu, 'Michaux et l'automatisme surréaliste', in *Cahiers de l'Herne: André Breton*, ed. by Michel Murat (Paris: L'Herne, 1998), pp. 353-63.

<sup>90</sup> 'SURREALISME, n. m. Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.

ENCYCL. *Philos.* Le surréalisme repose sur la croyance à la réalité supérieure de certaines formes d'associations négligées jusqu'à lui, à la toute-puissance du rêve, au jeu désintéressé de la pensée. Il tend à ruiner définitivement tous les autres mécanismes psychiques et à se substituer à eux dans la résolution des principaux problèmes de la vie. Ont fait acte de SURREALISME ABSOLU MM. Aragon, Baron, Boiffard, Breton, Carrive, Crevel, Delteil, Desnos, Eluard, Gérard, Limbour, Malkine, Morise, Naville, Noll, Péret, Picon, Soupault, Vitrac.' Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, *OCI*, p. 328.

<sup>91</sup> Michaux, 'Surréalisme', *OCI*, p. 58.

apporter de quoi écrire',<sup>92</sup> thereby underlining a key difference in attitude concerning materials from the outset of this automatic experiment. Michaux's instructions could suggest drawing, painting or writing or indeed any artistic or literary activity that uses paper as its support, whilst Breton's stipulations are most definitely restricted to writing.

Michaux considers that the automatic writing contained in *Poisson soluble* is monotonous as it takes place in a state of total indifference. Indeed, this is one of the titles of his subheadings in which he notes: 'L'indifférence qui est à la racine est aussi dans le fruit. *Poisson soluble* est inémotif, monotone comme un clown.'<sup>93</sup> Even if this were not the case, the speed of images cascading from the mind could not be captured by the human hand:

Ses doigts ne pourraient suivre. Dans une peur, une émotion tragique, une noyade, on aperçoit sa vie et son avenir, deux mille images en deux secondes. Mais le moyen, en deux secondes, d'en écrire deux mille?<sup>94</sup>

Jean-Claude Mathieu indicates that, in the same issue of *Le Disque vert*, Michaux had published a playlet in which he prepares the reader for a race between thought and speech to determine which is the faster:

J'étais une parole qui tentait d'avancer à la vitesse de la pensée.  
Les camarades de la pensée assistaient.  
Pas une ne voulut sur moi tenir le moindre pari, et elles étaient bien là six cent mille qui me regardaient en riant.<sup>95</sup>

As we know, this problem of conveying the speed and multiplicity of thought patterns using visual and verbal means would recur throughout Michaux's life especially when faced with the hallucinatory rapidity of thought and image production, a sensation intensified by his experimentation with mescaline. This reaction has been examined in the sections dealing with the mescaline experiments in Chapter 1.

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<sup>92</sup> Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, OC I, p. 331.

<sup>93</sup> Michaux, 'Surréalisme', OC I, p. 59.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>95</sup> Michaux, *Qui je fus*, OC I, p. 82.



This chapter has analysed how much of Michaux's creation, both verbal and artistic, was intrinsically linked to corporeality and its expression. Through the images he uses to describe Breton's attempts at automatism, for example, 'l'incontinence', he identifies a corporeal absence in surrealist automatic writing: 'Breton fait de l'incontinence graphique. Il a vu le nez de l'automatisme; il y a encore derrière tout un corps.'<sup>96</sup> Michaux was of the opinion that, as well as expressing 'le fonctionnement réel de la pensée',<sup>97</sup> automatic creation had the capacity to render the movement of the body, an aspect that he believed the Surrealists had ignored. Barthes expressed a similar opinion on the Surrealists: 'Ils ont, me semble-t-il, *manqué* le corps.'<sup>98</sup> In similar fashion, Christian Dotremont writes in a letter to Michel Butor:

Le 'surréalisme français' ou 'belge' ne s'était pas, ne s'est pas intéressé à l'action d'écrire, à la créativité plastique de toute écriture, aux 'formes' matérielles de l'écriture (dans l'écriture automatique' il ne s'agit que du 'contenu', du 'message', et chez Magritte, dans ses observations sur les relations des mots et des images, comme dans quelques-unes de ses peintures où apparaît un mot, il ne s'agit que de la 'signification', de paradoxes des 'significations', et dans ses quelques peintures où un mot apparaît, il a peint ce mot d'une écriture intentionnellement calligraphique, impersonnelle, dénuée de toute créativité, ce mot ayant un rôle de pure 'signification' paradoxale ou insolite et devant donc être *plastiquement* limité au moins de présence possible).<sup>99</sup>

According to Dotremont, the Surrealists were not responsive to the material, gestural nature of writing, which is present in the former's 'logogrammes' and Michaux's experimentation with signs. These opinions, however, do not appear justified, particularly if we take into account the Surrealist's and, for that matter, Barthes's appreciation of André Masson's artistic output. And indeed, Elza Adamowicz, in opposition to Barthes, evokes corporeal presence in the interstices of surrealist output:

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<sup>96</sup> Michaux, 'Surréalisme', *OCI*, p. 60.

<sup>97</sup> Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, p. 328.

<sup>98</sup> Barthes, 'Les surréalistes ont manqué le corps', in Barthes, *Le Grain de la voix: Entretiens 1962-1980* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), pp. 230-232 (p. 230), Barthes's italics.

<sup>99</sup> Michel Sicard, ed., *Christian Dotremont, Michel Butor, Cartes et lettres: Correspondance 1966-1979* (Paris: Galilée, Collection 'Écritures/Figures', 1986), p. 168, Dotremont's emphasis.

Barthes failed to see that the body as constructed by the surrealists, like surrealist language, may well display the ‘corset’ of familiar anatomical or syntactical frames [...], yet it is, after all, a ‘corset mystère’, and the violation of sexual taboos, like the subversion of discursive norms, is effected through the transgression, inscribed in the space between a rule and its transgression, between normative syntax or naturalistic frames and a free semantic or iconic displacement which transforms external reality, fashions it in the light of inner drives and desires.<sup>100</sup>

At this point, it should be highlighted that Michaux’s critique of a lack of corporeal presence in automatic writing is more preoccupied with the inadequacy of language to convey any type of reality than with surrealist ideas.

Indeed, Michaux does not totally condemn automatic writing in ‘Surréalisme’. He even appears to support the surrealist concept of ‘le merveilleux’.<sup>101</sup> But, if automatic writing is not dismissed, he does seem to have reservations about it, reiterating its monotony. Ultimately, it is possible to say that Michaux saw the literary or artistic outlet of automatism as being elsewhere:

Breton ne fait pas attention aux phrases à écrire... Mais le crayon de l’homme de lettres veille pour son maître.  
On ira plus loin dans l’automatisme.  
On verra des pages entières d’onomatopées, des cavalcades syntaxiques, des mêlées de plusieurs langues, et bien d’autres choses.<sup>102</sup>

In this last sentence, Michaux almost announces his agenda of experimentation for years to come, were it not for the playful

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<sup>100</sup> Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the exquisite corpse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Collection ‘Cambridge Studies in French’, 1998), p. 177.

<sup>101</sup> The opening section of *Les Grandes Épreuves de l’esprit* is entitled ‘Le merveilleux normal’. The first sentences show that Michaux, like the Surrealists, sought ‘le merveilleux’ in the everyday, but the creative processes used in the two respective cases differ enormously: ‘*Je voudrais dévoiler le “normal”, le méconnu, l’insoupçonné, l’incroyable, l’énorme normal. L’anormal me l’a fait connaître*’, in Michaux, *Les Grandes Épreuves de l’esprit*, OC III, p. 313, Michaux’s italics. In this instance, ‘l’anormal’ is in fact induced by the sensations provoked by experimentation with drugs. He also writes of the extraordinary nature of the everyday in *Saisir*, in the final section (OC III, p. 974) in which he attempts to ‘saisir une situation’: ‘Le secret du quotidien, de l’ordinaire sans fin, de l’ordinaire néanmoins extraordinaire, quand un certain recul le rend à son étrangeté, sa fatale étrangeté’.

<sup>102</sup> Michaux, ‘Surréalisme’, OC I, p. 60.

inclusion of the purposefully vague 'et bien d'autres choses'. And indeed, he asserts in relation to the double nature of his creative practice:

Écrits et peintures vont dans des sens différents. Ils sont hétérogènes. Je ne me vois pas faisant un poème spontané... À l'inverse, la rapidité est excitante et désirable en peinture.<sup>103</sup>

In Michaux's experience, therefore, the expressive form which is conducive to automatism is visual rather than verbal. For example, he expands on the immediate dimension of watercolour:

Spontanée. Sursponnée. La spontanéité, qui dans l'écriture n'est plus, s'est totalement reportée là, où d'ailleurs elle est plus à l'aise, la réflexion plus naturellement pouvant être tenue à l'écart.

Je ne délibère pas. Jamais de retouches, de correction. Je ne cherche pas à faire ceci ou cela; je pars au hasard dans la feuille de papier, et ne sais ce qui viendra.<sup>104</sup>

Yet even in his artistic activity, which is perhaps closer to Breton's concept of automatism, Michaux realises there is no way of actually capturing thought. He instead aims to render the spontaneous nature of the 'pré-geste' or gesture in the making, in progress.

It should also be mentioned that other artists and writers from the twentieth century, such as Dubuffet and Asger Jorn, investigated the creative possibilities offered by automatism and spontaneity, but, like Michaux, refused to be associated with the surrealist group. Indeed, during a conference given in Argentina in 1936 on contemporary poetry, Michaux situates himself in the third person alongside other poets seeking to go beyond the conventional confines of words and language:

D'autres recherches poétiques se sont occupées de la langue. Il semblerait que ces auteurs accusent la langue d'être un mauvais véhicule de la poésie et de la complexité du monde intérieur. Les mots seraient porteurs des ulcères de la prose, habitués qu'ils sont à ces petites servitudes, je veux dire, aux nécessités sociales.

Joyce, Fargue, Péret, Michaux, Eugène Jolas, et le groupe franco-américain dit de rébellion contre le mot.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Rey, *Henri Michaux*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>104</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences, OC III*, pp. 574-75.

Although a somewhat surprising exercise, given his attitude towards belonging to groups or movements, it should be noted that Michaux does not place himself with the Surrealists, but with other literary figures who by no means form a group and are also notoriously difficult to classify.

This chapter has examined the important role of corporeal expression in Michaux's visual and verbal output. He is concerned with rendering the agitated mobility of immaterial thought patterns as well as the physical process of writing and drawing in his graphic signs. This intention of representing the dynamism of the inner self can be described as similar to certain surrealist aims, as set out by Breton. But, although Michaux shared some of the same concerns as the surrealist group, such as the place of 'le merveilleux' in the everyday, he considered automatic writing to be a failure. This is ultimately because he believed linguistic structures to be constrictive and regarded visual production as more appropriate for expressing immediacy, which is, as we know, an essential theme in his literary and artistic output.

Michaux's focus on the spontaneous and vibrant nature of children's artistic production highlights his nostalgia for a prelinguistic state, before expression is hindered by structure. He attempts to render this 'pré-geste', which is also present in prehistoric creation, in his signs. Through the paradoxical symbiosis of movement and fatigue in the creative process, the inner self is freed from all constrictive structures including the shell of the body, and thus the 'pré-geste' can lodge itself in the blank space of the page. And yet, we shall consider in the next chapter how the page forms part of a structure, the book. In his four books incorporating signs, Michaux appears to reject writing systems. A link to these conventions is maintained, however, through the layout of the signs on the page.

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<sup>105</sup> Michaux, 'Recherche dans la poésie contemporaine', *OC I*, pp. 971-83 (p. 976).



## Chapter 5

### Experimentation with Book Form

How should a reader approach these pages filled with dancing or battling figures in *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*? Are they simply drawings in a book? Or are they a type of writing system? Do they manage to transgress both linguistic and literary conventions? Or are they bound to the book form in order to function? Are they able to render the dynamic inner self? Does Michaux experiment with other expressive forms with the same objective in mind? Can the books incorporating this experimentation with signs be described as *livres d'artiste*? These questions must all be addressed in order to understand the aims of Michaux's graphic signs and find a working definition for them. This chapter will therefore concentrate on Michaux's experimentation within book form. The textless *Par la voie des rythmes* will be examined in greater detail as it represents the most extreme point of this experimentation.

#### The Reading Process

When confronted with *Par la voie des rythmes*, the reader is placed in an awkward situation: what from its external appearance seems to be an ordinary book contains almost no verbal element. It therefore cannot be read or understood in a conventional manner. The word *voie*, path, included in the title provides a thought-provoking paradox because its homophone, *voix*, is precisely what the reader cannot use when reading this book. Michaux makes numerous references to the reading activity throughout his literary works. Most of them are surprisingly negative, given that they were written by an obviously erudite author. As early on as *Ecuador*, he states: 'Je lis très mal, repoussant incessamment, avec haine, refus et mauvaise foi.'<sup>1</sup> And later in the same passage, he asks:

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<sup>1</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, *OCI*, p. 176.

Inintelligible? Eh bien, toutes les lectures que j'entreprends me produisent justement toujours ce même effet: inintelligibles. C'est pourquoi je n'ai aucune mémoire. Qui donc se souviendrait de l'inintelligible?<sup>2</sup>

In 'Une Vie de chien', the content of the text suggests that Michaux aggressively destroys the, in his opinion, facile transparency of the reading process, depriving words of meaning and in turn meanings of their contexts:

Quant aux livres, ils me harassent par-dessus tout. Je ne laisse pas un mot dans son sens ni même dans sa forme.  
Je l'attrape et, après quelques efforts, je le déracine et le détourne définitivement du troupeau de l'auteur.  
Dans un chapitre vous avez tout de suite des milliers de phrases et il faut que je les sabote toutes. Cela m'est nécessaire.  
Parfois, certains mots restent comme des tours. Je dois m'y prendre à plusieurs reprises et, déjà bien avant dans mes dévastations, tout à coup au détour d'une idée, je revois cette tour. Je ne l'avais donc pas assez abattue, je dois revenir en arrière et lui trouver son poison, et je passe ainsi un temps interminable.<sup>3</sup>

This quotation is paradoxical because the very form of the text conflicts with Michaux's wish to undermine textual order as he remains within conventional grammatical and syntactical parameters. It would therefore perhaps be more appropriate to assert that he is simply critical of a certain, rather naïve, kind of reading activity which all too readily assumes a tidy convergence between signifier and signified.

From the beginning of his literary career, Michaux invites his readers to participate actively in the reading process, perhaps in order to assure his own posterity. For example, in *Ecuador*, we read:

Ne me laissez pas pour mort, parce que les journaux auront annoncé que je n'y suis plus. Je me ferai plus humble que je ne suis maintenant. Il le faudra bien. [...] Ne me laisse pas seul avec les morts comme un soldat sur le front qui ne reçoit pas de lettres. Choisis-moi parmi eux, pour ma grande anxiété et mon grand désir. Parle-moi alors, je t'en prie, j'y compte.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, *OC I*, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> Michaux, 'Une Vie de chien', *Mes Propriétés*, *OC I*, pp. 469-70 (p. 470).

<sup>4</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, *OC I*, p. 179.

He above all incites his readers to follow the same sort of spiritual quest for knowledge of both inner and outer worlds as well as for the expressive means to render these experiences, perhaps even using the writing process as their tool:

Lecteur, *tu tiens donc ici*, comme il arrive souvent, *un livre que n'a pas fait l'auteur*, quoiqu'un monde y ait participé. Et qu'importe?  
Signes, symboles, élans, chutes, départs, rapports, discordances, tout y est pour rebondir, pour chercher, pour plus loin, pour autre chose.  
Entre eux, sans s'y fixer, l'auteur poussa sa vie.  
Tu pourrais essayer, peut-être, toi aussi?<sup>5</sup>

Through this dynamic role, the reader continues the author's text. In these quotations, Michaux expresses opinions on the reader's contribution to the creation of a text that appear to anticipate Roland Barthes's radical text first published in 1968, 'La Mort de l'auteur':

L'écriture est destruction de toute voix, de toute origine. L'écriture, c'est ce neutre, ce composite, cet oblique où fuit notre sujet, le noir-et-blanc où vient se perdre toute identité, à commencer par celle-là même du corps qui écrit.<sup>6</sup>

Barthes asserts that, once a story is told, once a text is read, the reader's role changes from consumer to producer and it is at this point that the creative writing process begins and that the multiplicity of language can now 'speak':<sup>7</sup>

Un texte est fait d'écritures multiples, issues de plusieurs cultures et qui entrent les unes avec les autres en dialogue, en parodie, en contestation; mais il y a un lieu où cette multiplicité se rassemble, et ce lieu, ce n'est pas l'auteur, comme on l'a dit jusqu'à présent, c'est le lecteur: le lecteur est l'espace même où s'inscrivent sans qu'aucune ne se perde, toutes les citations dont est faite une écriture; l'unité d'un texte n'est pas dans son origine, mais dans sa destination.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michaux, 'Postface à *Plume précédé de Lointain intérieur*', *OC I*, p. 665, Michaux's italics.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, 'La Mort de l'auteur', in Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue: Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, Collection 'Points Essais', 1984), pp. 63-69 (p. 63).

<sup>7</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 119-20.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, 'La Mort de l'auteur', p. 69.



The author has therefore lost his omniscient role. This leads to an empowerment of the reader and an ultimate democratisation of the text, notions which cannot be separated from the contemporary political context of Barthes's article. In Michaux's *Par la voie des rythmes*, the reader reactivates the graphic signs through a complex rhythmic and repetitive process that juxtaposes Oriental and Western writing systems as well as the activities of reading a text or looking at a drawing.

Almost forty years after *Ecuador*, in *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, Michaux still attempts a radical transformation of the reading process by encouraging the reader to break free from all authorial constraints:

Quant aux écrits, aux nobles écrits, si le regard dans la chambre s'égaré sur un livre ouvert, que la veille encore on suivait phrase après phrase et d'idée en idée, cette fois on ne se laisse plus faire, les mots dans les phrases, les phrases dans la page, on les bouscule, on les retourne, on les retire, on les échange, on les recompose, non pour refaire le livre mais pour le défaire, pour les faire sauter et se dévergondier ailleurs, pour le plaisir pur de la non-obéissance, de la non-soumission. Pendant que ce parleur confiant dans l'imprimé qu'est l'écrivain va son petit bonhomme de chemin, l'attelage laborieux de ses propositions se détache. On est libre! On est libre!  
On est redevenu libre. On ne sera plus mené. On ne sera pas assimilé!  
Les déplacements incongrus enfantent un cocasse, qui éclate, qu'on ne nous volera pas, qui tempête dans le livre appliqué qui se croyait définitif.<sup>9</sup>

The last word of this quotation suggests why Michaux battles with both the reading process and the textual form: once the word is in print and published in a book, it is no longer open to change. As we have noted from the beginning of this book, Michaux was opposed to a fully completed end-product. The epigraph to *Passages* makes this point with great efficiency:

*Koyu, le religieux, dit: seule une personne de compréhension réduite désire arranger les choses en séries complètes.  
C'est l'incomplétude qui est désirable. En tout, mauvaise est la régularité.  
Dans les palais d'autrefois, on laissait toujours un bâtiment inachevé, obligatoirement. (Tsurezure Gusa, par YOSHIDA NO KANEYOSHI, XIVe siècle.)<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, OC III, pp. 445-538 (p. 522).

<sup>10</sup> Michaux, *Passages*, OC II, p. 281, Michaux's italics.

As a result, Michaux revised his books constantly, and was opposed to the publication of his collected works in the 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' collection.<sup>11</sup>

A text aptly entitled 'Lecture', which was first published in 1950 as a preface to a book of lithographs by Zao Wou-Ki,<sup>12</sup> appears to elaborate on the theme of books and reading:

Les livres sont ennuyeux à lire. Pas de libre circulation. On est invité à suivre. Le chemin est tracé, unique.  
 Tout différent le tableau: immédiat, total. A gauche, aussi, à droite, en profondeur, à volonté.  
 Pas de trajet, mille trajets, et les pauses ne sont pas indiquées. Dès qu'on le désire, le tableau à nouveau, entier. Dans un instant, tout est là. Tout, mais rien n'est connu encore. C'est ici qu'il faut commencer à LIRE.<sup>13</sup>

In this extract, Michaux again evokes the directive nature of texts, whose narrator guides the reader along a predetermined semantic route. For the first time, however, he proposes an alternative: looking at a painting. He also makes it very clear from the first four sentences that reading a written text is a limited experience because of the confines of typographical layout. From his point of view, paintings, unlike verbal production, do not impose a unique point of view or any type of visual order on the spectator; a multiplicity of possible interpretations is therefore available thanks to their visual immediacy.

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<sup>11</sup> Michaux refused Claude Gallimard's proposal to publish his collected works in this famous edition in the following terms: 'La raison majeure est qu'il s'agit dans les volumes de cette prestigieuse collection d'un véritable dossier où l'on se trouve *enfermé*, une des impressions les plus odieuses que je puisse avoir et contre laquelle j'ai lutté ma vie durant. / Me libérer de quantité de pages d'autrefois, retrancher, réduire au lieu de rassembler, voilà quel serait mon idéal, au lieu de l'étalement de tous mes textes, qui à coup sûr me dégoûterait et à brève échéance me paralyserait (17 janvier 1984).' Cited in Bellour, 'Introduction', *OC I*, p. LXXII, Michaux's italics.

<sup>12</sup> Little has been written on the friendship between Michaux and Zao Wou-Ki or on *Lecture de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki*, the book that contains Zao Wou-Ki's lithographs accompanied by Michaux's texts. Peter Broome fails to mention this fusion between text and image in 'L'Abstraction dynamique: Henri Michaux vers Zao Wou-Ki', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 21, *Art Criticism by French Poets since World War II* (Autumn-Winter 1991), 15-31. An exhibition, entitled 'Signe(s)', took place at the Galerie Kamel Menour in Paris from 16 May to 30 June 2002 bringing together their works in ink. The galerie thessa herold also organised an exhibition in 1993, for which the catalogue, *Pas de barbare en Asie*, includes texts by Michaux and Zao Wou-Ki.

<sup>13</sup> Michaux, 'Lecture', *Passages, OC II*, pp. 332-33 (p. 332).

There is no doubt that the reader or spectator reacts in different ways when presented with a text or an image. This is assuming, however, that the text follows a linear sequence, whereas the visual work does just the opposite, inciting several ocular reactions on the part of the spectator. Michaux's admiration for the immediacy of visual expression must not be taken too literally, as this artistic form, like language, obviously follows certain rules and conventions. Indeed, until the advent of modernism, order was generally imposed on the direction of the spectator's gaze through conventional subject matter, technique and composition. 'Lecture' was written as a spontaneous response to Zao Wou-Ki's lithographs, and it seems logical to infer that Michaux prescribed a particular form of painting very close to his own, in that it does not adhere to certain visual codes, to interact with his idea of 'reading' paintings.

The fundamental questioning of the reading process presented in these different texts by Michaux justifies his experimentation with book form and appears to anticipate the composition of *Par la voie des rythmes*, whose very format begs the question: are we reading a text or looking at drawings? From the very first pages of the first chapter of this book, the reader wonders whether to proceed in columns or in lines, or indeed whether the book's spine should be placed vertically or horizontally.<sup>14</sup> The first three pages do not clarify this ambiguity as they function in both directions on account of their systematic horizontal and vertical layout (Fig. 22). It could be suggested that the book's spine should be placed in a horizontal position as the signs on the first page only occupy the right hand side of the page if read in a conventional manner. Once the fourth page is reached, a horizontal linearity appears to be favoured. The compact figures are larger than in the first few pages and mainly composed of three pen strokes. On the following pages, these figures become more and more abstract.<sup>15</sup> The transformation from long, dense strokes to small blobs implies a breaking up of the figures through the introduction of blank space. This disintegration in turn connotes

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<sup>14</sup> For many pages of signs, it is difficult to say which way up the original drawings were supposed to go. This is not helped by the fact that most of the original drawings were composed on loose sheets of paper. Very few have been signed as this could help orient the reading direction. Accordingly, a page from *Mouvements (OC II, p. 567)* has been reproduced upside down in Alfred Pacquement, *Henri Michaux: Peintures*, p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> Michaux, *Par la voie des rythmes, OC III, p. 765*.

speed. At this point, the first totally blank page of the text appears, which brings the acceleration of the signs to an unexpected halt. The following page is most definitely structured in a horizontal sequence with no significant vertical division (Fig. 23). The humanoid signs appear to be running across the page, recalling the ink splashes in Michaux's large Indian ink paintings from the 1950s and 1960s. In the opening pages of *Par la voie des rythmes*, Michaux has subverted traditional reading conventions through a wholehearted and wholesale rejection of semantics and the written word. The desire to escape the constrictions of Western signifying systems is voiced in a contemporary text to *Par la voie des rythmes*, 'Lignes': 'Echappées des prisons reçues en héritage, venues non pour définir, mais pour indéfinir, pour passer le rateau sur, pour reprendre l'école buissonnière, lignes, de-ci de-là, lignes'.<sup>16</sup> He reiterates this urge to unravel conventional signifying processes ten years later in the poetic text in *Par des traits*: 'Insignifier par des traits'.<sup>17</sup>

Towards the end of *Saisir*, Michaux expresses his surprise at an unexpected development in his signs. For no apparent reason, anthropomorphic forms have appeared which seem to ascend the page diagonally, thus continuing the questioning of an imposed reading direction:

Surprise: Pour certains gestes, pour des attitudes, des postures mon dessin avait une inclination inattendue: un homme apparaissait en situation de montée.

[...]

Étranges ces montées.

Ascension, ascension répétée. Où était le but?

Aucun sommet à atteindre apparemment. Le sol était absent. L'appui en l'air s'arrêtait soudain. Où cachée, une finalité?<sup>18</sup>

Conventional horizontal linearity is shattered as our eyes follow the small figures climbing up the page. If the bottom of the page is considered to be the ground and the top of the page the summit, this upward movement emphasises the verticality of the page. If, as Michaux's text implies, these signs are to be understood as signifying an ascent, we must understand them to be moving from left to right

<sup>16</sup> Michaux, 'Lignes', in *Moments*, OC III, pp. 730-31 (p. 730).

<sup>17</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1250.

<sup>18</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 963.



Fig. 22:  
*Par la voie des rythmes, OC III,*  
 p. 763  
 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London  
 2007

Fig. 23:  
*Par la voie des rythmes, OC III,*  
 p. 767  
 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS,  
 London 2007



following the standard reading direction of Western writing systems. This upward movement continues for six pages in a row and the figures become more and more abstract as each page is turned.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the diagonal questioning of the layout of the page is confirmed by the absence of any numerical pagination. The traditional structure of the book is thus challenged as the signs transcend conventional ordering, that is, the horizontal line of the page.

This is not, however, the first mention in Michaux's *œuvre* of an upward movement towards the unknown. In a discussion of 'Terrasse' from *Épreuves, exorcismes*, Mihailovich-Dickman compares the ascent of the humanoid forms in *Saisir* to the metaphor of a flight of stairs, of which man always stays at the bottom:<sup>20</sup>

Dans 'Terrasse', les années de guerre ne font que souligner un sentiment de désespoir vis-à-vis de la question d'être. L'homme se sent exilé sur terre, la vue du paradis interdite. Le poète souligne à la fois l'isolement dont il souffre et la fatigue de toujours se retrouver au pied de l'escalier, comme s'il s'agissait d'une montée impossible, d'un destin fatal.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of a never-ending flight of stairs reaching towards the absolute unknown is the subject of one of Michaux's hallucinations in *Miserable miracle*:

Parfois un escalier de verre, un escalier en échelle de Jacob, un escalier de plus de marches que je n'en pourrais gravir en trois vies entières, un escalier aux dix millions de degrés, un escalier sans paliers, un escalier jusqu'au ciel, l'entreprise la plus formidable, la plus insensée depuis la tour de Babel, montait dans l'absolu.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, in the last lines of *Paix dans les brisements*, when Michaux experiences a moment of great transcendence, he compares it

<sup>19</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, *OC III*, pp. 963-66.

<sup>20</sup> 'Terrasse ardente. Terrasse vaine. Au bout de l'homme, au pied de l'escalier, au plus dénué de la plus réculée solitude. Il aboutit là, celui qui avait tant chanté.

Et comme il y parvenait, il fut secoué d'une poigne solide et un voile de faiblesse, passant en son être, effaça de sa vue Ce qu'il est interdit à l'homme de contempler.' Michaux, 'Terrasse', *Épreuves, exorcismes*, *OC I*, p. 783. A reproduction of a drawing from *Exorcismes* which seems to be the visual equivalent of this poem appears in the first volume of the Pléiade edition on p. 831.

<sup>21</sup> Mihailovich-Dickman, 'Idéogrammes: L'Apport de la Chine ou "Voie par l'écriture"', p. 181.

<sup>22</sup> Michaux, *Miserable miracle*, *OC II*, pp. 649-50.

to a physical ascent, or, perhaps resorting to traditional Christian imagery, to the ascension of Christ to heaven:

la pente vers le haut  
 vers le haut  
 vers toujours plus haut  
 la pente  
 comment ne l'avais-je pas encore rencontrée?  
 la pente qui aspire  
 la merveilleuse simple inarrêtable ascension.<sup>23</sup>

Stairs are drawn for some of the climbing shapes in *Saisir* (Fig. 24), but, more importantly, these pages of ascending figures are accompanied by what can only be described as casualties of war: horizontal dots and dashes form hundreds of helpless or dying figures lying horizontally on the page.<sup>24</sup> These prostrate figures already feature twice in the third section in *Mouvements*, in which they appear to be victims of the battling figures above them on the same page.<sup>25</sup> The vocabulary that Michaux uses in *Saisir* to describe these signs further emphasises this war imagery:

Il y eut quand même des gisants, des plages entières de gisants. Comme ils s'allongent une fois morts...

Un débarquement sans doute les a laissés là, par dizaines sur la grève. Pas encore retirés, y demeurant toujours.<sup>26</sup>

'Gisants' is a highly significant term to use in this context because, in art terminology, a 'gisant' means a recumbent statue on a tomb. It therefore connotes total immobility in diametrical opposition to the dynamism of the ascending figures. This upward movement could be interpreted as an escape from sordid exterior realities, a type of transcendence. These lines of figures climbing towards an unknown destination again remind the reader of Michaux's large format Indian ink paintings from the 1950s and 1960s in which crowds of figures

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<sup>23</sup> Michaux, *Paix dans les brisements*, *OC II*, p. 1010.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 967-68.

<sup>25</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 559.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 966.



Fig. 24: *Saisir, OC III*, p. 964  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007



dash across the canvas in pursuit of some invisible quest. The individual gesture has been sacrificed to mass movement: 'Les gestes, les attitudes, le mouvement, les actions, c'est cela qui m'entraînait, et qui m'incitait présentement à les reproduire.'<sup>27</sup>

Michaux attempts to transform the reading process from the outset of his literary production. Even in his books that contain words and follow syntactical and grammatical rules, he encourages his readers to shatter reading conventions by participating actively in the creative process. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between the 'texte de plaisir' and the 'texte de jouissance'. The former category cannot be used to describe Michaux's texts as it is 'celui qui contente, emplit, donne de l'euphorie; celui qui vient de la culture, ne rompt pas avec elle, est lié à une pratique *confortable* de la lecture.'<sup>28</sup> The latter appears far more suitable on account of its demanding, questioning nature:

Celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte (peut-être jusqu'à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage.<sup>29</sup>

Through Michaux's constant challenging of textual conventions, his books incorporating signs, and especially *Par la voie des rythmes* in which the reader finds a sign system that cannot be 'read' using traditional methods, could be defined, in Barthes's terms, as 'textes de jouissance'. Michaux's experimentation with signs therefore continues his reassessment of reading practices for the signs can be read, although not understood conventionally, either horizontally, vertically or diagonally. Malcolm Bowie interprets Michaux's experimentation with book form as the prolongation of his challenging of all literary boundaries:

The reader of Michaux soon becomes accustomed to a vein of subsidiary questioning: the word, the sentence, the poem, the very practices of writing and reading may be attacked while other things are going on, and often in a seemingly adventitious way. This gives his entire work an atmosphere of restlessness in which balances are continually being lost and found on many

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<sup>27</sup> Michaux, *Saisir, OC III*, p. 962.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, Collection 'Points Essais', 1973), pp. 22-23, Barthes's italics.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

different levels. A favourite target is the book itself. No doubt as an antidote to the physically uniform pieces of public property which most of his works are destined to become, Michaux has first presented several of them in experimental books to a small circle of readers. This has been done in collaboration with various printer-publishers. His idea has been that the size, shape, and appearance of a book can all corroborate aspects of the text it contains and that the book as an object can be endowed with expressive powers of its own.<sup>30</sup>

In the next section, we shall see how Michaux pursues his questioning of Western creative traditions through his experimentation with the material form of the book itself.

### Deconstructing Book Form

For the reader familiar with Michaux's work and opinions on the reading process, this ambiguity concerning the usage of the book, exemplified by *Par la voie des rythmes*, does not come as a surprise. For example, fifteen years earlier, in *Paix dans les brisements*, Michaux was already implicitly encouraging his readers to change their reading habits by turning the book around until its spine was in a horizontal position in an attempt to attain continuity. Both drawings and text follow a vertical direction across the horizontal spine of the book leaving no gap or margin, rather like a Chinese scroll. The verse no longer takes heed of the vertical position of the book's spine. In Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, verses also traverse the book's spine with the book held in a conventional manner. And yet, in stark contrast to *Paix dans les brisements*, the importance of the spine is accentuated by Mallarmé for the text plays on the central fold to a very large extent, in the images of a bird's wings and the ship's sails that emerge from the text.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bowie, *Henri Michaux*, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> 'SOIT / que / l'Abîme / blanchi / étale / furieux / sous une inclinaison / plane désespérément / d'aile / la sienne / par / avance retombée d'un mal à dresser le vol / et couvrant les jaillissements / coupant au ras les bords / très à l'intérieur résume / l'ombre enfouie dans la profondeur par cette voile alternative / jusqu'adapter / à l'envergure / sa béante profondeur en tant que la coque / d'un bâtiment / penché de l'un ou l'autre bord.' Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, pp. 460-61.

Many critics consider *Paix dans les brisements* to be the peak of Michaux's artistic and literary production. For instance, Reinhard Kuhn states the following on this subject:

This work occupies a place apart in the total production of Michaux because it is the first and only one in which the poet, the prose writer, and the graphic artist join forces to create what is truly a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In *Connaissance par les gouffres* prose commentaries follow the poems, which are interspersed among descriptions of drug experiences. In *Émergences-Résurgences* drawings serve as illustrations of the text. But in *Paix dans les brisements* drawings, essays, and the poem form a whole which should be indivisible.<sup>32</sup>

Although it goes without saying that *Paix dans les brisements* is an exceptional book in which text and image intertwine in a cogent manner, it must also be remembered that Michaux's experimentation with signs, particularly in *Mouvements* and *Par des traits*, also provides a meeting point for image and text in verse and prose. Bellour agrees with Reinhard Kuhn on the importance of *Paix dans les brisements*, affirming: 'Jamais Michaux ne sera parvenu à exprimer d'aussi près, et si physiquement, ce qu'il veut en idée communiquer.'<sup>33</sup> He also writes that the unique nature of this book owes much to Michaux's experimentation with book form:

La singularité de ce livre tient à sa tentative, unique dans l'œuvre de Michaux, et rare de façon générale, d'imiter le rouleau chinois ou japonais, et ainsi à la fois la peinture sur soie ou sur papier se déroulant de haut en bas et le rouleau horizontal mêlant mots et images.<sup>34</sup>

And indeed, in *Paix dans les brisements*, Michaux declares that the Oriental book form would suit his needs far better than the divisional Western book: 'Un rouleau, un kakémono l'aurait rendu mieux qu'un livre, à condition de pouvoir se dérouler, ou un volume à page unique indéfiniment dépliée.'<sup>35</sup> This is significant because the roll also connotes film. Michaux's fascination with the dynamic expressive

<sup>32</sup> Reinhard Kuhn, 'Prismatic Reflections: Michaux's *Paix dans les brisements*', in *About French Poetry from Dada to 'Tel Quel': Text and Theory*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 1974), pp. 186-204 (pp. 190-91).

<sup>33</sup> Bellour, 'Notice' to *Paix dans les brisements*, *OC II*, pp. 1362-66 (p. 1362).

<sup>34</sup> Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' to *Paix dans les brisements*, *OC II*, pp. 1366-68 (p. 1366).

<sup>35</sup> Michaux, *Paix dans les brisements*, *OC II*, p. 1000.

possibilities offered by cinematic form will be considered in the next chapter concerning his experimentation with expressive means other than the book. *Paix dans les brisements* establishes a radical critique of the Western book form in relation to the Chinese writing system, thereby providing a foundation for the experimentation carried out in *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*.

Michaux was far from alone in this interest in the possibilities offered by the layout of the page and the book form. Since the introduction of the poem in prose and the advent of the *vers libre* in the latter half of the nineteenth century, poets had questioned the space of the page as this was no longer directly controlled by strict rules concerning rhyme and metre. Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* reformulated poetic space through experimentation with the material possibilities of the page as a solution to a *Crise de vers*, epitomised by mass reproduction presented as a danger to the future of literary language, and the inability of the sign to reproduce immediate discourse. In this poem, the blank space provides the form and rhythm, where before strict versification rules would have functioned as the main structuring principle. Paul Valéry describes his overwhelmed reaction to the physical layout of this poem in a letter to the director of the literary review, *Marges*:

Mallarmé, m'ayant lu le plus uniment du monde son *Coup de dés*, comme simple préparation à une plus grande surprise, me fit enfin considérer le dispositif. Il me sembla de voir la figure d'une pensée, pour la première fois placée dans notre espace... Ici, véritablement, l'étendue parlait, songeait, enfantait des formes temporelles. L'attente, le doute, la concentration étaient *choses visibles*. Ma vue avait affaire à des silences qui auraient pris corps. [...] Il a essayé, pensai-je, *d'élever enfin une page à la puissance du ciel étoilé!*<sup>36</sup>

Valéry's astonishment, although perhaps difficult to comprehend for a modern-day poetry reader accustomed to the blank space playing an important role in poetic composition, is, however, less surprising when the radical nature of *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* is considered in its literary context.

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Valéry, 'Le coup de dés: Lettre au directeur des *Marges*', *Variétés, Études littéraires*, in Paul Valéry, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, ed. by Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1980), pp. 622-30 (pp. 624-26), Valéry's italics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, as has already been briefly mentioned, Apollinaire experimented with the calligram in order to express the visual and lyrical dynamism of modernity.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Blaise Cendrars's and Sonia Delaunay's *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France*, also known as the 'premier livre simultané', implies a radical alternative to the book form.<sup>38</sup> Robert Delaunay recalls the reactions provoked by the publication of this book in *Du Cubisme à l'art abstrait*:

Le poème du *Transsibérien* fit naître des polémiques dans les journaux et les revues de Paris et de l'Étranger. L'Orphisme venait de battre son plein; le Simultanisme naissait avec grand scandale. Un livre de 2 mètres de haut! etc... Cependant, la critique avancée lui rendit hommage et le poème fut lu à Paris, dans le grenier de *Montjoie* qui à l'époque était le rendez-vous de l'avant-gardisme [*sic*] français. Il fut au Herbstsalon à Berlin la même année de sa naissance, à Pétrograd dans une conférence donnée par Smirnof [*sic*] sur les contrastes simultanés et la poésie plastique, etc. Le livre était, en même temps, exposé à Londres, New York, Moscou, dans des Galeries.<sup>39</sup>

The *Prose du Transsibérien* is divided into two sections on a single piece of paper, which unfolds like an accordion, and is two metres tall. The left-hand side is composed of a sequence of swirling forms painted in bright colours by Sonia Delaunay whilst the right-hand side contains the text by Cendrars with numerous typographical innovations.

Michaux's closer contemporaries were also experimenting with ways of challenging the normally static nature of the printed text, for example, the Oulipian writer, Raymond Queneau.<sup>40</sup> His *Cent mille*

<sup>37</sup> For example, in 'Il pleut', the words and lines of the poem visually represent raindrops. Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Il pleut', *Calligrammes*, in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. by Marcel Adéma and Michel Decaudin (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1965), p. 203. One of Michaux's texts, *Quatre cents hommes en croix (OC II)*, pp. 785-803, could be described as a calligram, as some of the verbal fragments in this book take on the form of a cross.

<sup>38</sup> Blaise Cendrars, 'Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France', in Blaise Cendrars, *Poésies complètes*, Vol. I, ed. by Claude Leroy (Paris: Denoël, Collection 'Tout autour d'aujourd'hui', 2001), pp. 17-34. Unfortunately, neither the visual component by Sonia Delaunay nor the typographical innovations in the poem by Cendrars are reproduced in this, or most, publications of the *Prose du Transsibérien*.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Delaunay, *Du Cubisme à l'art abstrait*, ed. by Pierre Francastel (Paris: École pratique des Hautes Études – 6e section, S. E. V. P. E. N, 1957), pp. 201-02.

<sup>40</sup> Oulipo, acronym for *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, is the name of a group of writers interested in formal literary experimentation and, particularly, in imposing

*milliards de poèmes* contains ten sonnets consisting of interchangeable lines placed on flaps. Queneau provides instructions for the reader at the beginning of this book in a 'Mode d'emploi':

Les choses étant ainsi données, chaque vers étant placé sur un volet, il est facile de voir que le lecteur peut composer  $10^{14}$  sonnets différents, soit cent mille milliards. (Pour être plus explicite pour les personnes sceptiques: à chaque premier vers [au nombre de dix] on peut faire correspondre dix seconds vers différents; il y a donc cent combinaisons différentes des deux premiers vers; en y joignant le troisième il y en aura mille et, pour les dix sonnets, complets, de quatorze vers, on a donc bien le résultat énoncé plus haut.)<sup>41</sup>

The reader can attempt to create the number of poems suggested in the title, thus shattering the traditional author/reader relationship through the attempted creation of a multiple poem.

### *Livres d'artiste?*

Michaux's activity as an artist and his experimentation with book form lead us to the question of whether his books containing graphic or visual elements can in general be described as *livres d'artiste*. Bernard Gheerbrant has no qualms about using this term to describe *Par la voie des rythmes*: 'Ainsi le texte n'est autre que la somme de ces signes, définie par deux mots, "La Voie des Rythmes": rythme des pages, ponctuées de blancs, ordonnées en véritable "livre d'artiste".'<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, in an article on the *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France*, Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D.

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constraints on the creative process. Oulipian research is concerned with the numerous possible outcomes of a combinatorial science, inspired by mathematics, so as to multiply the potentialities of language, thus extricating it from conventional linguistic structures. Their ludic and innovative techniques, which are always implemented with extreme mathematical and philological precision, include, for example, phonetic spelling, elimination of all syntactical structures and frequent use of neologisms. Georges Perec's *La Disparition* is one of the group's most famous works. The disappearance indicated by the title is in fact that of the letter 'e', the most frequently used letter in the French language, which is entirely absent from the text. Oulipo was created by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau in 1960 and its members still meet regularly and continue their research today.

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

<sup>42</sup> Bernard Gheerbrant, 'Comment se passer des mots? Henri Michaux et la série', *Nouvelles de l'estampe*, 140 (May 1995), 9-14 (p. 11).

Hubert compare this breathtaking fusion of the visual and the verbal by Cendrars and Delaunay to works by ‘double artists’, such as Jean Arp. For Michaux, they state: ‘his masterpiece as a book artist is *Meidosems* in which text and image reflect the same horrendous anguish.’<sup>43</sup>

But can we label Michaux a ‘book artist’? And indeed, the genre of the *livre d’artiste* proves to be somewhat difficult to define. As Maurice Imbert points out in his inventory of what he terms Michaux’s ‘livres illustrés’, the poet-artist does not help us on this subject, as he never mentions it, although he published a considerable number of books including both visual and verbal content by himself and by others:

Il n’y a pas d’écrit d’Henri Michaux à propos du livre illustré. En revanche on trouve des textes sur la peinture, plus souvent la sienne mais aussi celle de Klee, Bernal, Sima, Bettencourt, à plusieurs reprises Zao Wou-Ki et sur l’écriture.<sup>44</sup>

This is further problematised by the fact that Michaux was both a poet and an artist and often provided both the visual and verbal input of these books. Renée Riese Hubert dedicates a chapter to this question of the ‘double artist’ in *Surrealism and the Book*, examining the cases of Arp, Max Ernst and Joan Miró:

For books produced by double talents, we tend to have fewer clues as to which came first, the text or the image: in other words, we have difficulty in identifying which is the illustration, and which the illustrated. [...] Nevertheless, the awareness of a double talent at work complicates not only our reading but the very notion of illustration.<sup>45</sup>

Riese Hubert does not mention Michaux in this chapter, but there is no doubt that his dual activity, not to mention Bertelé’s editorial role, also complicates the reader’s reception of these books including text and image.

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<sup>43</sup> Renée Riese Hubert & Judd D. Hubert, ‘La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France’, in *Livres d’Artistes 1874-1999: The Dialogue between Painting and Poetry*, ed. by Jean Khalifa (Cambridge: Black Apollo Press, 2001), pp. 59-82 (p. 79).

<sup>44</sup> Maurice Imbert, *Henri Michaux: Les Livres illustrés* (Paris: la hune, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Renée Riese Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 18.

In an article entitled 'Une création multiforme: Le Livre d'artiste chez Henri Michaux', Elizabeth R. Jackson provides a bibliography of Michaux's *livres d'artiste*. Unfortunately, she does not give a precise definition for this genre, instead classifying Michaux's books containing both visual and verbal production as 'ce qu'on connaît comme le *livre d'artiste*, enraciné dans la tradition française, surtout prospère au vingtième siècle'.<sup>46</sup> A more satisfying definition of the term points to:

A type of luxury illustrated book in which each illustration is printed directly from the surface on which the artist has worked (etching plate, lithographic stone, etc.). The genre was originated by the dealer Ambroise Vollard, a great promoter of printmaking, and the first example is regarded as *Parallèlement* (1900), a book of poetry by Paul Verlaine illustrated with lithographs by Pierre Bonnard.<sup>47</sup>

Many famous works originate from this application of book form, which brings together poets and artists, for example, Apollinaire and André Derain, *L'Enchanteur pourrissant*; Pierre Reverdy and Pablo Picasso, *Cravates de chanvre*; Tristan Tzara and Joan Miró, *Parler seul*; and Paul Eluard and Joan Miró, *A toute épreuve*.<sup>48</sup>

In the 1960s, however, another type of artist's book was born in America.<sup>49</sup> This radical re-examination of the artist's role and use of the book, in stark comparison to its luxurious French counterpart, is contemporary to Michaux's last three books incorporating

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<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth R. Jackson, 'Une création multiforme: Le Livre d'artiste chez Henri Michaux', *Correspondance*, 4, *La Escritura y su espacio: Dossier Michaux* (November 1995), 92-99 (p. 93), Jackson's italics.

<sup>47</sup> Ian Chilvers, *Oxford Dictionary of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 353.

<sup>48</sup> The publishing details for these books are as follows: Paris: Henri Kahnweiler, 1909, Paris: Nord-Sud, 1922, Paris: Maeght, 1950 and Geneva: Gérald Cramer, 1958.

<sup>49</sup> Much of the problem concerning the definition of the *livre d'artiste* arises from the fact that the same term is used to describe two different forms. Anne Mœglin-Delcroix underlines this ambiguity in *Esthétique du livre d'artiste 1960/1980* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place/Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1997), p. 43: 'La seconde remarque a trait au vocabulaire français ("*livre d'artiste*", "*livre de peintre*", etc.) utilisé par les Anglo-Saxons chaque fois qu'il est question de cette spécialité française qu'est le livre illustré. Elle leur permet de faire une absolue distinction entre "*the livre d'artiste*" (pour désigner, on vient de le lire, les livres illustrés ou les livres de peintres) et "*the artist's book*" (pour désigner les livres d'artiste nés avec Ruscha et Roth), distinction qui disparaît totalement en français, puisque dans notre langue la première expression est l'exacte traduction de la seconde.'



experimentation with signs, and therefore must be taken into account in a study of this kind. On the back cover of her book dealing with this issue, Anne Mœglin-Delcroix describes this innovative form of expression:

En 1963 paraît un étrange petit livre d'images photographiques intitulé *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Signé du peintre californien Edward Ruscha et édité par lui, il est exemplaire d'un genre nouveau dans les arts plastiques, le livre d'artiste. À l'opposé de la tradition artisanale du 'livre illustré' ou du 'livre de peintre', objets précieux pour bibliophiles, dans lesquels un artiste associe des gravures au texte d'un écrivain, le 'livre d'artiste' a pour seul auteur un artiste, qui choisit de faire œuvre sous la forme moderne du livre, le plus souvent en édition non limitée.<sup>50</sup>

From the very beginning of this book, a formal distinction is made between the *livre illustré*, a term which Mœglin-Delcroix uses to describe a 'livre en édition limitée d'un poète qui fait appel à un artiste pour orner ses textes de gravures imprimées à la main',<sup>51</sup> and the *livre d'artiste*, the artist's book, which in her words is an 'œuvre de l'artiste pour les images comme pour le texte, d'une part, et œuvre fabriquée en un nombre non limité d'exemplaires à l'aide des moyens mécaniques d'impression et de reproduction propres au livre courant, d'autre part'.<sup>52</sup> So, as Michaux is both an established poet and an artist, to which of these categories do his books composed of signs subscribe? The answer, we shall see, is inevitably neither, as certain characteristics of his books belong to both classifications.

In the first chapter of her book, aptly entitled 'Qu'est-ce qu'un livre d'artiste?', Mœglin-Delcroix examines various aspects of the artist's book and its technical differences to the *livre illustré* or the *livre de peintre*. The artists who experimented with the *livre d'artiste* from the 1960s onwards, such as Dick Higgins, Sol LeWitt, Bernard Villers, Robert Filliou, Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager, Marcel Broodthaers and Ian Hamilton Finlay, used the normal, everyday book in order to escape the price-oriented world of art galleries and their distribution networks. Their works therefore became more accessible to the public as these books were not limited to small print runs, as is the case of the luxurious *livre illustré*. These artists were also closely

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<sup>50</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, back cover.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

involved at every stage of the creative and editing process.<sup>53</sup> Some artists even produced their own books without the help of a publisher, often setting up their own publishing houses in the process:

[...] ainsi de Ruscha (Heavy Industry Publications), de Dieter Roth (Forlag Ed) ou de Ian Hamilton Finlay dont la Wild Hawthorn Press en Écosse n'édite depuis lors que ses publications personnelles [...]. La plupart du temps, cependant, ces 'artistes éditeurs' publient d'autres artistes dont ils se sentent proches: ainsi de Something Else Press, éditions fondées par Dick Higgins à New York en 1963-1964, lequel a souvent expliqué que les artistes avaient décidé de s'organiser eux-mêmes parce que l'accès aux éditeurs ordinaires et aux médias en général leur était refusé.<sup>54</sup>

This again goes against the trend of the *livre illustré* in which the editor always played a major, if not excessive, role.<sup>55</sup> In this context, the use of the ordinary book form by artists in fact implies a political reflection on the democratisation of art. These artists aimed to use mass distribution methods, such as the postal system in Mailart, precisely to reverse the downward trend brought about by mass culture.

Michaux was far from sharing these allegiances, although he did use 'poor' materials for much of his artistic output: ballpoint pen, Crayolor and pencil for his mescaline drawings, fibre-tipped pen for many of the later series of signs. Many of his books, however, had limited print runs, for instance, *Parcours*, which, according to its colophon: 'a été tirée à soixante-dix exemplaires numérotés de 1/60 à 60/60 et I/X à X/X, / chaque planche étant signée et justifiée par l'artiste.'<sup>56</sup> Moreover, many of these limited editions contained lithographs by Michaux. For example, when the books including

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<sup>53</sup> Some poets in France, such as Pierre Lecuire, also create and edit their own books, but not with the same aim in mind. Lecuire is the *maître d'œuvre* of his own production, which, because of its very nature, is limited to small print runs. His books include visual input by Nicolas De Staël and Geneviève Asse, for example, and are closely linked to architecture and music. For more information on Pierre Lecuire, see *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, ed. by Pierrette Cruzet (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2001).

<sup>54</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> The chapter titles of François Chapon's *Le Livre et le peintre: L'Âge d'or du livre illustré en France 1870-1970* underline this major input from editors, as most of them use an editor's name, for example, 'Ambroise Vollard', 'Henry Kahnweiler', 'Albert Skira' and 'Aimé Maeght'.

<sup>56</sup> Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' for *Parcours, OC III*, pp. 1584-85 (p. 1584).

experimentation with signs are examined, we find that the special edition of *Par la voie des rythmes* was accompanied by a series of twelve lithographs; for *Saisir*, one lithograph was included and for *Par des traits*, eight serigraphs in colour were added.<sup>57</sup> The first publication of *Mouvements*, however, contains no lithographs. This presence or absence can most probably be justified by different editorial strategies on the part of Gallimard and fata morgana.<sup>58</sup>

Lithographic experimentation was not used systematically for the books containing signs, for Michaux had first used this creative process in *Meidosems*, three years before the publication of *Mouvements*. This use of lithography within the book obviously recalls the tradition of the *livre d'artiste* from the beginning of the century. It is a surprising choice of technique for Michaux on account of the lack of immediacy and spontaneity it allows in the creative process, although it must be remembered that this did not prevent him from experimenting with the medium of oil painting. Indeed, in 1949, in a letter to René Bertelé, he writes:

J'ai trouvé! J'ai trouvé le secret de la peinture à l'huile. Quel prodige. Insensément j'essaie un peu depuis deux ans, dans l'état de celui qui cherche un nouveau carburateur. [...] Un jour, lui donne raison – parfois – Le jour est arrivé – La vie entre, une vie commence et mille formes denses, entre [*sic*] par là.<sup>59</sup>

Gheerbrant justifies Michaux's lithographic experimentation by linking this engraving process to primitive expression: 'En constituant des séries H.M. affirme l'autonomie de son art; pour l'affirmer davantage, il ressent le besoin tout primitif de graver ses signes, de les

<sup>57</sup> See the 'catalogue raisonné' edited by Rainer Michael Mason & Christophe Cherix, *Henri Michaux: Les Estampes 1948-1984* for more details on Michaux's lithographic production.

<sup>58</sup> Gallimard deals mainly with text, whereas fata morgana is known for publishing *livres d'artiste* and other textual and visual collaborations. Indeed, Michaux published sixteen texts with fata morgana, from *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques* in 1972 to *Par des traits* in 1984. A catalogue of all the texts published by fata morgana from 1966 to 1993 has been established: *fata morgana: vingt-sept ans d'édition* (Fontfroide-le-Haut: fata morgana, 1993), which highlights the many collaborations between writers and artists within this publishing house. Moreover, Bruno Roy, who is in charge of fata morgana, stated that Gallimard never asked Michaux to produce any more books containing signs after *Mouvements* (Telephone conversation).

<sup>59</sup> *Correspondance René Bertelé & Henri Michaux 1942-1973*, ed. by Maurice Imbert (Paris: la hune, 1999), p. 34.

éprouver sur la pierre ou le métal.’<sup>60</sup> It is important to note for our purposes that the signs contained in *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* are always composed in ink either using a brush or a pen. Any lithographic experimentation takes the form of extra elements added to the text for limited editions.

Michaux also appeared to want his work to remain relatively inaccessible. Although most of his longer anthologies were published by Gallimard, he continued to use smaller publishing houses like René Drouin and Pierre Bettencourt for shorter volumes in order to retain a certain independence from his main publisher. René Bertelé recalls Michaux’s reluctance to cultivate a large readership:

‘Je crois qu’il n’y a pas plus de vingt personnes qui peuvent comprendre mes poèmes et mes peintures et c’est bien ainsi...’ À plusieurs reprises il revient sur cette idée qu’un poète ne doit compter que sur un public très restreint, que c’est folie de vouloir être compris de beaucoup, qu’il est très inquiet chaque fois que son œuvre menace d’avoir quelque rayonnement. Il me dit cette parole qui me frappe: il faut être revenu de beaucoup de choses pour aimer ce que je fais, et avec moi quelques autres (Braque, Éluard, etc...).<sup>61</sup>

This opinion is, of course, diametrically opposed to the notion of the artist’s book as a means of democratising art. Michaux’s use of smaller publishing houses can be attributed to the fact that they allowed him to experiment with book form in ways that larger, more conservative publishing houses would not. For this reason, it must be emphasised that, although the first book containing signs was published by Gallimard, the three remaining volumes were all published by *fata morgana*.

As has already been indicated in Chapter 1, René Bertelé played an important role in the creation of *Mouvements*, thereby underlining a parallel with the French *livre d’artiste*. Michaux had filled hundreds of sheets with signs before Bertelé made a crucial intervention, selecting them and placing them into groups, clusters or ‘familles’,<sup>62</sup> and then asking Michaux to write the poetic texts, which,

<sup>60</sup> Gheerbrant, ‘Comment se passer des mots? Henri Michaux et la série’, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Correspondance René Bertelé & Henri Michaux 1942-1973*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> This term is coined by Alfred Pacquement in his essay in Pacquement, *Henri Michaux: Peintures*, pp. 9-61 (p. 40).

together with the signs, constitute *Mouvements*. Even Michaux admits in the postface that:

Je ne sais trop ce que c'est, ces signes que j'ai faits [...] J'en avais couvert douze cents pages, et n'y voyais que flots, quand René Bertelé s'en empara, et, tâtonnant et réfléchissant, y découvrit des sortes de séquences...<sup>63</sup>

This division by Bertelé is the result of a first attempt at deciphering and a first critical reading. The book, then, is created via a collaborative critical experience rather than coming directly from the author. Indeed, referring to Bertelé, Michaux declares that *Mouvements* is 'plus son œuvre que la mienne'.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Bellour states that many of the corrections made to *Mouvements* are in Bertelé's handwriting.<sup>65</sup>

Bertelé played an important role in Michaux's life until the former's death in 1973.<sup>66</sup> Their exchange of letters attests to a close relationship and Bertelé was also the first to write a monograph on Michaux. *Mouvements* was not the only book in which he actively intervened. For example, he encouraged Michaux to experiment with the medium of lithography for *Meidosems*<sup>67</sup> and to publish *Passages*,<sup>68</sup> which, according to Bellour, '[...] est sans doute le livre qu'aura le moins voulu Michaux. Ce sera devenu peut-être, juste et injuste retour des choses, celui par lequel il (s') est défini le plus.'<sup>69</sup> Michaux also collaborated with Bertelé on another book, *Parcours*. Bertelé suggested to Michaux the composition of a textless book containing twelve plates of lithographs which bear a definite resemblance to the signs contained in *Alphabet* and *Narration* (Fig. 25). Unlike *Mouvements*, however, it is Bertelé who presents these in a preface:

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<sup>63</sup> Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 598.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 598.

<sup>65</sup> 'Les corrections sont le plus souvent de l'écriture de Bertelé; quelques-unes sont de la main de Michaux, qui a vraisemblablement signalé les autres à Bertelé.' Bellour, 'Notes et variantes' to *Face aux verrous*, *OC II*, p. 1223.

<sup>66</sup> This was fairly common for Bertelé. He took the same care of Jacques Prévert and his writings. See Danièle Gasiglia-Laster, 'René Bertelé, l'éditeur et l'ami', *Magazine littéraire*, 355 (June 1997), p. 29.

<sup>67</sup> Michaux, *Meidosems* (Paris: Le Point du jour, 1948).

<sup>68</sup> Michaux, *Passages* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Le Point du jour-NRF', 1950).

<sup>69</sup> Bellour, 'Notice' to *Passages*, *OC II*, pp. 1147-61 (p. 1161).



Fig. 25: *Parcours*, 1966  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007

Ce besoin est à l'origine, on le sait, de toute son œuvre de dessinateur et de peintre. [...] un certain schéma plastique se reconnaît et s'impose: l'ordonnement de signes l'un à la suite de l'autre, plus ou moins groupés en séquences, elles-mêmes plus ou moins rangées l'une sous l'autre, un peu comme les lignes d'une page d'écriture.<sup>70</sup>

This passage underlines the extent to which Bertelé understood Michaux's experimentation with graphic signs as well as the double nature of his creative activities.

From reading an entry to Raymond Queneau's diary, it becomes clear that Michaux considered collaboration as essential to the creation of the signs:

Revu Michaux (lui). On regarde des pictogrammes. Il dit que ça devrait se faire en collaboration. Lui, il se laisse emporter 'par sa joie', les miens trop stricts pour qu'on fasse quelque chose ensemble. Il a essayé avec Tapié, qui s'inspirait des trucs océaniens (ce qui semble avoir dégoûté Michaux) et Dubuffet qui avait mis huit jours pour en faire un.<sup>71</sup>

It transpires that this collaboration is not as simple as it first appears because Michaux's attempts at graphic creation with Queneau, Tapié and Dubuffet have all failed. This is not surprising when Queneau's 'pictogrammes' from *Bâtons, Chiffres et Lettres* are considered.<sup>72</sup> This text was first published in 1950, a year before *Mouvements*, and the pictograms included in the section entitled 'Graphies' appear 'stricts', rigid and figurative in comparison to Michaux's graphic signs. Queneau's pictograms function conventionally, that is to say, as pictorial symbols for a word or phrase used to communicate messages in an easily recognisable way, whilst Michaux's signs aim to render a certain corporeal and mental dynamism. Although these collaborative efforts were, on the whole, unsuccessful, Michaux continued to believe that there could exist a more efficient form of graphic expression than conventional writing systems for which teamwork was essential:

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<sup>70</sup> Michaux, *Parcours, OC III*, pp. 429-44 (pp. 431-32).

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Queneau, *Journaux 1914-1965* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 769.

<sup>72</sup> Queneau, 'Graphies', in *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 273-84.

J'ai voulu faire cette recherche en équipe, mais je n'ai jamais trouvé que des tordus comme moi. Je reste néanmoins persuadé qu'il y a toujours quelque chose à faire dans ce sens. J'ai voulu indiquer des caractères qui aient un contenu psychique. L'être aujourd'hui est mécontent de sa langue... En dehors des signes de signalisation il y aura bientôt cinq cent signes qui seront nécessaires dans le monde actuel. Il existe actuellement un problème du signal et du signal non verbalisable qui est essentiel. Le graphisme qui a tant de rapports avec l'homme deviendra de plus en plus riche, de plus en plus précis.<sup>73</sup>

His views on the importance of combined efforts at graphism for the future of written expression are corroborated by his continued experimentation with signs and the major graphic developments in both typography and page layout that have taken place over the twentieth century. Even in his last book incorporating graphic signs, *Par des traits*, he mentions the idea of working together to create a new language in the last sentence of a footnote on the very last page: 'Au lieu d'un seul inventeur, j'imagine plutôt un groupe de trois ou quatre se comprenant bien, rejoints ensuite par quelques personnalités complémentaires.'<sup>74</sup> Bertelé's involvement in the creation of *Mouvements* suggests that Michaux actively sought the participation of other artists or writers in his visual and verbal output. This appears to be corroborated by Queneau's diary entry concerning pictograms, but also in published texts, such as *Poésie pour pouvoir*, *Mouvements* and *Parcours*. Furthermore, two more publications by Michaux are illustrated by other artists: *Tranches de savoir, suivi de la situation politique* (1950) contains a frontispiece etching by Max Ernst and *Vigies sur cibles* (1959) includes nine etched engravings by Matta.

Bruno Roy's editorial input in the creation of *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* cannot be held to be as significant as René Bertelé's intervention in the creation of *Mouvements*, and yet the former's role was nonetheless of vital importance. When interviewed, Roy affirmed modestly that his role was strictly one of encouragement and that, unlike Bertelé, he did not participate directly in the creative process. He described himself, using a sporting metaphor, as a type of trainer or coach, who had to convince Michaux to pursue his experimentation with signs and then actively encourage him not to

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<sup>73</sup> Rey, *Henri Michaux*, pp. 25-28.

<sup>74</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1285.



give up.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Claude Fintz writes the following about Bruno Roy's participation:

[...] l'importance que Michaux accordait à l'avis de Bruno Roy, tant du point de vue de l'édition que de l'élaboration de ses textes (formulation des titres, conseils, réconforts). L'éditeur est resté dans l'ombre, mais pour Michaux il a été beaucoup plus qu'un technicien de l'édition.<sup>76</sup>

Consequently, it becomes clear that Michaux was reliant on editorial input, once more distinguishing his experimentation with book form from that undertaken by artists in the 1960s. Michaux was interested in a collaborative creative process, pointing to the poststructuralist view that any text is made up of multiple meanings produced by multiple authors, readers and viewers:

Nous savons maintenant qu'un texte n'est pas fait d'une ligne de mots, dégageant un sens unique, en quelque sorte théologique (qui serait le 'message' de l'Auteur-Dieu), mais un espace à dimensions multiples, où se marient et se contestent des écritures variées, dont aucune n'est originelle: le texte est un tissu de citations, issues des mille foyers de la culture.<sup>77</sup>

A text is therefore rather created through the mosaic of references and experiences of the author(s), reader(s) and viewer(s) and, above all, language.

One of Mœglin-Delcroix's major prerequisites for a book to qualify as an artist's book is that the visual works produced within it cannot be reproductions of works which exist outside the book:

À quelle condition un livre signé par un artiste est-il un livre d'artiste? À la condition que le livre soit une création, autrement dit, qu'il ne soit pas le moyen de reproduction d'une œuvre préexistante.<sup>78</sup>

This again creates a distinction between Michaux's experimentation and the artist's book as he exhibited some of his series of signs in art

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<sup>75</sup> Telephone conversation with Bruno Roy. See also Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' to *Par la voie des rythmes, OC III*, pp. 1652-54 (p. 1653).

<sup>76</sup> Fintz, *Expérience esthétique et spirituelle chez Henri Michaux*, p. 322.

<sup>77</sup> Barthes, 'La Mort de l'auteur', p. 67.

<sup>78</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, p. 51.

galleries.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, having studied René Bertelé's considerable input into the creation of *Mouvements*, spoken to Bruno Roy about his own role and viewed the original drawings at the Michaux archives, it can be confirmed that Michaux did not produce his signs exclusively for the book. He rather chose pages of drawings or specific sections from pre-existing series.<sup>80</sup> Hence, he did not compose the drawings especially for the books. Mœglin-Delcroix goes on to ask:

Étant admis qu'en règle générale le livre doit être une création, à quelle nécessité répond le choix du medium livre? La réponse à cette question permet en effet de juger si la forme du livre est autre chose qu'un réceptacle commode, un contenant indifférent au contenu ou si, au contraire, *par* le livre s'établit un rapport de convenance réciproque, ou mieux, de dépendance réciproque entre la structure du livre et le sujet du livre.<sup>81</sup>

It is at this point that Michaux's eventual insertion of his graphic signs into the pages of the book becomes comparable to the artist's book, as there is no doubt that the relationship between the structure of the conventional book and its unconventional content constitutes a thorough questioning of this form. In *Par la voie des rythmes*, in particular, Michaux attempts to challenge conventional expectations of the book by suppressing any verbal element. And yet, the book is able to exist without words, just as textual elements can exist without the book.<sup>82</sup> This is obviously proved by the publication of Michaux's

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<sup>79</sup> These series continue to be exhibited today, for example, the exhibition that took place at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1999 opened with a series of ink drawings entitled *Mouvements*.

<sup>80</sup> For example, the original pages of graphic signs used for *Par la voie des rythmes* contain some which are divided by pencil lines into grids. From comparing the original drawings and the published books containing signs, we have noted that, at times, Michaux used only part of his original drawing in the published version. Several pages in book form can thus originate from a single page of drawings. Moreover, Michaux evaluated his own drawings: on some pages, one can make out a small 'b', which, according to Micheline Phankim, stood for *bien* (Information gathered from visit to Michaux archives and conversation with Phankim). This act of self-assessment appears to point to the fact that Michaux took care in composing his signs, so they cannot be described as a merely ludic enterprise.

<sup>81</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, p. 55, Mœglin-Delcroix's emphasis.

<sup>82</sup> For example, the poet and 'book-architect', Pierre Lecuire, attempts to liberate the word from the page and the book: 'Lecuire a toujours proclamé la primauté du poème sur toute forme d'expression, fût-elle le livre lui-même. La logique de cette ascèse le poussa à prendre la voie d'une expression directe, délivrée de tout support, permettant au Poème d'échapper à la pesanteur, d'être une sorte d'apparition écrite dans l'espace,

*Par la voie des rythmes*, but also by numerous artist's books containing little or no verbal content.

Marcel Broodthaers's reworking of Mallarmé's poem, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, is a particularly valuable example, as it makes reference to the spatial qualities of a groundbreaking text without using any words apart from those on the front cover:

Il s'agit d'une transcription visuelle du poème de Mallarmé d'après l'édition originale de Gallimard (1914), sous une couverture et dans un format identiques. Seules modifications: au mot 'Poème' a été substitué le mot 'Image' et à la mention de la NRF, celle des nouveaux éditeurs, les galeries Wide White Space à Anvers et Michael Werner à Cologne. À l'intérieur, les vers du poème sont remplacés par des barres noires horizontales de longueurs et épaisseurs différentes afin de conserver exactement la disposition typographique initiale. Broodthaers parachève ainsi la mise en espace du poème par Mallarmé lui-même, mais au détriment de sa nature de texte puisqu'il n'est plus lisible.<sup>83</sup>

This poet and visual artist's experimentation is obviously a comment on the contradiction between reading and looking at a book and can be compared to the last page of *Saisir*, already examined in Chapter 2, on which the layout of a poem is easily recognisable, but no meaning can be deciphered, as all the words have been obscured by thick black smudges. The contemporary visual artist, Pierre Buraglio, works on a similar concept in his series of *Caviardages* from the 1980s and 1990s. The creative process involved in these works consists of taking pre-existent written material, his diary, postcards or a newspaper, and crossing out all the text so that it becomes illegible:

L'occultation du signe écrit aboutit, en même temps qu'elle est opacification du sens, à une soudaine mise en valeur de la force plastique du

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donc de dépasser le déchiffrement, le mot-à-mot, le lettre-à-lettre, le balbutiement.' See *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, pp. 227 & 229.

<sup>83</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, p. 20. Broodthaers considered Mallarmé's text to be the inaugural work of contemporary art: 'Mallarmé est la source de l'art contemporain ... Il invente inconsciemment l'espace moderne [...] Un coup de dés. Ce serait un traité de l'art. Le dernier en date, celui de Léonard de Vinci, a perdu de son importance, car il accordait aux arts plastiques une place trop grande et on le devine aujourd'hui, à ses maîtres (les Médicis).' Cited in *Marcel Broodthaers*, ed. by Catherine David and Véronique Dabin (Paris: Jeu de Paume/Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1991), p. 139.

signe en tant que tel. Comme si, débarrassé du sens qui lui a été arbitrairement attribué, le signe, même recouvert de hachures, retrouvait sa valeur graphique initiale. Certes, les biffures de Buraglio recouvrent l'écriture au point de la rendre non seulement illisible, mais invisible. [...]. La biffure suit l'écriture. Elle la recouvre, elle la viole en la privant de sa capacité de dire, mais elle trahit, elle indique en même temps qu'elle biffe, l'emplacement de ce qu'elle a biffé. Le caviardage transforme le lisible en signe illisible.<sup>84</sup>

*Par la voie des rythmes* can be seen in a similar light: all verbal input has been negated, but this absence still forms an integral part of the book. Michaux creates a new form of expression, which is dependent on book form to express its rhythm and dynamism, but, above all, demands the reader to look rather than read. As Mœglin-Delcroix points out:

Si l'artiste peut exprimer la même chose sur le mur d'un musée où il accrocherait, par exemple, ses photographies, si l'œuvre peut être ce qu'elle est sans la forme du livre qui ne sert alors qu'à la reproduire, le livre n'est pas sa manifestation la plus adéquate et n'est donc pas intrinsèquement nécessaire à l'œuvre.<sup>85</sup>

Michaux's signs appear static, hung on the wall of an art gallery, whereas, in a book, their momentum is determined by the reader turning the page. This also places them in a temporal order.

Although Michaux's books incorporating signs could be regarded as a continuation of the tradition of the *livre d'artiste* because of their limited print runs, luxurious editions and the editorial participation of both René Bertelé and Bruno Roy, they seem closer in spirit to the artist's book of the 1960s because of a radical interrogation of book form. The term, *livre illustré*, is often used to avoid the difficulties in defining the *livre d'artiste*. Mœglin-Delcroix uses this expression when considering the books containing both pictorial and textual production by the artists and writers involved in the CoBra group:

Mais les livres de CoBra sont restés tributaires de l'histoire du dialogue entre écriture et peinture, tel qu'il continue de s'exprimer traditionnellement

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<sup>84</sup> Pierre Wat, *Pierre Buraglio* (Paris: Centre National des Arts plastiques/Flammarion, Collection 'La création contemporaine', 2001), pp. 90-96.

<sup>85</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, p. 55.

dans des livres réalisés en collaboration, quand bien même peintres et écrivains échangent leurs fonctions.<sup>86</sup>

The *livre illustré* may be more apt for evoking Michaux's books containing other forms of visual and verbal production or collaborations with artists and writers, which suggest a dialogue between writing and painting,<sup>87</sup> such as *Parcours*, *Vigies sur cibles* and *Hors de la colline* by Vadim Kozovoï, which contains fifteen lithographs by Michaux that illustrate the poems translated from the Russian.<sup>88</sup>

*Parcours* and *Vigies sur cibles* are in fact exemplary of the *livre d'artiste* tradition as they were both produced in luxurious editions and had limited print runs.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, *Parcours* is a very large book.<sup>90</sup> This implies that Michaux produced these books for a very limited number of readers, perhaps even for bibliophiles. It has also been suggested that the pages of lithographs that constitute *Parcours* were found by René Bertelé in a drawer and that the actual format of the book is the same as those original sheets of paper.<sup>91</sup> All of Michaux's experimentation with signs would apparently have been composed using this size and would have been dramatically reduced

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<sup>86</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> The expression 'book of dialogue' ('livre de dialogue') was suggested by Yves Peyré to describe a book containing text and image in 'A Glimpse of the Future', *The Dialogue between Poetry and Painting*, pp. 159-69. In our opinion, this term is unable to encompass all the nuances and indeed contradictions present in the various and overlapping definitions of the *livre d'artiste*, the *livre illustré* and the *livre de peintre*.

<sup>88</sup> Vadim Kozovoï, *Hors de la colline* (Paris: Hermann, 1984).

<sup>89</sup> At the end of *Vigies sur cibles*, one can read: 'Cet ouvrage a été édité sous la direction de Max Clarac-Sérou pour les Éditions du Dragon. Composé en Plantin romain corps 18 il a été tiré en pointure sur un papier spécialement fabriqué à la main par le maître papetier A.-G. Cabrol, papier dont chaque feuille porte en filigrane le monogramme de Henri Michaux et la signature de Matta. Le tirage a été limité à 99 exemplaires contenant chacun neuf gravures en couleurs de MATTA.' Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' to *Vigies sur cibles*, *OC II*, pp. 1359-61 (p. 1359).

<sup>90</sup> It in fact measures 54.6 x 41.7 cm. *Henri Michaux: Les Estampes 1948-1984*, p. 35.

<sup>91</sup> Conversation with Jacques Carion. This former publisher, who now teaches at the Université catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium, believes that Michaux's output including experimentation with signs belongs to the category of *livre illustré*, on account of the traditional editorial role played first by Bertelé and then Roy. For him, the *livre d'artiste* is created by someone from outside literary circles, who diverts the book from its conventional literary function.

for publication, thus transforming spatially the reader or viewer's reception of these books.<sup>92</sup>

The term, *livre illustré*, is also unsuitable for describing the books incorporating signs as the signs do not illustrate the text; they *are* the text. *Par la voie des rythmes*, in particular, cannot be described as a *livre d'artiste*, an artist's book or a *livre illustré*. It actually contains a form of writing, one which violently questions our own reading habits and attempts to render a widely felt yet intimate experience. As René Bertelé defines it in his introduction to *Parcours*:

Écriture d'Henri Michaux, créée et inventée par lui, pour lui, pour dire ce qu'il a à dire, qui ne ressemble à rien d'autre. Écriture des débuts du monde, celui de la 'préhistoire' aussi bien que celui de l'homme en son jeune âge. Écriture qui nous ramène aux sources primitives de la communication, d'un avant les mots et leur abstraction, faite pour une confidence plus directe et plus intime.<sup>93</sup>

Michaux believes that the physical properties of the book itself can assist its visual or verbal content in his objective of expressing the mobile nature of the inner self as well as the absurdity of the outside world. For this reason, it could be suggested that the would-be reader of *Par la voie des rythmes* witnesses the destruction of book form, a process enacted iconographically on the page through the introduction of anthropomorphic figures that replace traditional writing systems. *Par la voie des rythmes* can no longer be classified as a conventional written document because semantics and typography have been so comprehensively questioned. The empty shell of the book form has instead been filled with a sequence of signs that belongs to an intimate code for which the reader does not have the key. Indeed, this decomposition of the book, and thus of authorial authority, underlines Michaux's deliberate provocation as an established author in creating these books made of signs. As he states in *Émergences-Résurgences*: 'Je n'ai rien à faire, je n'ai qu'à défaire.'<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> A visit to the Michaux archives to examine the original drawings for *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* and photographs taken by Maurice Fourcade of Michaux working on the *Mouvements* series confirm this information concerning the size and format of the paper used.

<sup>93</sup> Michaux, *Parcours*, OC III, p. 432.

<sup>94</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, pp. 564-65. According to Bruno Roy, the publication of *Par la voie des rythmes* was a type of wager, a challenge to Roy, the publishing world and Michaux's readers in general (Telephone conversation).

### Rejection of Writing Systems?

The notion of the book, however, is not entirely demolished, as all of Michaux's experimentation with signs retains some aspects of formal writing systems. His choice to publish these signs in a literary context, and, in so doing, to allow the visual element to take precedence over the verbal in the latter's traditionally assigned space, is of great importance. Moreover, the general organisation of the signs appears to adhere to the conventions of textual production. This dimension is clearly foregrounded by the layout of *Par la voie des rythmes* in spite of the absence of any verbal input.

The pages incorporating figures in all four of the books containing signs consist of black characters drawn in ink, either with a brush or a pen, on a white background, underlining the formal and familiar aspects of the written page. This process is sometimes completely reversed with instead white characters on a black background (Fig. 26). Georges Roque reminds the reader of the conclusions reached by Eugène Chevreul, in *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (1839), concerning a theory of colours and the chromatic circle that greatly influenced artists from the Impressionists to Robert and Sonia Delaunay. For printed writing, the standard combination of black ink on white paper was considered the most satisfying in terms of readability and ease on the eye:

The demand for clarity or immediate legibility, which colour contradicts or compromises, is a trait which drawing and writing have in common. Clarity must, however, be understood in two senses: the clarity of drawing and writing which are readily distinguishable from their background, and the clarity of a lucidly expressed thought.<sup>95</sup>

Writing and drawing both exclude colour, which during the nineteenth century was considered to encourage emotivity and thus prevent clarity of expression. Roque maintains that:

Colour is faulted with becoming a sign of nothing other than itself, whereas drawing remains the sign of something else (be it an object, a thought, or anything else that moves the artist). Whence the ubiquitous allusions to and

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<sup>95</sup> Georges Roque, 'Writing/Drawing/Colour', *Yale French Studies*, 84, *Boundaries: Writing and Drawing*, 43-62 (p. 45).

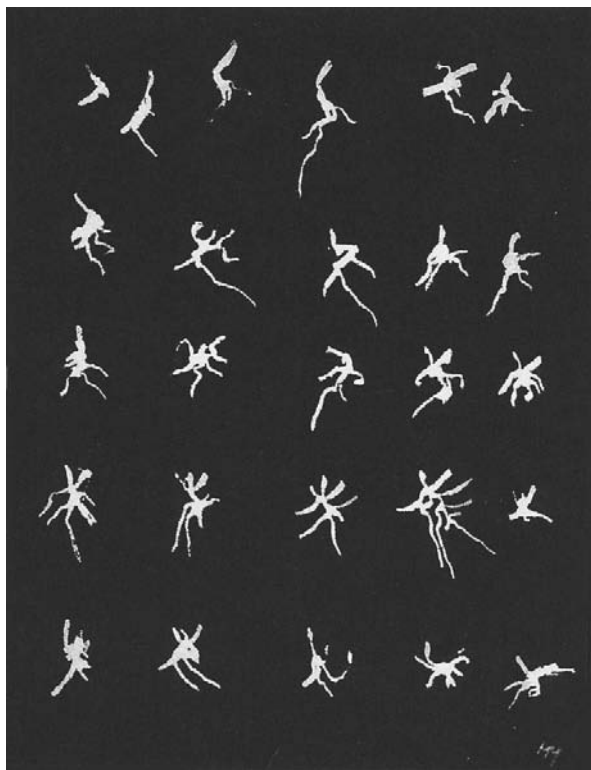


Fig. 26: Untitled (*Mouvements*), 1951  
(Gouache on black paper, 32 x 24 cm)  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007



analogies with writing, which is held to be another instrumental mode of thought, obediently submitting to that which it expresses.<sup>96</sup>

Michaux adheres to the same conventions regarding colour as most traditional writing systems. The practical communicational purposes of using black signs on a white background are, however, rendered null and void by the fact that Michaux's graphic signs do not function according to prevailing semantic codes.

As has already been noted, some of the original drawings for *Par des traits* were composed in red ink and red fibre-tipped pen. Furthermore, the first eighty copies of this volume were accompanied by eight serigraphs in colour by the author. This sudden excursion into colour is somewhat surprising as no colour is included in the other books incorporating signs and their accompanying lithographs. Bernard Gheerbrant comments on this introduction of colour in the following terms:

Les exemplaires de tête comportent une suite de petites sérigraphies verticales [...] où, comme à l'accoutumé, ses personnages deviennent signes, lignes d'écriture: mais pour la première fois en couleur, brun-rouge, ou noir et vieux rouge. Non pour donner une troisième dimension mais bien pour aller encore plus loin que *Saisir* dans l'expression du doublement des corps.<sup>97</sup>

According to Gheerbrant, Michaux's use of colour in *Par des traits* enables him to express corporeal expression more succinctly than in *Saisir*, thereby taking his experimentation with signs a step further.

In Michaux's first attempts at a form of expression using signs, his 'alphabets', some colour is also included. The original *Alphabet* dating from 1927 contains whole sequences of hieroglyphic figures; the fact that some of these are composed in red ink is lost in most reproductions (Fig. 1). This colour suggests prehistoric pictograms in which red was a predominant colour that is believed to have symbolised life, death, violence or danger. Indeed, Michaux compares paint to blood, hence implying the colour red, in a short text entitled 'Homme-bombe' in *La Vie dans les plis*:

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<sup>96</sup> Roque, 'Writing/Drawing/Colour', p. 54.

<sup>97</sup> Gheerbrant, 'L'Œuvre graphique d'Henri Michaux', p. 177.

D'ailleurs je ne tue plus. Tout lasse. Encore une époque de ma vie de finie. Maintenant, je vais peindre, c'est beau les couleurs, quand ça sort du tube, et parfois encore quelque temps après. C'est comme du sang.<sup>98</sup>

A large majority of the texts preceding this final text of the section 'Liberté d'action' deal with the therapeutic nature of violent acts, including murder. This parallel between paint and blood can therefore be said to underline the healing nature of the painting activity for Michaux.

On the other hand, the titles of these 'essais d'écriture',<sup>99</sup> *Alphabet* and *Narration*, imply linguistic notions of signification, representation and communication, and, in the case of the latter, literary aspirations. Michaux drew numerous other alphabets and signs, often using Indian ink (Fig. 27), and even coloured gouache figures from the 1940s to the 1970s (Fig. 15). This use of colour could be linked to Pollock's all-over drip paintings. Pollock, before turning to Action Painting, had similarly composed drawings in black ink depicting rows of humanoid figures.<sup>100</sup> As Michel Butor points out in an interview with Martine Reid:

In late nineteenth century writing, as it is represented in painting, ink was used, a liquid pigment, which was not the case in painting. Pasty pigments were used in oil painting, or in certain instances liquid pigments such as watercolours, but this dried very quickly... Pollock, on the other hand, uses a liquid paint which creates a kind of thread, and this is very close to handwriting.<sup>101</sup>

And yet, although Michaux did venture into colour with his signs, it is never introduced into his books incorporating graphic signs.<sup>102</sup> His use of black and white is in fact intrinsically linked to the notions of movement, simplicity and speed. He states in an interview with Jean-Dominique Rey:

<sup>98</sup> Michaux, 'Homme-bombe', in 'Liberté d'Action', *La Vie dans les plis, OC II*, p. 171.

<sup>99</sup> Underneath the rows of hieroglyphic figures that make up *Alphabet*, Michaux has written 'À Jean Paulhan ces essais d'écriture'. This inscription can only really be ascertained when viewing the original version (Fig. 1).

<sup>100</sup> *Jackson Pollock*, ed. by Kirk Varnedoe, with Pepe Karmel, pp. 162-63.

<sup>101</sup> Martine Reid, 'Bricolage: An Interview with Michel Butor', *Yale French Studies*, 84, *Boundaries: Writing and Drawing*, 17-26 (p. 20).

<sup>102</sup> This could be linked to price as it is evidently cheaper to print in black and white than in colour.

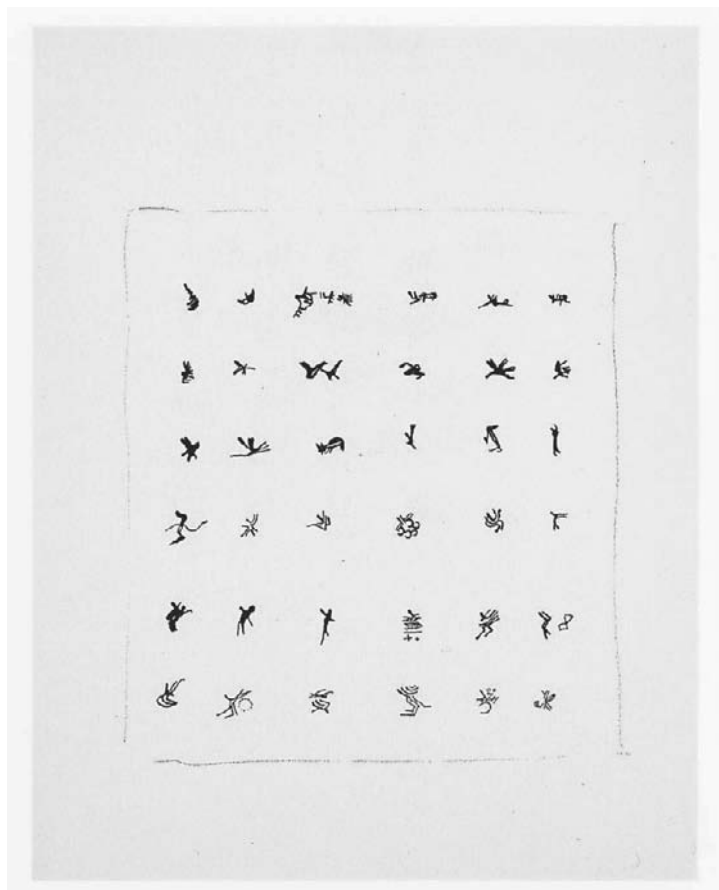


Fig. 27: Untitled (*Alphabet*), 1944  
(Indian ink on paper, 32 x 24 cm)  
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À la différence de ceux qui pratiquent la vitesse, de ceux qui en sont les champions, comme Pollock et Mathieu, je fais des mobiles, des parties de dessins qui l'évoquent, des pièces détachées qui foutent le camp... des petits paquets qui sont représentatifs des mouvements de cette vitesse. Sans quoi l'impression d'ensemble serait d'une grandiose exaspération. Ce mouvement représentatif de mouvement amène à une relative simplicité: noir et blanc... À aucun moment il ne faut que je perde la rapidité.<sup>103</sup>

Michaux's choice of Indian ink and a paper support in *Mouvements* imitates conventional writing systems, but also transposes the dynamism of the inner self and the creative act by harnessing the fluidity of the ink on the surface of the paper.<sup>104</sup> The use of the fibre-tipped pen in *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* reduces this fluidity, but increases the rapidity of the composition of the figures. Nevertheless, these books still mimic traditional writing systems through their layout.

The signs in these four books often call for a linear reading, either vertically, horizontally or, as we have seen for *Saisir*, diagonally. For example, most of the anthropomorphic signs and lines included in the third chapter of *Par la voie des rythmes* are organised in a fairly linear manner, reminding the reader of the horizontal format of the written line. And yet the fourth chapter attempts to shatter this comforting linearity by introducing large circular configurations with dashes around their circumference which remind the reader of childlike attempts at representing the sun or faces (Fig. 28). Adelia V. Williams suggests that these circular signs were inspired by Chinese seal script characters.<sup>105</sup> These characters are the most ancient form of Chinese writing and are generally used nowadays as a type of signature:

De nos jours, elle [l'écriture dite 'sigillaire'] n'est plus guère utilisée que pour graver les sceaux, dont les Chinois se servent quotidiennement là où un Occidental apposerait simplement sa signature. En Chine, l'usage du cachet personnel remonte à la plus haute antiquité et la qualité de celui-ci permet de reconnaître l'homme de goût.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Rey, *Henri Michaux*, p. 19.

<sup>104</sup> In the original drawings from the *Mouvements* series, the materiality of the ink is tangible through the reflection of light on the black signs (Visit to Michaux archives).

<sup>105</sup> Williams, *The Double Cipher*, p. 162.

<sup>106</sup> Chang, *La Calligraphie chinoise*, pp. 5-6.



Fig. 28:

*Par la voie des rythmes, OC III, p. 794*

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These seals can often be seen in red on Chinese calligraphies and paintings, indicating generally the collector's signature:

Les cachets rouges des collectionneurs, qui constellent la surface d'une calligraphie, permettent d'en retracer l'histoire. Cette habitude des collectionneurs d'apposer leur cachet sur les œuvres qu'ils ont l'heureux privilège de posséder est fort ancienne, et nous la trouvons déjà sous la dynastie des Ts'i (479-501).<sup>107</sup>

Williams also notes that the linear sequences of stick figures reappear momentarily in this fourth section of *Par la voie des rythmes*. They represent in fact two pages out of the seven that constitute the chapter.

Michaux uses his favourite decelerating technique, the blank page, at the beginning and the end of the section, to prevent the three pages of extravagant circular motion from overflowing into the next chapter. And indeed, the first pages of signs in the fifth chapter appear to conform to a fairly subdued horizontality. This final chapter is the longest and it goes without saying that this apparent linearity does not last for long. Structured by the blank page, the acceleration of the signs is provided by the whirling disintegration of their figural forms. As the figures become more abstract, they also become more horrific. The reader's imagination gives form to monstrous insects, animals and men with many limbs and tentacles, poised for attack. Michaux considers the unusual appearance of his signs in 'Dessiner l'écoulement du temps':

Les animaux et moi avons affaire ensemble. Mes mouvements je les échangeais, en esprit, contre les leurs, avec lesquels, libéré de la limitation du bipède, je me répandais au-dehors... Je m'en grisais, surtout des plus sauvages, des plus subits, des plus saccadés. J'en inventais d'impossibles, j'y mêlais l'homme, non avec ses quatre membres tout juste bons pour le sport, mais muni de prolongements extraordinaires, suscités spontanément par ses humeurs, ses désirs, en une incessante morpho-création.<sup>108</sup>

Following the numerous confrontations with these zoomorphic entities, the last page of *Par la voie des rythmes* is reassuring in its simplicity. A singular, triumphant sign with four imperfect circles at the end of each limb frolics in the middle of the page, suggesting a return to order, balance and harmony.

<sup>107</sup> Chang, *La Calligraphie chinoise*, p. 29.

<sup>108</sup> Michaux, 'Dessiner l'écoulement du temps', *OC II*, pp. 372-73.

In Michaux's four books incorporating signs, each sign is generally of a similar size and occupies its own space in the format of the page. Conventional writing systems, whether they be alphabetic or ideographic, follow the same principles of compartmentalisation:

Dans le cas du livre imprimé, c'est la page elle-même qui fournit la case maximum, tandis que la case minimum renferme une seule graphie. Entre ces deux limites, il existe normalement toute une série de cases intermédiaires: mot, ligne, paragraphe, colonne.<sup>109</sup>

This division into a logical structure helps the reader to take in the page as a whole. The signs at the beginning of *Par la voie des rythmes* appear to be in a grid, much like those throughout *Mouvements*. A clear vertical and horizontal organisation keeps each sign within its own division of the page, for example, the first page with a chapter heading contains nine battling humanoid signs divided into three vertical and three horizontal rows (Fig. 22). Various limbs seem to be moving from the centre of each sign, but they all keep within their own assigned spaces. This containment, again, is short-lived. Horizontal axes blur as the signs break free from this prevailing order. The conflation of individual signs into groups or whole lines accentuates the difference between printed and cursive handwriting and underlines the scriptural quality of these zigzags. As Barthes states when considering Cy Twombly's visual production:

C'est en somme une écriture dont il ne resterait que le penchement, la cursivité; dans le graphisme antique, la cursive est née du besoin (économique) d'écrire vite: lever la plume coûte cher. Ici, c'est tout le contraire: cela tombe, cela pleut finement, cela se couche comme des herbes, cela rature par désœuvrement, comme s'il s'agissait de rendre visible le temps, le tremblement du temps.<sup>110</sup>

In Michaux's case, as in Twombly's, it is not for the economic reasons identified by Barthes that he fills the page with horizontal bands of figures without lifting the brush or pen. But unlike Twombly's scribbled lines, Michaux's figures gradually merge, implying an acceleration of both creative and receptive processes. For when Michaux's signs are compartmentalised, it is almost as if they are

<sup>109</sup> Harris, *La Sémiologie de l'écriture*, p. 230.

<sup>110</sup> Barthes, 'Cy Twombly ou Non multa sed multum', p. 1038.

waiting for the signal to break from an oppressive structure. As the reader turns the pages of *Par la voie des rythmes*, the signs can no longer obey linear constraints; they become more abstract, finer and lighter as if they were attempting to escape from the page. Once more, Michaux uses the blank page as a type of brake to regain some control and slow down the swirling masses of lines by restoring them to a linear order.

These consistent returns to horizontality, which slow the reading process, point to Michaux's dependence on narrative order. And yet, the reader is unable to 'saisir', to grasp the meaning of the signs, for they also create a personal experience that cannot be interpreted by an 'other'. In this light, Michaux's experimentation with signs in *Par la voie des rythmes* could in fact be described as a type of anti-writing. Indeed, the contemporary poet, Bernard Noël, refers to the totality of Michaux's visual production as a 'contre-écriture'<sup>111</sup> that retains 'le geste qui la trace'<sup>112</sup> and conveys 'l'instant qui la fait être, et qui, en elle, n'en finit pas de la pulser'.<sup>113</sup> Michaux's signs may at times mimic the external appearance of writing, but they reject its main communicative functions. They escape from the conventions and codes governing meaning, pronunciation and readability in order to start anew. Michaux's experimentation with signs is not his only attempt at transgressing conventional book form. Like many other writers and artists, he experimented with this form throughout his life, showing a particular interest in the Oriental scroll. From examining the complex definition of the essentially artistic genre of the *livre d'artiste*, it may be affirmed that Michaux's enigmatic glyphs still follow certain literary codes and in fact need to remain within literary boundaries in order to be able to question these very forms.

In Chapter 3, Roland Barthes's concept of an 'intertext' was used to consider the interstitial space that Michaux's signs occupy between Western and Oriental signifying systems. This experimentation with signs is in fact produced in the interval between not only these writing systems, but also writing and drawing, as well as movement and fatigue. Furthermore, there are other books by

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<sup>111</sup> Bernard Noël, 'Les Peintures noires de Michaux', in Bernard Noël, *Vers Henri Michaux* (Paris: Unes, 1998), pp. 29-35 (p. 34).

<sup>112</sup> Noël, 'Les Pulsations d'une poussée vers le visible', in *ibid.*, pp. 37-47 (p. 46).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.



Michaux that create a dialogue between different creative forms and practices, such as the mescaline works which vacillate between scientific and poetic discourse in both visual and verbal form. In order to encompass these various crossovers, a broader term than 'intertext' is needed. At this point, the notion of 'intermedia' can be introduced. This word was borrowed from Samuel Taylor Coleridge by the Fluxus poet Dick Higgins in order to evoke a conceptual fusion of two different art forms that can no longer be described as mixed media because they are indistinguishable. As Higgins states in an interview:

La performance intermedia telle qu'un happening est une chose, mais la poésie visuelle, la poésie concrète, qui sont une fusion du visuel et du littéraire, sont aussi 'intermedia'. Si vous essayez de les considérer comme des 'mixed media', des medias mixtes, vous allez avoir des difficultés.<sup>114</sup>

This is precisely the case for Michaux's mescaline works and his experimentation with signs. The latter, particularly in the textless *Par la voie des rythmes*, rejects both semantics and the written word. His radical approach to the reading process demands an active reader, ready to continue the text. In the case of the graphic signs, the reader must be aware that these are drawings. They function, however, in the same physical way as any writing system because of their layout on the page and their existential dependence on book form. It can therefore be said that they are intermedia as all boundaries are blurred between writing and drawing, within the book and beyond it.

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<sup>114</sup> 'Entretien avec Dick Higgins', *Poésure et Peintrie: D'un art, l'autre*, pp. 418-31 (p. 428).

## Chapter 6

### **Beyond the Book: Searching for other Expressive Forms**

In this final chapter, Michaux's use of rhythm, repetition and the series to organise both his textual output and his signs will be analysed, taking into consideration the book form itself, and especially the blank space and page, which play vital roles in textual construction, particularly when no conventional narrative order is followed. Michaux's experimentation with expressive forms outside the book that also revolve around rhythm can then be explored, firstly examining his interest in cinema. The development of the cinematographic form is an important phenomenon of the twentieth century, and many other artists and writers, like Michaux, believed that it was the exemplary expressive form to render the speed, movement and immediacy of the modern experience. Michaux's references to film in his literary production will be examined, followed by an analysis of a possible parallel between early filmmaking techniques and his signs. His passion for music can then be evaluated. Although the textual and visual rhythms formed in his poetic texts and signs cannot be described as the same as musical rhythm, Michaux still considered music as the ideal art form for rendering the pulsations of the inner self. A short comparison between Michaux's experimentation with signs and dance notation will end this chapter as their respective aims of transcribing movement in a universal graphic system appear at first glance to be fundamentally similar.

#### **Use of Rhythm**

The poetic text in *Mouvements* illustrates how Michaux was well aware of the repercussions of repetition on a text as he takes full advantage of the incantatory and litanic effects produced. It is a poem of attack which demands power and action and can be regarded as the

verbal correlative of the movements signified by the signs as well as a commentary on the creative process involved.<sup>1</sup> The text in fact mimics the fluidity of the figures through a rapid succession of images which evoke, for example, men, plants, battles, sea creatures and demons. These images join together, follow and then efface each other. It could be suggested that the accompanying poem imitates the variety of the rhythm and movement developed in the signs using linguistic enumeration. It also describes the birth of the signs, underlining the importance of spontaneous gesture.

On the other hand, Bertelé's organisation of the signs in *Mouvements* somewhat undermines any notions of spontaneity and immediacy. Michaux mirrors this selection in his text through stanzas of different length that emphasise their affiliation to certain groups of signs through the repetition of one word. In some stanzas, this repetition appears to function like a title, and thus signal a certain theme, while, in others, it seems simply to accentuate one word, creating a particular tone or colour for the stanza in question, for example:

un arraché de bas en haut  
 un arraché de partout  
 un arraché jamais plus rattaché.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is not only applied to the important thematic words in the stanza, but also to seemingly more banal linguistic elements, for example, in *Par des traits*:

Pour dégager  
 Pour desserrer  
 pour assécher  
 pour débloquer  
 pour faire éclater.<sup>3</sup>

This creates a very similar effect: the phonetic characteristics of the word become as important as the meaning. This repetitive process puts the signifier in a prominent position alongside the signified.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bowie, *Henri Michaux*, p. 117; and Adamowicz, 'Visions on the edge: Faces in the work of Henri Michaux', p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements, OC II*, p. 435.

<sup>3</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits, OC III*, p. 1250.

Furthermore, it provides the text with a hypnotic rhythm, alluding to musical compositions or religious litanies, which suggests a ritualistic as well as incantatory aspect to Michaux's pages of signs. Consequently, Michaux employs a litanic process to place the signified and the signifier on the same level, remaining aware that constant repetition eventually renders any word meaningless, thus 'exorcising' it from linguistic constraints.

Towards the end of 'DES LANGUES ET DES ÉCRITURES / POURQUOI L'ENVIE DE S'EN DÉTOURNER', Michaux mentions this idea of repetition in comparison to the freedom of the line: 'Signe : enfin délivrant des litanies de mots, des phrases ne reposant que sur des phrases, se continuant en phrases il libérerait le cerveau de sa suroccupation locale.'<sup>4</sup> This quotation emphasises once more the liberating capacity of the signs for Michaux in comparison to the rigidity of words and sentences and their choking grammatical and syntactical confines. This use of repetition, which is particular to both *Mouvements* and *Par des traits*, has already been evoked in Chapter 2 for its litanic effect ultimately leading to Michaux's concept of exorcism. The third book incorporating signs, *Saisir*, contains far more prose and, although the verb 'saisir' is often repeated, it does not produce the same declamatory tone:

saisir  
voulant saisir, saisir m'accapara

je n'étais plus que ça, je l'étais trop  
l'esprit saisi, l'être saisi.<sup>5</sup>

As we know, the signs in all four books aim to render Michaux's individual inner rhythm in a more widely apprehensible manner. In *Mouvements* and *Par des traits*, this rhythm appears to be created textually by the repetition of certain words. This, however, is problematic because rhythm and repetition function in different manners linguistically and paralinguistically.

Henri Meschonnic states in an article entitled 'Le rythme et le poème chez Henri Michaux', in which he analyses the various rhythmic techniques used by Michaux in his verbal output: 'Mais la répétition n'est pas le rythme, le rythme n'est pas la répétition.

<sup>4</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1284.

<sup>5</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, OC III, p. 951.

Comme le voudraient des psychanalystes. Parce que la répétition est une limite du rythme. Une maladie du rythme.<sup>6</sup> Clive Scott agrees that repetition and rhythm are different processes. He writes when defining rhythm:

To describe rhythm as a principle of repetition is to dessemanticize and to displace it; rhythm is not to be dissociated from the particularity of its context (the verse-instance); it is part of the dynamic of perception and cognition, rather than an interior or posterior hypostatization. The perception of rhythm is a psychological need, the means whereby phenomena are made sense of, and sensory stimuli are absorbed as subjective percepts. Rhythm compels the text to recover its status as enunciation (process), to resist being something that already exists, the enunciated (product).<sup>7</sup>

The last sentence of this quotation suggests the importance of rhythm to Michaux's sign production, which is concerned with rendering a process rather than a finished product. And indeed, when Michaux's use of repetition is studied, it soon becomes obvious that it is not repetition at all. The words may be repeated, enumerated, listed, but they are actually transformed each time, either semantically or contextually.<sup>8</sup> In *Mouvements*, an 'homme au bond' is not the same as an 'homme pour l'opération éclair',<sup>9</sup> just as in *Par des traits*, being 'Contre la dérive' is different from being 'contre le passage des

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<sup>6</sup> Henri Meschonnic, 'Le Rythme et le poème chez Henri Michaux', in Henri Meschonnic

, *La Rime et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989), pp. 318-47 (p. 338). This article is also included in *Passages et langages de Henri Michaux*, pp. 185-208.

<sup>7</sup> Clive Scott, *Reading the Rhythm: The Poetics of French Free Verse 1910-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) pp. 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Luis Borges's short essay, 'Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote', exemplifies this idea of difference in repetition. The fictional character, Pierre Menard, has copied out, word for word, Cervante's *Don Quixote*. And yet, Borges states: 'The text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. [...] Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "ingenious layman" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical eulogy of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes: [...]. History, *mother* of truth; the idea is astounding. [...] Equally vivid is the contrast in styles. The archaic style of Menard – in the last analysis, a foreigner – suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his precursor, who handles easily the ordinary Spanish of his time.' Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote', in Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (London: David Campbell, 1993), pp. 29-38 (p. 36).

<sup>9</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 436.

rabachages'.<sup>10</sup> A word or phrase such as 'par des traits' can be repeated until it loses meaning altogether, so that it becomes the empty shell of a word, rather like the 'traits' and the signs themselves. Its linguistic elements, however, continue to function conventionally and thus the litanic rhythm is formed purely from sounds, underlining their magical, shamanic value. These sounds in turn form the cadence of the text which carries Michaux's words and mirrors the corporeal rhythm of the signs. This corporeal element, which is an integral part of any incantatory production, is underlined in remarks that Michaux made to the Hungarian photographer, Brassai, about the physical process of poetic production: 'Je ne peux écrire qu'en parlant à haute voix. C'est pour moi une sorte d'incantation. Il faut que je puisse entendre ma pensée...'.<sup>11</sup>

Meschonnic employs the term 'répétition-variation'<sup>12</sup> to evoke this rhythmic particularity of Michaux's texts in verse and prose. This term seems particularly relevant to his experimentation with signs because no figure is repeated in any of the four books. Any attempt at decoding them is rendered impossible because they do not follow the rules of an alphabetic system. As a result, they have no semantic value by themselves. This, however, does not mean that they have no links with the other signs; they are instead part of a plural process that cannot be divided and appears to be constantly evolving. They could be described in musical terms as variations on a theme, which are in turn reflected in the verbal text. They in fact make up a sequence of which the serial aspect is present in much of Michaux's work, whether it be in the litanic nature of some of his poetry or in his faces and signs. The four books including experimentation with signs can also be described as a series, perhaps even including *Parcours* and the various alphabets from 1927 onwards. As Jean-Claude Mathieu states in his article 'Limite et illimité chez Michaux': 'Le sériel est fondamental; il est le mode d'inscriptions de visions qui viennent "à la file" instantanément et répétitivement'.<sup>13</sup> As a result, it is a way of transposing spontaneous movement, where each element of the

<sup>10</sup> Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1251.

<sup>11</sup> Brassai, *Conversations avec Picasso* (Paris: Gilberte Brassai and Gallimard, 1997), p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> Meschonnic, 'Le Rythme et le poème chez Henri Michaux', p. 335.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Claude Mathieu, 'Limite et illimité chez Michaux', in *Horizons de la poésie moderne*, ed. by Michel Collot & Rino Cortiana (Paris: Cahiers R. I. T. M., 1997), pp. 17-29 (p. 25).

sequence adds to, but also struggles with, the rest of the series so that it is never a finished totality.

Michaux mentions the importance of rhythm in the composition of his pages of signs:

J'ai commencé par vouloir me débarrasser d'obsessions puis je me suis mis à penser qu'il allait venir quelque chose, que cette spontanéité était prévisible... C'est le *rythme* qui fait tout. S'il y a une interruption de quelques secondes, tout est perdu.<sup>14</sup>

He even states in the postface to *Mouvements*: 'Un rythme souvent commandait la page, parfois plusieurs pages à la file.'<sup>15</sup> He also refers to rhythmic elements as 'Compagnons de musiques intérieures'<sup>16</sup> in the poem, 'Distraitement frappés, rythmes', thus connoting the presence of the inner self. The last line of this poem, 'Eau lapée par la langue d'un loup', underlines the rhythmic action of a drinking wolf through the alliteration of the letter 'l'.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the use of the word 'rhythm' in the title of the second book incorporating signs, *Par la voie des rythmes*, can be considered all the more revealing.

Indeed, Michaux goes one step further in *Par la voie des rythmes* as this publication obviously contains no verbal input in which rhythmic elements can be developed textually. An alternative method is needed to structure its pages and provide a global unity which will encourage the reader to turn the page. Clive Scott discusses the relationship between rhythm, movement, order and the role of the reader:

Plato described 'rhythm' as 'the name for order in movement' (*Laws* 2. 655a), and the kinetic element is crucial. Symmetry and proportion as spatial percepts can only become rhythm through the motions of the eye. Rhythm is thus not accessible in the text, but only in the linear reading of the text. It is to do with response, and with what activates and informs response, the transformations of choreography into dance. [...] And as long as rhythm is where prosodic analysis makes room for paralinguistic features (tempo, pausing, loudness, tone, intonation, etc.), and as long as rhythm is

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Jean Grenier, *Carnets 1944-1971*, ed. by Claire Paulhan (Paris: Seghers, Collection 'Pour Mémoire', 1991), p. 452.

<sup>15</sup> Michaux, Postface to *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 598.

<sup>16</sup> Michaux, 'Distraitement frappés, rythmes', in *Jours de silence*, in *Chemins cherchés, chemins perdus, transgressions*, pp. 1204-05 (p. 1205).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1205.

treated as a multilevel phenomenon, it must remain elusive to quantification and measurement.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, it is only once a linear text is read that any rhythm becomes present through the indications left by the author. Similarly, if the signs were not 'read', they would remain static. For the reader, the recurrence of similar signs or page layouts creates a rhythm based on memory. The movement of the reader's eyes recreates the movement of Michaux's signs, as can be seen from the epigraph to *Saisir*. The reader thus assumes a dynamic role in recreating the text.

Michaux's reliance on the material aspect of the book itself, as well as the blank space and page, needs to be analysed in greater detail as it gives his texts a type of rhythmic order and underlines his ultimate dependence on conventional book form. This may appear paradoxical after studying the poet-artist's attack on the reading process and the book but, as we have established, Michaux needs the structure of the book in order to be able to criticise it. The very format of the book in general provides a certain rhythmic order through its serial and repetitive nature, for it consists of a sequence of almost identical pages which have been assembled in a certain order. This organisation connotes both spatiality (the physical and illusionistic space of the page) and temporality (the succession and turning of pages). As Anne Mœglin-Delcroix observes:

Une suite ordonnée de pages, en effet, implique conjointement deux choses: l'unité spatiale de la page ou de la double page, donnée simultanément à la vue; la durée où cet espace lui-même est compris et situé, qui fait que la page n'a pas l'autonomie d'un tableau, mais apparaît et disparaît à son tour au moment qui lui est prescrit par sa position dans la séquence.<sup>19</sup>

*Par la voie des rythmes* is structured conventionally for it relies on the serial nature of the book in order to function as a text.

In the first chapter of this book, the idea of the blank space and page playing a vital role in Michaux's books incorporating signs as rhythmic textual dividers was discussed when describing their respective structures. But just how does blank space provide textual organisation in these books? There is no doubt that Michaux's use of the blank page adds new dimensions to the reading process, in a

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<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Reading the Rhythm*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, p. 57.



similar way to text boards and titles in silent films which may establish the dialogue and the context but interrupt the flow of the film. In both cases, the direct relationship between the spectator or reader and his/her experience is shattered through this introduction of another medium that necessitates a different form of reception. The preface to Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* is particularly relevant when considering the role of blank space in a text. In an explanatory note accompanying the first publication of the poem in 1897, Mallarmé highlights the significance of the blank space in the poem: 'Les "blancs" en effet, assument l'importance, frappent d'abord.'<sup>20</sup> Thereafter he goes on to discuss the ramifications of this blank space through its ability to accelerate or decelerate the movement within the page:

L'avantage, si j'ai droit à le dire, littéraire, de cette distance copiée qui mentalement sépare des groupes de mots ou les mots entre eux, semble d'accélérer tantôt et de ralentir le mouvement, le scandant, l'intimant même selon une vision simultanée de la Page: celle-ci prise pour unité comme l'est autrepart le Vers ou ligne parfaite.<sup>21</sup>

If the word 'mots' is replaced by 'signes', the same reading can be applied to both *Par la voie des rythmes* and *Mouvements*, in which blank space and the blank page play an enormous role in the structure of the text, providing it with a type of rhythmic punctuation. Indeed, changing the formats of these books, as is the case for *Mouvements*, and thus the size of the signs as well as the quantity of blank space surrounding them, transforms both the rhythmic and visual impact on the reader. Moreover, Michaux often resorted to using the blank page in his texts containing experimentation with signs to regain control over the text, slowing both creative and receptive processes down. A distinction can be made between Michaux's use of the blank page and blank space. Indeed, the first pages of *Par la voie des rythmes*, described in the previous chapter, demonstrate how Michaux introduces blank space both to accelerate and decelerate the movement of his graphic signs, whereas he uses the blank page to bring the signs to an abrupt halt, which of course connotes rapid deceleration.

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<sup>20</sup> Mallarmé, 'Préface' to *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, in Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 455-56 (p. 455).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 455.

The blank space and page are not used in the same manner in *Saisir* and *Par des traits*. The signs in *Saisir* remain fairly figurative and consequently Michaux appears to be in full control of them. The blank page still functions as a divider, but between different thematic groups or between pages of text and pages of signs. For *Par des traits*, the blank page is used differently once more. For the first two sections containing mysterious squiggles, a blank page accompanies every page of signs, bar one. This creates a very measured tempo as well as accentuating the fact that these pages of signs were originally conceived as drawings. The two sections which include text in verse and prose are printed conventionally on both sides of the page. The final section incorporating signs only includes five blank pages which seem each time to announce the development of new themes. By filling the previously empty pages, any former measure is shattered. The signs pulsate abstractly on the double page, conversing from left to right and right to left, until a blank page separates them from the final section in prose.

This use of the blank space also finds its influence in the drawn or written line of Chinese painting and calligraphy, which in turn has its roots in Taoism, thus reiterating the significance of Chinese sign systems in Michaux's books incorporating graphic signs:

Car dans l'optique chinoise, le Vide n'est pas, comme on pourrait le supposer, quelque chose de vague ou d'inexistant, mais un élément éminemment dynamique et agissant. Lié à l'idée des souffles vitaux et du principe d'alternance Yin-Yang, il constitue le lieu par excellence où s'opèrent les transformations, où le Plein serait à même d'atteindre la vraie plénitude. C'est lui, en effet, qui, en introduisant dans un système donné discontinuité et réversibilité, permet aux unités composantes du système de dépasser l'opposition rigide et le développement en sens unique, et offre en même temps la possibilité d'une approche totalisante de l'univers par l'homme.<sup>22</sup>

In a similar way to Chinese calligraphy or painting, the introduction of the blank space and page at irregular intervals in all four of Michaux's books containing signs shatters the monolithic nature of any conventional signifying system, and instead allows room for hesitation or even going back on one's tracks. The signs therefore express a dynamic process rather than a static meaning and replace the rhythms

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<sup>22</sup> Cheng, *Vide et plein*, pp. 45-46.

of the thought process, drawing on the contrast between the drawn line and the blank space.

Consequently, as *Par la voie des rythmes* contains no verbal element, the movements of the signs are not subdued by a monosemic text. Instead, each sign is open to a great number of interpretations as they all take part in a dynamic signifying process, which attempts to figure a (pre-)gesture, a movement.<sup>23</sup> The blank space provides an opportunity for acceleration, deceleration and order. In this context, it is necessary also to examine Michaux's large Indian ink paintings from the 1950s and 1960s (Fig. 29).<sup>24</sup> In these paintings, the blank space of the canvas is far less present than the blank space of the page in the books containing graphic signs. It is as if the signs have escaped the ordered space of the book to regain the relative freedom of the canvas. Jean Pierrot describes these Indian ink paintings as follows:

L'impression de bataille est donnée souvent par la présence, issue des figurines et des taches, de traits rectilignes s'amincissant à leur extrémité, qui peuvent faire songer à des lances de quelque énorme corps-à-corps de cavaliers ou de fantassins, tandis que l'orientation opposée de ces lances figure l'antagonisme et l'affrontement des combattants. Souvent aussi l'orientation de ces figures anthropomorphiques n'est plus parallèle. Ces figures, qui avaient été ordonnées horizontalement et verticalement, se trouvent maintenant organisées sur des plans multiples: corps projetés en l'air dans l'instant d'une explosion, ou tombant en groupe dans le vide, comme si le sol s'était brusquement dérobé sous leurs pieds.<sup>25</sup>

The fast movement of these figures is emphasised by the trail that joins one glyph to the next, implying that Michaux did not even have time to lift his brush between signs. This recalls the pages of signs in *Par la voie des rythmes* where the figures merge together in horizontal lines, also connoting rapidity and dynamism.<sup>26</sup> Bernard Gheerbrant states with reference to *Mouvements*:

Le rythme est donné par la fréquence des signes dans la page, de trois à vingt suivant leur taille: les signes se répondent et les pages également. Un

<sup>23</sup> See Adamowicz, 'Visions on the edge: Faces in the work of Henri Michaux', p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> See Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, pp. 590-603.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Pierrot, 'Henri Michaux: Écriture et Peinture', in *Motifs et Figures*, (Paris: Centre d'Art, Esthétique et Littérature, Publications de l'Université de Rouen, Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), pp. 171-97 (p. 196).

<sup>26</sup> For example, Michaux, *Par la voie des rythmes*, OC III, p. 770; p. 782.

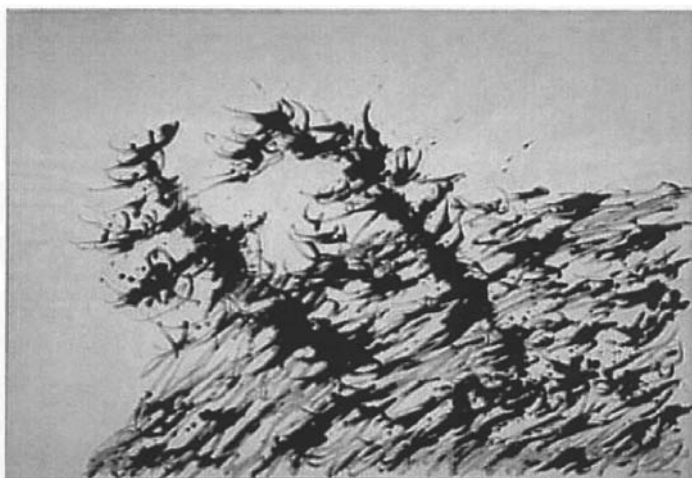


Fig. 29: Untitled, 1959  
(Indian ink on paper, 74 x 105 cm)  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007

peintre les a disposées en ordre. Ils se parlent et chacun peut imaginer qui ils sont, ce qu'ils se disent.<sup>27</sup>

And indeed it could be suggested that the rhythm and speed of all the books incorporating signs are decided by the frequency of the signs on the page. A high frequency, and correspondingly less blank space, suggests an acceleration of the reading rhythm, whilst a low frequency, and therefore more blank space, connotes the opposite, a deceleration of the reading rhythm. Somewhat paradoxically, however, as the Indian ink paintings grow faster and become more densely covered, white space begins to show once more, but this time as accidental blanks within the surface of the Indian ink. The same applies to the figures in *Par la voie des rythmes*.

These figures translate Michaux's attempts to render the rhythm and dynamism of the inner self, using the blank space as well as the serial nature of the book form itself to provide a type of rhythmic structure for the creative and receptive processes. And yet, Michaux's use of other expressive forms such as music and cinema, which will now be explored, underlines his reticence for the limited rhythmic and dynamic possibilities offered by conventional writing systems and the book form. He studied both musical and cinematographic forms on account of their ability to recreate speed, rhythm and continuous movement.

### Quest for a Cinematic Form

Michaux's admiration for the dynamic, creative possibilities offered by cinema is present from a very early stage in his literary and artistic production. And indeed, it should be noted that the etymological origins of the word 'cinema', an abbreviation for 'cinématograph', signify writing movement. Michaux would have witnessed much of the evolution of cinema during the twentieth century, and the first films he would have seen were without doubt the jerky black and white *court-métrages* from the 1910s and 1920s. The short essay on Charlie Chaplin, 'Notre frère Charlie',<sup>28</sup> first published in *Le Disque vert* in 1924, emphasises Michaux's keen interest in film.

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<sup>27</sup> Gheerbrant, 'Comment se passer des mots? Henri Michaux et la série', pp. 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> Michaux, 'Notre frère Charlie', *Premiers écrits, OC I*, pp. 43-47.

In an article entitled 'Michaux cinémane et cinématicien', Maurice Mourier comments on Michaux's appreciation of the fast, repetitive, visual gags of such comic characters as Laurel and Hardy and, once more, Chaplin. Mourier brings together characters from 'Mon Roi' or *Plume* and those in burlesque films, highlighting similar story lines concerning the underdog who gains the upper hand and manages to take revenge as a type of exorcism. Mourier even compares some of Michaux's short texts in prose, for example, 'Intervention' in *La Nuit remue*,<sup>29</sup> in which the narrator introduces camels into the otherwise banal scenery of Honfleur, to silent shorts:

Beaucoup de poèmes en prose qui mettent en scène délibérément des exorcismes ont l'air d'avoir été composés, par émulation avec le cinéma muet, comme des courts-métrages où le raccourci narratif, les effets de montage, et certain comique visuel typiquement *slapstick* tiennent leur place.<sup>30</sup>

In 1929, in *Ecuador*, Michaux had already suggested the serial nature of the cinematographic image as a way of animating certain train lines:

À propos de chemin de fer, une invention sur la ligne Paris-Versailles par exemple: le cinéma plastique, les sculptures animées. On façonnerait, dans le déblai ou en cire, ou en terre, des sculptures. Une tous les mètres, par exemple. Elles se superposeraient à la vue, ébaucheraient des mouvements, agiraient. Trains sans arrêt animés d'une vitesse constante (il faudrait tenir compte naturellement de certaines déformations). Mais quel bon principe de cauchemars nouveaux. Ah! Ah! On recommencerait à s'évanouir en chemin de fer.<sup>31</sup>

He adds in a footnote: 'Le principe de cela serait déjà dans les sculptures d'*Angkor-vat*. Si l'on passe devant à la course, elles se mettent à danser.'<sup>32</sup> In fact, references to cinema are scattered throughout Michaux's literary texts, often functioning as an image of dynamism. In 1946, in a text about painting, he states: 'En somme, c'est le cinéma que j'apprécie le plus dans la peinture.'<sup>33</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>29</sup> Michaux, 'Intervention', *La Nuit remue*, *OC I*, p. 488.

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Mourier, 'Michaux cinémane et cinématicien', in *Méthodes et savoirs chez Henri Michaux*, pp. 43-62 (p. 49).

<sup>31</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, *OC I*, pp. 145-46.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>33</sup> Michaux, 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture', *OC II*, p. 329.

in the text that accompanies the signs in *Mouvements*, he writes, underlining his desire to render movement in his graphic signs:

Signes  
 non de toit, de tunique ou de palais  
 non d'archives et de dictionnaire du savoir  
 mais de torsion, de violence, de bousculement  
 mais d'envie cinétique.<sup>34</sup>

It is, however, his experience with drugs that highlights the dynamism presented by this creative form. Following a long passage in which he evokes the difficulties, for himself and other painters, of representing the repetitive, hallucinatory visions induced and distorted by mescaline, he writes:

Les mouvantes lignes aussi qu'ils [les peintres] avaient aperçues, qui se ployaient, se déployaient, s'enroulaient, se déroulaient; qui partaient en boucles, en déhanchements, enlacements ou désenlacements, en spirales, serpentins, éventails, en ombelles, en queue de paon, formes dévergondées, en appels au secours, en sarabandes, en étoiles rayonnantes, en anneaux, en astéries, en roses des vents, en segments tombants, se dédoublant, se dédoublant sans fin... ils tentaient maintenant de les reprendre et de les rendre par une prodigalité d'entrelacs, de zébrures, de franges, d'ornements sur ornements, lignes que bien à tort on prenait pour décoratives et superflues alors qu'elles n'étaient que le rendu affaibli de ce qu'ils avaient subi, expression d'une incoercible, infernale répétition.  
 À l'exprimer, le cinéma – doué de mouvements – mieux y réussissait.<sup>35</sup>

In 1963, an attempt to convey mescalinian visions on the big screen was undertaken by Michaux, in collaboration with the filmmaker, Eric Duvivier, entitled *Images du monde visionnaire*.<sup>36</sup> As Anne Brun points out, this film was produced in a scientific, rather than creative, perspective by Sandoz pharmaceutical laboratories:

D'emblée, ce film se place bien moins sous le signe de la création que sous celui d'un témoignage d'ordre scientifique. La perspective médicale est indiquée clairement par une présentation écrite au début du film, qui place cette réalisation dans le contexte des recherches sur la psychose expérimentale, en postulant l'origine biochimique des images.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 440.

<sup>35</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 629.

<sup>36</sup> A dossier is dedicated to this film in Michaux, OC III, pp. 221-62.

<sup>37</sup> Brun, *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné*, p. 253.

In Michaux's opinion, this film failed miserably to render the frenetic, repetitive motion of the hallucinations that he experienced under the influence of mescaline. In a recorded message at the beginning of the film, he states:

Lorsqu'on me proposa de faire un film sur les visions mescaliniennes, je déclarai et répétais et le répète encore que c'est entreprendre l'impossible. Quoi qu'on fasse, cette drogue est au-delà. Même d'un film supérieur, fait avec des moyens beaucoup plus importants, avec tout ce qu'il faut pour une réalisation exceptionnelle, je dirais encore de ces images et d'avance qu'elles sont insuffisantes. Elles devraient être plus éblouissantes, plus instables, plus subtiles, plus labiles, plus insaisissables, plus oscillantes, plus tremblantes, plus martyrisantes, plus fourmillantes, infiniment plus chargées, plus intensément belles, plus affreusement colorées, plus agressives, plus idiotes, plus étranges. Quant à la vitesse, elle est telle que toutes les séquences réunies devraient tenir en cinquante secondes. Là, le cinéma devient impuissant, d'autant qu'il faudrait toutes ces caractéristiques augmentées à la fois [...].<sup>38</sup>

Once the film has been seen, Michaux's disappointment can be understood. Rather than being surprising or shocking, many of the images appear to conform to clichés of how hallucinations should appear. Anne Brun justifies the inadequacy of the cinematic form in the following terms:

La déception que l'on peut éprouver lors de la visualisation du film tient sans doute au fait que le corps de l'écrivain n'est pas engagé dans l'entreprise cinématographique – qui se limite à une mise en images distanciée de représentations – au même titre que dans l'écriture, qui rend compte avec la matérialité des mots, ainsi qu'avec la matrice phonique et rythmique, de la jouissance inhérente à la pulsion scopique. Les images – aux contours trop nettement définies [*sic*], limitées à la projection sur un seul écran (et non sur plusieurs simultanément!) – semblent insuffisantes à traduire le phénomène mescalinen, alors que l'écriture en appelle à l'imaginaire du lecteur et à sa participation corporelle.<sup>39</sup>

In Brun's opinion, this cinematographic project was unsuccessful in comparison to the texts composed under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs because of a lack of corporeal presence on the part of the writer and spectator. Brun's is a particularly pertinent

<sup>38</sup> *Images du monde visionnaire: Dossier du film (1963), OC III*, p. 223.

<sup>39</sup> Brun, *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné*, p. 256.



analysis as much of Michaux's literary and artistic output including the books containing signs is evidently centred on the body.

Although this direct attempt at using the cinematic form was regarded by Michaux as a failure, this did not affect his long-term appreciation of the rhythm, movement and speed produced in cinema. It has been suggested that, if the reader flicks quickly through the pages of the books made up of signs, the figures seem to come alive, twisting and dancing rather like the flickering shadows in early film sequences<sup>40</sup> or children's 'flickbooks'. Indeed, if one flicks through any book fast enough, each page contributes to the dynamic creation of a rhythmic whole. This highlights once more not only the serial nature of the book form, which Michaux exploits to the full, but also the way in which his graphic figures convey spontaneous movement in both an individual and collective fashion.

In *Crise de vers*, Mallarmé comments on the organisation of the book of verse, underlining the importance of the fragment to the unity of the whole poem:

Une ordonnance du livre de vers poind innée ou partout, élimine le hasard; encore la faut-il, pour omettre l'auteur: or, un sujet, fatal, implique, parmi les morceaux ensemble, tel accord quant à la place, dans le volume, qui correspond. Susceptibilité en raison que le cri possède un écho – des motifs de même jeu s'équilibreront, balancés, à distance, ni le sublime incohérent de la mise en page romantique ni cette unité artificielle, jadis, mesurée en bloc au livre. Tout devient suspens, disposition fragmentaire avec alternance et vis-à-vis, concourant au rythme total, lequel serait le poème tu, aux blancs; seulement traduit, en une manière, par chaque pendentif.<sup>41</sup>

Mallarmé also admitted to appreciating the movement of the pages of the book. But he preferred the chance intervention of the wind to a human hand creating this mobility:

Sur un banc de jardin, où telle publication neuve, je me réjouis si l'air, en passant, entr'ouvre et, au hasard, anime, d'aspects, l'extérieur du livre: plusieurs – à quoi, tant l'aperçu jaillit, personne depuis qu'on lut, peut-être n'a pensé.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Pacquement, *Henri Michaux: Peintures*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> Mallarmé, *Crise de vers*, p. 366-67.

<sup>42</sup> Mallarmé, *Le Livre, instrument spirituel*, p. 378.

Michaux's decision to insert his signs in a book rather than hanging them on a wall also changes the way the reader or spectator approaches them. As they are not on a wall, they cannot be contemplated as a whole, in a series. The fact that the reader has to turn the pages places the signs in a temporal, rhythmic sequence which calls upon memory and is close to the early cinematographic form.

Michaux also mirrors certain cinematographic techniques in his experimentation with the book form. The Oriental layout of the original version of *Paix dans les brisements* confirms this through its material affinities with a roll of film. Marcel Broodthaers also experimented with the structure of cinema within the page of the book.<sup>43</sup> Michael Compton comments on *Un Voyage en mer du Nord*, a book by Broodthaers, accompanied by a silent film of the same name, in which the pages render the continuous movement of a roll of film through Broodthaers's instructions to the reader on how to handle the book:

Both pieces [the written preface and postscript of the book] warn the reader against the danger of cutting the leaves of the book which is printed with folded, uncut pages like an old book. If you do, you will find that the other sides are all blank. So the paper is printed on one side only and therefore potentially could open out into a continuous ribbon, like a film. If you cut it, you break the sequence.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In addition, Broodthaers created directly with the film form. Rosalind Krauss comments on this experimentation in her essay on Broodthaers and the post-medium condition: 'The true collector, however, was not the only outmoded figure to whom Broodthaers was attracted. Another was that of the film-maker from the early moments of cinema when, as with the Lumière Brothers or with D. W. Griffith's and Chaplin's stock-company operations (such as Biograph or S. and A.), movie production was entirely artisanal. As Broodthaers began to make films in earnest in 1967 and into the early 1970s, he cast his own production in precisely this mold. He imitated the gestures of the silent-movie comic actors, particularly Buster Keaton, capturing the amazing sense they radiated of dogged persistence in the face of endless adversity. And he replicated the primitive look of early cinema with its uneven exposures spliced together and its flickering gait.' Krauss, 'A Voyage on the North Sea': *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, pp. 42-43. Broodthaers's fascination with unfashionable figures, perhaps in reaction to the capitalist conventionalism of mainstream cinema, is striking in its similarities with Michaux's signs and his own interest in early film.

<sup>44</sup> *Marcel Broodthaers*, ed. by Michael Compton (London : Tate Gallery, 1980), p. 23.

This image of a ribbon or roll of film is essential to Michaux as it represents continuous movement, able to render the dynamics of the inner self. He uses this same imagery in a text on music:

Déroulement du film psychique, du ruban émotionnel, du chant perpétuel dont le musicien a attrapé un bout, une courte séquence, dont ceux qui vont l'entendre étaient d'avance, sans le savoir, désireux et avides de se remplir. La vie intérieure passe, l'étonnante vie intérieure qui procède et par coulées et par dé clics.<sup>45</sup>

Consequently, the preference for the continuous Chinese book format expressed in *Paix dans les brisements* brings us back to the idea of cinema, and especially early cinematic experimentation by Edward Muybridge and his contemporaries. Various different techniques, inspired by magic lanterns and other Victorian drawing room toys, where transparent images were projected onto a rotating drum, were investigated for the scientific purpose of examining movement in both humans and animals.<sup>46</sup> This rotation made possible the movement of a sequence of still, drawn images.

At this point, it is worthwhile comparing Michaux's ideas on the expressive and dynamic signifying capacity of the ideogram with those of the famous Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein.<sup>47</sup> The latter's hugely influential theory of montage is especially valuable when analysing Michaux's experimentation with signs. For this rhythmic juxtaposition of contrasting shots, present, for example, in the opening sequence of *Emak Bakia* (1927) by Man Ray, resembles the sequential organisation of Michaux's signs. Mourier comments on this influence of montage on Michaux's work:

Michaux découvre un autre sens, plus juste ou au moins plus complet de l'adjectif 'cinématique', qui s'applique, aussi bien qu'à l'écriture-fleuve, tout en plans-séquences, d'un Renoir ou d'un Mizoguchi, à la fièvre de mouvements décentrés, à l'art du montage-mosaïque (qui ne cherche pas à faire oublier qu'une séquence est couturée de plans, mais à exalter au

<sup>45</sup> Michaux, 'Un certain phénomène qu'on appelle musique', *OC II*, p. 365.

<sup>46</sup> For more information on the precursors of modern cinema, see Brian Coe, *Muybridge and The Chronophotographers* (London: Museum of the Moving Image, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> Richard Sieburth also mentions Eisenstein in his article, 'Ideograms: Pound/Michaux', *L'Esprit créateur*, XXVI, 3, *Henri Michaux* (1986), 15-27.

contraire le patchwork cinématographique) caractéristique d'Eisenstein, de Welles, de Godard.<sup>48</sup>

Eisenstein wrote an important essay, especially with regard to a comparison with Michaux, entitled 'The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideograph', which was translated into French by I. Montagu as 'Le Principe du cinéma et la culture japonaise (avec une digression sur le montage et le plan)' and published for the first time in Paris in the review *transition* in 1930. Michaux would have been familiar with this international review dedicated to experimental creation, and in particular to the works of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett. Indeed, he published 'Rencontre dans la forêt' and 'À hue et à dia' in *transition* in 1935 and 1948 respectively.

In his article, Eisenstein compares the cinematographic notion of montage to the Japanese ideogram. According to Eisenstein, montage is not to be underestimated as a simple editing or cutting process; indeed, in Russia, it was considered to be the major creative act in cinematic expression. In *L'Image-mouvement*, Gilles Deleuze emphasises the importance of montage in the opening sentences to his chapter on this subject:

À travers les raccords, les coupures et faux raccords, le montage est la détermination du Tout [...]. Eisenstein ne cesse de rappeler que le montage, c'est le tout du film, l'Idée. Mais pourquoi le tout est-il justement l'objet du montage? Du début à la fin d'un film, quelque chose change, quelque chose a changé. Seulement, ce tout qui change, ce temps ou cette durée, semble ne pouvoir être saisi qu'indirectement, par rapport aux images-mouvement qui l'expriment. Le montage est cette opération qui porte sur les images-mouvement pour en dégager le tout, l'idée, c'est-à-dire l'image *du* temps.<sup>49</sup>

Eisenstein's ideas on ideograms are in fact very close to those of Fenollosa, whose conception of the ideograph was discussed in Chapter 3, for the former also believed that the combination of purely visual ideograms creates concepts:

Si chacune séparément correspond à un *objet*, à un fait, leur combinaison correspond à un concept. Par la combinaison de deux choses 'représentables', on réalise la représentation de quelque chose que l'on ne peut dépeindre graphiquement.

<sup>48</sup> Mourier, 'Michaux cinémane et cinématicien', p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, *Cinéma 1: L'Image-mouvement*, p. 46, Deleuze's emphasis.

[...]

Mais tout ceci c'est ... du pur 'montage'!

Oui. C'est exactement ce que nous faisons au cinéma, en combinant, les plans *représentatifs* – autant que possible synonymes, neutres du point de vue du sens – en un contexte, en séries intelligibles.<sup>50</sup>

According to Eisenstein and his particular understanding of Oriental writing systems which was based above all on their visual nature, the organisation of ideographic signs, each representing a specific object, to produce a concept can be compared to the montage of shots that create a film.

In his poetic texts, Michaux often resorts to literary devices inspired by early cinematographic techniques, such as ellipsis and montage. As Mourier states: 'Ce cinéma de mots, confié à la page blanche, Michaux le pratiquera toute sa vie, alors que le cinéma d'images oubliera, à la naissance du parlant, la richesse infinie de l'ellipse et du montage'.<sup>51</sup> He uses, for example, elliptical syntax and the absence of punctuation to give his verses a degree of speed and a kinetic, telegraphic style, as illustrated by the suppression followed by the sudden introduction of the definite article in the poem-exorcism, 'Agir je viens':

Où était peine, est ouate  
Où était éparpillement, est soudure  
Où était infection, est sang nouveau  
Où étaient les verrous est l'océan ouvert.<sup>52</sup>

Michaux states in one of his aphorisms in 'Tranches de savoir': 'Attention au bourgeonnement! Écrire plutôt pour court-circuiter.'<sup>53</sup> This accelerating technique, which reminds us of Epstein's notion of 'fatigue' in relation to the modern-day poet, also suggests the cinematic technique of splicing successive shots into a sequence, and thus, according to Eisenstein, the signifying process of ideographic languages.

<sup>50</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'Le Principe du cinéma et la culture japonaise (avec une digression sur le montage et le plan)', in S. M. Eisenstein, *Le Film: sa forme, son sens* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1976), pp. 33-45 (pp. 34-35), Eisenstein's italics.

<sup>51</sup> Mourier, 'Michaux cinémane et cinématicien', p. 55.

<sup>52</sup> Michaux, 'Agir je viens', *Face aux verrous, OC II*, pp. 445-47 (pp. 446-47).

<sup>53</sup> Michaux, 'Tranches de savoir', *OC II*, p. 454.

The Russian filmmaker had given a conference in Paris to much acclaim in 1930. Georges Bataille and the group behind *Documents* admired his films and it has even been suggested by Georges Didi-Huberman that Eisenstein showed public support for this marginal group rather than for Breton and the Surrealists.<sup>54</sup> A double page of stills chosen and organised by Eisenstein from ‘The General Line’ was published in *Documents*, thus underlining the general interest at the time in the notions of montage and the close-up.<sup>55</sup> Many poets and artists with whom Michaux was familiar were experimenting with techniques borrowed from the cinema. Furthermore, Jérôme Roger reminds us of the existence of a ‘poétique du montage’:

Simultanément situé comme une pratique des dadaïstes et des futuristes russes – et parmi eux les théoriciens du cinéma – le montage avait donné le jour à une cohérence inédite de l’image, cohérence fondée sur l’idée surgissant de combinaisons incompatibles avec les normes de la tradition représentative. En contrepoint à des tableaux en recherche d’un regard nouveau, il y eut une prose du texte bref qui, à partir de l’image, visait moins à en mimer les procédés qu’à provoquer dans le lecteur une impression d’étrangeté – angoissante ou cocasse, analogue à une sortie de soi.<sup>56</sup>

In a footnote to this quotation, he cites Eisenstein: ‘Nous découvrons que le montage cinématographique est seulement un cas particulier du montage.’ Writers such as Blaise Cendrars and Robert Desnos continued to use this method of assembling spasmodic images to render the frantic mobility of the modern experience.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le Gai Savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, p. 288.

<sup>55</sup> ‘La ligne générale’, *Documents*, Vol. II, 4 (1930), pp. 218-29. Didi-Huberman explores Bataille’s and Eisenstein’s shared artistic concerns in *La Ressemblance informe ou le Gai Savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* and remarks on the insertion of these frames in the following terms (p. 292): ‘Tout ce qui vouait la question de l’anthropomorphisme à un traitement “dialectique” fait de contacts et de contrastes mêlés, de mises en mouvements, de passages à l’informe, de ressemblances cruelles, tout cela se retrouve muettement disposé sur deux pages de la revue.’

<sup>56</sup> Jérôme Roger, ‘L’Essai ou “le style morceau d’homme”’, in *Méthodes et savoirs chez Henri Michaux*, pp. 9-28 (p. 11).

<sup>57</sup> Robert Desnos wrote a short text to accompany the stills from Eisenstein’s film, ‘La Ligne générale’, thus drawing attention to his interest in this medium. *Documents*, Vol. II, 4 (1930), pp. 220-21.

Certain parallels can be drawn between the theories established by Eisenstein in his article and Michaux's signs. When referring to the old-school conception of a sequence of shots making up the montage, Eisenstein states: "*En les collant les uns aux autres*", *ces plans constituent un montage (quand, naturellement, ils se succèdent suivant un rythme convenable)*.<sup>58</sup> The typographical transformation into italics as well as the quotation marks with no actual reference accentuate the ambiguous nature of this sentence. Moreover, the passage in quotation marks mirrors almost exactly one of Michaux's first refusals in *Mouvements*: 'contre la colle / la colle les uns les autres'.<sup>59</sup> And indeed, Eisenstein was very strongly opposed to this notion of parallel montage, which, as Deleuze shows in *L'Image-mouvement*, was exemplified by the pioneering American filmmaker, D.W. Griffith: 'Au montage parallèle de Griffith, Eisenstein substitue un montage d'oppositions; au montage convergent ou concourant, il substitue un montage de sauts qualitatifs ("montage bondissant")'.<sup>60</sup> Could it be assumed that the italics and the quotation marks used by Eisenstein in his article actually refer to Griffith? Instead of parallel montage, Eisenstein introduces the idea of a conflict between different shots producing the montage. Michaux's fighting figures appear to evoke the same concept:

Emmêlements  
attaques qui ressemblent à des plongeurs  
nages qui ressemblent à des fouilles  
bras qui ressemblent à des trompes.<sup>61</sup>

It could be suggested that Eisenstein's reflections on the ideograph and cinematographic montage influenced Michaux's own experimentation with signs and encouraged his ideas on cinema as being an ideal expressive form for rendering the momentum of the inner self. And yet, although fully aware of the creative potential of

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<sup>58</sup> Eisenstein, 'Le Principe du cinéma et la culture japonaise', p. 39, Eisenstein's italics.

<sup>59</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 435.

<sup>60</sup> Deleuze, *L'Image-mouvement*, p. 56. It must be added that, although Eisenstein did not agree with Griffith's use of montage, he was nevertheless heavily influenced by many of the latter's cinematographic techniques.

<sup>61</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 439.

certain cinematographic techniques, Michaux in fact believed music to be the optimal art form for reproducing this incessant movement.

### Application of Music as a Structuring Principle

According to Michaux, yet another expressive form, music, rather than the visual arts, was especially well suited to rendering the rhythms of the inner self.<sup>62</sup> Many critics interpret Michaux's works that incorporate graphic figures using musical terminology, for example, Bernard Gheerbrant writes the following about *Parcours*:

Ainsi, est-ce l'ordonnance qui domine l'ensemble de *Parcours*. Comme jamais plus une ordonnance quasi musicale. On pourrait y voir une partition dont la fréquence des notes, variant avec chaque page, donne couleur et architecture à celle-ci. Les '*tempi*' pourraient se lire ainsi; planche I *andante*, planche II *adagio*, planche III *largo*, planche IV *allegro* où les formes, emportées par la vitesse, deviennent des accents, des '*esprits*' comme disent les Grecs.<sup>63</sup>

As has already been suggested, *Par des traits* even contains a page that closely resembles the layout of a musical score (Fig. 30). Furthermore, in the collected works of the Romanian essayist, Emil Cioran, there exists a reproduction of an untitled Indian ink painting by Michaux which he apparently called '*ma portée de musique*'.<sup>64</sup> Cioran confirms this by stating: '*Michaux avait bien raison, par le geste, il a merveilleusement capté l'esprit de la musique.*'<sup>65</sup>

Michaux's passion for music is underscored in two articles included in *Passages*: '*Premières impressions*', parts of which were first published in 1949, and '*Un certain phénomène qu'on appelle musique*', which was first published in 1958 as a preface to a music encyclopaedia. He owned a piano and apparently enjoyed composing and improvising for hours on end. Unfortunately, there exist no recordings of these compositions. Michaux was also a member of the '*Domaine musical*', created in 1953 by the renowned French composer and conductor, Pierre Boulez, and he kept himself up-to-

<sup>62</sup> Sylviane Goraj examines this subject in '*Les Musiques d'Henri Michaux*', in *Henri Michaux, est-il seul?*: *Cahiers bleus*, 13, pp. 49-56.

<sup>63</sup> Gheerbrant, '*L'Œuvre graphique d'Henri Michaux*', p. 175.

<sup>64</sup> E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres*, ed. by Yves Peyré (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 1265-66.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1265-66.



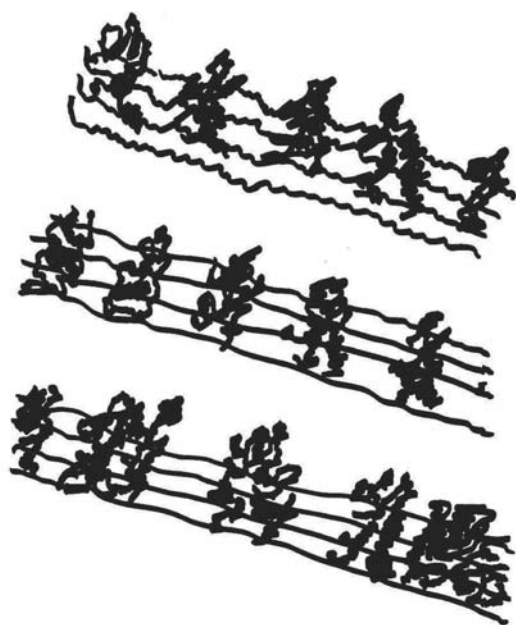


Fig. 30: *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1258  
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date with the musical avant-garde, as well as admiring music from outside Europe, which follow very different respective schemas.<sup>66</sup> He writes the following appreciative comments about Chinese music in *Un Barbare en Asie*:

Je serai plus modéré, mais sauf certaines mélodies bengalis, je dois dire que c'est la musique chinoise qui me touche le plus. Elle m'attendrit. Ce qui gêne surtout les Européens, c'est l'orchestre fait de fracas, qui souligne et interrompt la mélodie. Cela, c'est proprement chinois. Comme le goût des pétards et des détonations. Il faut s'y habituer. D'ailleurs, chose curieuse, malgré ce formidable bruit, la musique chinoise est tout ce qu'il y a de plus pacifique, pas endormie, pas lente, mais pacifique, exempte du désir de faire la guerre, de contraindre, de commander, exempte même de souffrance, affectueuse.

Comme cette mélodie est bonne, agréable, sociable. Elle n'a rien de fanfaron, d'idiot, ni d'exalté, elle est tout humaine et bon enfant, et enfantine et populaire, joyeuse et 'réunion de famille'.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, Michaux's poetry gave rise to many musical compositions, for example, Boulez created a piece inspired by his incantatory texts included in *Poésie pour pouvoir*, which was played for the first time in 1958 in Donaueschingen in Germany.<sup>68</sup> Michaux's poetry continues to encourage musical creation today: Clara Maïda recently composed a piece entitled 'Instants Passages' for soprano, clarinet, cello and percussion, including extracts from *L'Infini turbulent*, which inspired this composition. It was recorded on 23 January 1998 in the Méjan Chapel in Arles and has been presented at two festivals: the 'Festival Aix en Musique' in March 1998 and the 'Festival international des Musiques d'Aujourd'hui' in April of the same year. Maïda clarifies her approach as follows:

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<sup>66</sup> The notes to 'Un certain phénomène qu'on appelle musique' attest to the following: 'Fidèle abonné du "Domaine musical" depuis sa fondation, lié à Pierre Souvtchinski, mais aussi au couple Varèse, Michaux connaissait tout cela, son texte en témoigne. Son intérêt pour les recherches les plus poussées de l'avant-garde européenne se combine ici avec celui qu'il éprouve pour les musiques extra-européennes', in Bellour, 'Notes et variantes' to *Passages*, *OC II*, p. 1193.

<sup>67</sup> Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie*, *OC I*, pp. 360-61.

<sup>68</sup> For more information on Boulez's composition, see Bellour's notes on *Poésie pour pouvoir*, *Face aux verrous*, *OC II*, pp. 1229-30.

Les matériaux poétique mais aussi plastique et graphique ont ainsi déterminé le choix de l'écriture musicale décrite plus haut (trilles, glissandi, textures mélodiques oscillantes, écriture mélismatique, rapidité du débit, mobilité, foisonnement sonore mais aussi déchirures dans le tissu musical, en sont la marque principale).<sup>69</sup>

Anne-Élisabeth Halpern comments on Michaux's special identification with music in the following terms:

Michaux, qui a étudié le violon dans son enfance, estimait que c'est dans le domaine musical qu'il aurait pu le mieux réussir, la musique demeurant jusqu'à la fin de sa vie une source de plaisirs et de réflexions, que ce soit dans la pratique du piano et d'instruments à percussion rapportés de ses divers voyages, ou dans un usage récurrent de la métaphore musicale pour s'exprimer.<sup>70</sup>

In 'Premières impressions', using a musical metaphor, Michaux states his aims as a creator: 'Ce que je voudrais (pas encore ce que je fais) c'est musique pour questionner, pour ausculter, pour approcher le problème de l'être.'<sup>71</sup> The use of the verb 'ausculter', in this context, underlines an important analogy made by Michaux between musical and cardiac rhythms, and also serves as an intermediary between the questions and answers to existential dilemmas.

Michaux appreciated the primitive, basic rhythms produced by certain percussion instruments, such as the *sansa*,<sup>72</sup> for their proximity to the rhythm of breathing and the heart. Indeed, he was forced to be very aware of cardiac rhythms from an early age on account of the deficiency of his own heart. He states in an interview with Robert Bréchon:

Une tachycardie (sans doute nerveuse) jointe à un souffle très prononcé et que l'on diagnostiquait insuffisance cardiaque (la cardiologie a fait quelques progrès depuis) m'interdisait tout effort, toute aventure.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Clara Maïda, 'Instant-*Passages*: Composition de Clara Maïda', in *Henri Michaux est-il seul?*: *Cahiers Bleus*, 13, pp. 82-86 (p. 85).

<sup>70</sup> Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, p. 330.

<sup>71</sup> Michaux, 'Premières impressions', *Passages*, *OC II*, p. 342.

<sup>72</sup> The *sansa* is an African musical instrument consisting of a wooden box having at the top tongues of bamboo or iron which the performer vibrates with his thumb and forefingers (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*).

<sup>73</sup> 'Entretien avec Robert Bréchon', *OC III*, p. 1460.

It must be added, however, that this did not stop him from working as a sailor or going on various dangerous trekking expeditions whilst in Ecuador:

Décidément bizarre, ce cœur. Je n'ai pas eu le mal de montagne, et pourtant une dizaine de médecins jusqu'à présent m'ont trouvé de l'insuffisance cardiaque. En reparler en Europe, à mon retour.<sup>74</sup>

Michaux evokes this vital rhythm in 'Premières impressions':

Pourquoi je joue du tam-tam maintenant?  
 Pour mon barrage  
 Pour forcer vos barrages  
 Pour franchir la vague montante des nouveaux empêcheurs  
 Pour m'ausculter  
 Pour me tâter le pouls  
 Pour me précipiter  
 Pour me ralentir.<sup>75</sup>

In this poetic passage, the rhythm of African drums, which in turn mirrors the human pulse, is emphasised by the repetition of 'pour' at the beginning of each line. From this analogy with music and cardiac rhythm, a possible interpretation of the blank page in the books incorporating experimentation with signs as a pause for breath is suggested once more.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Michaux, *Ecuador*, OC I, p. 202.

<sup>75</sup> Michaux, 'Premières impressions', OC II, p. 342. One of the sections of Jean-Marie Gleize's essay on the situation and role of contemporary poetry is entitled: 'Pourquoi je joue du tam tam maintenant?', in Gleize, *Altitude-Zéro. Poètes, etcetera: costumes* (Paris: Java, Collection 'Les petits essais', 1997), pp. 69-75.

<sup>76</sup> This idea of rendering corporeal rhythm in the space of the page is central to a modern conception of the poetic text. For example, Gleize writes the following about the contemporary poet, Anne-Marie Albiach, with regard to a possible correlation between the oral composition and textual layout of her poetry: 'La mise en page répond (correspond) au *souffle* (autre terme très récurrent); la "disposition" à un "rythme corporel" qui est rythme "de lecture, ou de pensée, ou de respiration", ou de "vibration" (je relève ces formules dans l'entretien avec Jean Daive). D'où l'importance, pour Anne-Marie Albiach, de la lecture, de l'oralisation, de la vocalisation de son texte: pendant et après l'écriture. On perçoit dès lors ce que peut signifier la notion de "chant graphique" (*Mezza Voce*, 18). La parole donnée au mouvement – du corps, des corps -, dans l'espace du livre ("la distance exacerbe le mouvement dans la PAROLE que tu lui donnes", *Mezza Voce*, 89), parole écrite comme transposition d'un parlé-chanté, quelque chose qui serait proche du "récitatif" dans l'oratorio, la cantate ou l'opéra.' Gleize, *Le Théâtre du poème: Vers Anne-Marie*

Michaux reflects on the ability of music to reproduce the incessant movement of the inner self in ‘Un certain phénomène qu’on appelle musique’:

La musique, dans notre espèce humaine, propose un modèle de construction, et *en* construction, net, mais invisible. Un montage en l’air. Ce montage n’est pas à voir, ni même à concevoir ou à imaginer. *Il est à parcourir.*

L’œuvre est un ensemble de trajets, un parcours en lignes brisées. Chaque trajet est sensible, sauts, chutes, montées, descentes jamais vagues, toujours mesurables. On évite les petites unités, la fluidité des passages. (On n’emploie pas le huitième de ton.) Perchoirs précis, préfabriqués, en nombre limité. Appréciation des trajets. Descentes et montées, ascensions infinies dans l’abstrait. (Le seul voyage intelligent: l’abstrait).<sup>77</sup>

In this passage, Michaux’s use of vocabulary such as ‘trajets’ and ‘parcours’ underlines the dynamic nature of music, which one is accustomed to reading in his writings on visual arts in *Passages* and *Émergences-Résurgences*. The term ‘montage’, as we saw in the previous section, is also a term usually found in a visual rather than musical context. Michaux appears to believe that, because of its completely abstract nature, music is able to surpass other expressive means in rendering the rhythm and movement of the inner self. He saw music as an ‘*Art de l’élan*’,<sup>78</sup> an ‘art des sources, art qui sait rester dans l’élan’.<sup>79</sup> He strove to attain this movement in his experimentation with the visual arts, and yet it appears that he considered music to be the only art form capable of expressing the rhythmic dynamism of the thought process and of gaining access to the original inner self.

Just as blank space is essential to Michaux’s poetic texts and experimentation with signs, silence plays a vital role in his musical compositions. If Kandinsky’s theoretical writings on colour are taken into consideration, the fact that Michaux chose to compose his books of signs in black ink on white paper, in comparison to the brightly coloured gouache alphabets, attests to their silent nature:

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*Albiach* (Paris: Belin, Collection ‘L’extrême contemporain’, 1995), pp. 91-2, Gleize’s emphasis.

<sup>77</sup> Michaux, ‘Un certain phénomène qu’on appelle musique’, *OC II*, p. 369, Michaux’s italics.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, *OC II*, p. 366, Michaux’s italics.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

C'est pourquoi le blanc agit également *sur notre âme* (psyché) comme un grand silence, absolu pour nous. Il résonne intérieurement comme un non-son, ce qui correspond sensiblement à certains silences en musique, ces silences ne font qu'interrompre momentanément le développement d'une phrase sans en marquer l'achèvement définitif. C'est un silence qui n'est pas mort, mais plein de possibilités. Le blanc sonne comme un silence qui pourrait subitement être compris. C'est un néant, qui est jeune ou encore plus exactement un néant d'avant le commencement, d'avant la naissance. C'est peut-être ainsi que sonnait la terre aux jours blancs de l'ère glaciaire. *Un néant sans possibilités, un néant mort après que le soleil s'est éteint, un silence éternel sans avenir ni espoir, voilà la résonance intérieure du noir.*<sup>80</sup>

According to Kandinsky, the silence evoked by white is by no means static. It is full of possibilities, a pre-beginning, in a similar way to Michaux's signs, which attempt to figure a moment before language and conventional writing systems, a pre-gesture. By contrast, Kandinsky believed that the silence contained in black implies no hope of eventual possibilities, and indeed, once Michaux's signs are committed to paper in black ink, the only dynamic opportunities they appear to have are the blank space which surrounds them as well as their reception by a potential reader or viewer. But Michaux states the following about his gouache or pastel paintings on black backgrounds: 'Pour le moment je peins sur des fonds noirs, hermétiquement noirs. Le noir est ma boule de cristal. Du noir seul, je vois de la vie sortir.'<sup>81</sup> Unlike Kandinsky, in this case, Michaux saw creative possibilities, rather than an inert silence, in black.

The contemporary French composer and conductor, Gilbert Amy, who was in charge of the 'Domaine musical' from 1967 to 1973, and who composed the music for *Images du monde visionnaire*,<sup>82</sup> notes the importance of silence in twentieth-century musical compositions: 'Le silence est au moins aussi important que le

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<sup>80</sup> Kandinsky, *Du Spirituel dans l'art, et dans la peinture en particulier*, ed. by Philippe Sers, trans. from German by Nicole Debrand (Paris: Denoël, Collection 'Folio/Essais', 1989), pp. 155-56, Kandinsky's italics.

<sup>81</sup> Michaux, 'Peindre', *OC II*, p. 319.

<sup>82</sup> 'Concevant largement sa partition à partir du premier chapitre de *Misérable miracle*', Bellour, 'Note sur le texte' for *Misérable miracle*, *OC II*, pp. 1272-90 (p. 1289).

son (n'est-ce pas une "découverte" du XXe siècle musical?)'.<sup>83</sup> Michaux writes in 'Premières impressions':

Dans ma musique, il y a beaucoup de silence.  
 Il y a surtout du silence.  
 Il y a du silence avant tout qui doit prendre place.  
 Le silence est ma voix, mon ombre, ma clef... signe sans m'épuiser, qui  
 puise en moi.  
 Il s'étend, il s'étale, il me boit, il me consomme.  
 Ma grande sangsue se couche en moi.<sup>84</sup>

This emphasis on silence recalls the experimentation of John Cage, who was influenced by the techniques of Zen Buddhism, Indian aesthetic theory and chance composition using the Chinese *Book of Changes*.<sup>85</sup> Cage went so far as to compose music without any sound. One of his best-known pieces, called *4' 3''*, consists of the performer or performers playing nothing. Cage wanted to accentuate everyday, ambient noise. In this piece, the sounds are produced indirectly and incidentally by the audience and the environment. If one listens to a recording of *4' 3''*, the sounds of the record player or other music systems also constitute some of the sounds of the piece. This interest in emptiness and duration was apparently inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*. Cage's radical approach to music has profoundly influenced many poets, visual artists, composers and choreographers of the twentieth century, such as Dick Higgins, Joseph Beuys, Charles Olson and Merce Cunningham, with whom he also worked closely.

Kandinsky comments on this attraction to music on the part of visual artists wishing to go beyond the figurative:

Un artiste qui ne voit pas, pour lui-même, un but dans l'imitation, même artistique, des phénomènes naturels et qui est créateur, et veut et doit exprimer son *monde intérieur*, voit avec envie avec quel naturel et quelle facilité ces buts sont atteints dans l'art le plus immatériel à l'heure actuelle: la musique. Il est compréhensible qu'il se tourne vers elle et cherche à trouver dans son art les mêmes moyens. De là découle la recherche actuelle de la peinture dans le domaine du rythme, des mathématiques et des constructions abstraites, la valeur que l'on accorde maintenant à la

<sup>83</sup> Gilbert Amy, "'... Il y a ce qu'on appelle musique'", in *Cahiers de l'Herne: Henri Michaux*, pp. 194-96 (p. 195).

<sup>84</sup> Michaux, 'Premières impressions', *OC II*, p. 335.

<sup>85</sup> See John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

répétition de ton coloré, la manière dont la peinture est mise en mouvement, etc.<sup>86</sup>

This passage shows that Michaux was by no means alone in his belief that music was the ideal art form for expressing the inner self. It also points to the crossover and exchange of ideas in different art forms. Kandinsky makes the analogy between the visual arts and music, and similar correlations can be established between music and poetry.

This section has examined the importance of music as a structuring principle in Michaux's visual and verbal output. Like many of his contemporaries, Michaux believed that this means of expression was able to give both form and voice to the infinitesimal motions forever taking place in the body and mind on account of its purely abstract nature. He often used musical metaphors for his own creative output but, more importantly, he connected the repetitive beat of percussion instruments to his own cardiac tempo, thereby emphasising their mutual proximity. It could be suggested that Michaux did not draw or write his pages of signs, he rather composed them like a contemporary musician, focused on repetition, series and silence. Corporeal mobility and presence are able to emerge from this rhythmic formulation.

### Parallels with Dance Notation

This final section deals with the similarities between Michaux's signs and another expressive form with important rhythmic implications, that is, dance. It can be suggested that many of Michaux's signs bear a definite likeness to dancing figures. Indeed, they appear to closely resemble some of the systems of notation used by choreographers to note down their dance routines, especially visually by means of a series of black stick figures against or under the strict black lines of a musical score to indicate timing, for example, Friedrich Albert Zorn's influential 1887 *Grammatik der Tanzkunst*.<sup>87</sup> The initial aim of these systems of recording a simple

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<sup>86</sup> Kandinsky, *Du Spirituel dans l'art*, p. 98, Kandinsky's italics.

<sup>87</sup> Patricia G. Berman, *Modern Hieroglyphs: Gestural Drawing and the European Vanguard 1900-1918* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 96. For a history of the various dance notation systems, see Ann Hutchinson Guest, *Choreo-Graphics: A Comparison of Dance Notation Systems from the Fifteenth*



description of movement in universal graphic forms is very similar to Michaux's own concerns in his experimentation with signs. But dance is ephemeral by nature and writing it down, transcribing it, undoes its movement. This is the same basic problem for Michaux's signs, leading to the question as to whether it is possible to render movement in the fixed line of a drawing, painting or written page.

Since the invention of photography and cinema, there have been many attempts by painters to capture the instantaneous, gestural nature of dance in painting, as confirm the series of paintings of dancers by Edgar Degas<sup>88</sup> and Henri Matisse's infamous *Dance Murals*.<sup>89</sup> Poets, such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud, were also fascinated by this expressive form.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, in a short passage on the subject of how theatre distorts other art forms, Mallarmé even compares ballet to a hieroglyph:

Toujours le théâtre altère à un point de vue spécial ou littéraire, les arts qu'il prend: musique n'y concourant pas sans perdre en profondeur et de l'ombre, ni le chant, de la foudre solitaire et, à proprement parler, pourrait-on ne reconnaître au Ballet le nom de Danse; lequel est, si l'on veut, hiéroglyphe.<sup>91</sup>

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*Century to the Present* (New York; London; Paris; Montreux; Tokyo; Melbourne: Gordon and Breach, 1989).

<sup>88</sup> For example, see plates 225 and 226, *Danseuses évoluant* (1906-1908) and *Danseuses sur la scène* (1906-1908), in Götz Adriani, *Edgar Degas: Pastels, Dessins, Esquisses* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985).

<sup>89</sup> See Jack Flam, *Matisse: The Dance* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>90</sup> The following chapters in *Corps provisoire: Danse, Cinéma, Peinture, Poésie* discuss the crossover between the visual arts and dance: Christian Delacampagne, 'L'amour du remuant: Le corps dansant et la peinture, de Bouguereau à Pollock', pp. 152-193; and poetry and dance: Michèle Finck, 'Poésie et danse à l'époque moderne: Six poètes en quête de corps', pp. 36-111. Finck makes reference to Michaux and the improbability of dance in this chapter (pp. 43-44). Although parts of her analysis are valuable - she traces the beginnings of the writing experience back to the evanescent nature of the dancing body contained in the image of the transformation of a drop of water into a female body resembling that of a dancer: 'Elle eût fait une danseuse'. (This is the fourth fragment of Michaux's *La Nuit remue, OC I*, pp. 420-21, and not the third as Finck states in her article) - she does not mention any of his other references to dance.

<sup>91</sup> Mallarmé, *Crayonné au théâtre*, in Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 291-351 (p. 312).

This analogy further corroborates a parallel between Michaux's signs, which could be interpreted as dynamic hieroglyphs of the inner self, and dance. Indeed, throughout pictorial, sculptural and textual representations, dance offers a subject in which the body, even in its absence, dominates. The dancer is transformed in his/her own performance, and through visual representation, into a realm of imagination and expression beyond the physical body.

Michaux does not specifically mention dance as an alternative means of expression, as he does for cinema and music. But, from the circles he frequented, for example, the 'Domaine musical' where many members of the avant-garde met, it can be assumed that he would most probably have had some contact with dancers and choreographers. At the end of *Un Barbare en Asie*, he lists the dances he has seen on his travels, '[...] les danses javanaises, balinaises, hindoues, somalies, indiennes du Pérou, de l'Équateur',<sup>92</sup> which obviously highlights some interest in this artistic form. He does, moreover, make reference to dance in his literary production, generally with regard to its dynamic and possibly liberating nature. In a text in *Passages*, he observes the following:

Bien sûr, je ne voudrais pas dire que je danse, moi qui ne sais même pas marcher, mais j'ai fini par être intrigué (pas trop tôt!) par les mouvements, par l'influence que pourraient avoir sur moi des mouvements.<sup>93</sup>

In a footnote to the above passage, he compares European dance rather unfavourably with Hindu dance discovered on his trip to Asia:

C'est la faute de cette gymnastique occidentale aux gestes mécaniques, qui écartent de soi. Nos gens ne souffrent donc pas de s'éloigner d'eux? Ma foi, non. Ça les excite même. Et leurs danses vont encore plus 'au-dehors'. Que n'ai-je plus tôt connu la danse de l'Hindou, danse qui se garde bien de le décentrer, de l'éloigner de lui-même. L'œil, le cou, les doigts, plutôt que les excentriques jambes, font presque tous les mouvements, les mouvements de la pensée, les mouvements pour n'être pas multiple, en pièces et à la débânde, pour n'être pas distrait, les mouvements pour ne pas se désunir.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie*, OC I, p. 398, Michaux's italics.

<sup>93</sup> Michaux, 'Observations', OC II, p. 344.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

Hindu dance therefore manages to maintain a type of harmonious unity over corporeal and mental movements that Michaux admired and strived for in much of his literary and artistic production.

Furthermore, there exists a text by Michaux solely concerned with dance, in which he again describes the joy of discovering dance in Asia and goes on to evoke the emancipating nature of dance for the body:

Je voyais affluer en des corps le monde entier, et l'inexprimé y apparaissait avec autant de force que l'exprimé grâce à une grande soumission et à un extraordinaire recueillement.

Des mouvements si légers qu'ils en étaient imperceptibles et inanalysables inscrivaient la largeur de la vie, la méditation, les mythes, le monde, les raisons d'exister et j'étais enfin nourri de quelque chose après quoi j'avais toujours été, sans m'en douter vraiment, comme tant de personnes.

[...]

Dans quantité de danses, le corps fait les figures de la libération. Ce pesant objet destiné à retomber lourdement à chaque demi-seconde ne s'occupe qu'à s'élancer, à tenter de se libérer. C'est en effet au corps dansant que l'on revient quand il s'agit d'être libéré.<sup>95</sup>

According to Michaux, the dancer lacks dynamic ability and grace because of his cumbersome body, which in turn can be compared to the confining nature of words and grammatical structures on linguistic expression. Through a fusion of movement and total stillness, rather like the symbiosis between movement and fatigue needed to produce the signs, the Oriental dancer, 'L'Inspiré',<sup>96</sup> is able to render 'la conscience du Monde'.<sup>97</sup>

Michaux appears to make implicit reference to Friedrich Nietzsche in this short text when he asks: 'Qui n'a rêvé d'un philosophe qui ne s'exprimerait qu'avec la danse de son corps?'<sup>98</sup> Michèle Finck reminds us of Nietzsche's thoughts on this subject in her article on poetry and dance. Nietzsche writes in *Le Gai Savoir*: 'Je ne sais rien qu'un philosophe souhaite plus qu'être un bon danseur. Car la danse est son idéal, son art aussi, sa seule piété enfin: son "culte".'<sup>99</sup> Indeed, for Nietzsche, only dance and music are able to

<sup>95</sup> Michaux, 'Danse', *OCI*, pp. 697-98.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 699.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 699.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 699.

<sup>99</sup> Michèle Finck, 'Poésie et danse à l'époque moderne: Six poètes en quête de corps', p. 40.

give meaning. They are vital components of life and to miss out on them is to miss out on life: ‘Qu’il soit perdu pour nous, le jour où nous n’avons pas dansé (*Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*). La vie sans musique n’est qu’une erreur, une besogne éreintante, un exil (*ibid.*).’<sup>100</sup> This is certainly the case for Michaux with music, although it is rather less sure for dance, especially when we consider that he chose not to include ‘Danse’ in *Passages*.<sup>101</sup> As for the books incorporating signs, Michaux uses the verb *danser* to evoke his signs in *Mouvements*: ‘bloc qui danse’<sup>102</sup>. Furthermore, he writes in *Saisir* about how he strives to express the multifold movements of the inner self and not the static matter which surrounds it: ‘Retrouver la danse originelle des êtres au-delà de la forme et de tout le tissu conjonctif dont elle est bourrée, au-delà de cet immobile empaquetage qu’est leur peau.’<sup>103</sup> But above all, some of his signs appear to represent dancing figures. Or are they fighting? Although an analogy between Michaux and Eugène Delacroix may at first appear somewhat far-fetched, it can be suggested that the same ambiguity is present in Delacroix’s monumental mural, *Lutte de Jacob avec l’ange* (*Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*) (1855–61), in the Chapelle des Saints-Anges, Saint Sulpice.<sup>104</sup> Here the two figures, supposedly fighting, could almost be practising a measured step from a dance such as the tango.

The basic similarity between dance notation systems and Michaux’s signs is present in their universal aim of depicting corporeal dynamism. Some dance figures, for example, the *sardana*, a traditional Catalan folk dance, and the *farandole* from Provence, also aspire to universal meaning. These are both danced in a circle, which signifies universal understanding. Some of Michaux’s figures also appear to be dancing in circles, which suggests perhaps that he was

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<sup>100</sup> Michèle Finck, ‘Poésie et danse à l’époque moderne: Six poètes en quête de corps’, pp. 40–41.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Il est difficile d’estimer pourquoi ce texte, vraisemblablement proposé par Bertelé à Michaux lors de l’élaboration de *Passages* [...], n’a pas été retenu, à l’inverse de “Visages de jeunes filles” et “Enfants”, parmi les textes publiés en 1937–1938 dans *Verve*. C’est pourtant le seul que Michaux ait consacré à ce sujet.’ Bellour, ‘Note sur le texte’ to ‘Danse’, *OC I*, p. 1296.

<sup>102</sup> Michaux, *Mouvements*, *OC II*, p. 435.

<sup>103</sup> Michaux, *Saisir*, *OC III*, p. 959.

<sup>104</sup> See Peter Rautmann, *Delacroix*, trans. by Denis-Armand Canal and Lydie Échasseriaud (Paris: Citadelles & Mazenod, 1997), p. 314.

familiar with basic forms of dance imagery.<sup>105</sup> These attempts to find a type of grammar for transposing movement can be compared to the periodic table, used in science to signify the various elements. This chemical reduction of a living element into signs, lines and symbols could be described as an attempt at a universal language, although highly specialised, as it is used by scientists all over the world. And indeed, Michaux presents the chemical symbol for the mescaline molecule at the very beginning of *Misérable miracle* before any of his text or drawings.<sup>106</sup> This of course points to its chemical make-up for the initiated, and underlines the utopian nature of Michaux's attempts at a direct form of expression. But, surely, all types of communication have to follow certain conventions? Ann Hutchinson Guest comments on this subject in relation to dance notation systems:

What in one dance notation system is seen by some as an advantage is seen by others as a disadvantage. Is the aim of the system to be simple, providing a memory-aid for those who know the style of movement? If so, it is likely to be found deficient by those who need scientific accuracy. But if great care is taken to analyze and record movement precisely, many people may find such a system too complex, requiring that too much attention be paid to the nuances of movement and consequently too great a need to analyze. [...] No matter how great a desire there may be for scientific accuracy, sooner or later in each system the need has arisen for conventions for actions which are experienced as simple and natural, such as walking. Conventions are a necessary part of any movement notation system designed for everyday use by the average person.<sup>107</sup>

It becomes clear that choreographers and dancers have not been able to agree on a universal system that would be able to transpose all dance movements. These systems are important because they record dances and dancers' interpretations which would otherwise be forgotten. They in fact inscribe dance in the past, in the same way that writing transcribes previously oral accounts. For the majority of these systems, however, the dancer or choreographer has to learn certain schemas, highlighting once more the idealist dimension of Michaux's desire for a universal language.

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<sup>105</sup> For example, Michaux, *Mouvements*, OC II, p. 557; Michaux, *Par des traits*, OC III, p. 1243.

<sup>106</sup> Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, OC II, p. 618.

<sup>107</sup> Hutchinson Guest, *Choreo-Graphics*, p. XV.

Finally, what does a professional choreographer understand from Michaux's signs? Mihailovich-Dickman relates Marie-Aude Pacreau's comments on the links between *Mouvements* and dance. The latter does not literally compare Michaux's signs to dance notation systems. She insists instead on the fleeting nature of dance which leaves no mark, in contrast to any form of writing:

[...] il y a dans ces deux arts – la danse et la poésie calligraphiée – une même méfiance de la forme, un même désir de l'attaquer pour l'agrandir à l'infini. Mais là où la danse se décompose immédiatement pour le spectateur, l'écriture s'inscrit dans la durée, bien qu'il ne puisse y avoir deux lectures semblables de 'Mouvements'. Dans les mots des autres, comme dans le corps, l'on se trouve face à une limite dont on voudrait sortir, même si cette dépossession de soi doit mener à la folie. Étant mouvement, la danse brise la distance entre la vie et l'art plus facilement que l'écriture car le corps est là, contre la colle. Il aspire à ne pas se fixer dans la forme: il est dans une succession de manières d'être. Dans le signe d'un mouvement, signifié et signifiant se rejoignent. Si c'est bien le côté impulsif du mouvement que nous retrouvons dans les encre de Michaux, le mouvement dans un état d'innocence qui précède la forme [...], dans la danse contemporaine le mouvement jaillit comme un adjectif d'un mot clé. La forme est défiée. Elle est désormais multiple. Or cette danse donnée à voir, n'étant pas écrite, étant éphémère et instantanée, est intransmissible; elle ne peut survivre à son créateur.<sup>108</sup>

But can written language, and indeed dance notation systems, not be described as ephemeral too? For a word is unable to represent the object, concept or emotion that it names. The abstract marks in notation systems only represent dance steps or other types of movement through the reader's knowledge of an organised system. Accordingly, Michaux's signs appear never to stop moving and flee every time the reader tries to focus on one.

When considering the title of the textless book containing signs, *Par la voie des rythmes*, the *jeu de mots* of 'parle à voix d'eurythmes' can be detected. At first glance, this pun appears to be totally irrelevant. And yet, as the word 'eurhythmics' connotes the harmony of corporeal movement, especially as developed with music and dance into a system of education, it is in fact curiously apt as it underlines the link between rhythm, music, the body and dance which is present in Michaux's signs. Less fancifully, no firm conclusions can

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<sup>108</sup> Véra Mihailovich-Dickman, 'L'Envie cinétique', in *Plume*, 16, *Bulletin de la Société des Lecteurs de Michaux*, (Paris: Findakly, May 1998), 21-24 (pp. 21-2).

be made when considering the links between Michaux's signs and dance. There is a definite physical resemblance between the signs and dancing figures and some dance notation systems. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the aim of transcribing movement in a universal graphic manner is common to both choreographic systems and the signs. This likeness, however, draws attention to the utopian nature of this universal aim, which is corroborated by the many different attempts at transcribing dance movements since the fifteenth century and the unfinished nature of Michaux's experimentation with signs.

This chapter has examined how Michaux structured his pages of signs using repetition and rhythm, rather than semantic or narrative processes. Michaux used repetition on a regular basis as a poetic device, and it has been established how he transforms this into textual rhythm, which is then mirrored in his pages of signs. The introduction of blank space is vital to this organisation as it assists the reading process by providing a type of rhythmic punctuation. Michaux is reliant on the book form, which, by its very nature, imposes a serial order. Typically, however, he had to move beyond the boundaries imposed by the book form. This is confirmed by his response to Robert Bréchon's question about critics' reactions to his work:

Enfermés dans la littérature, hommes d'une seule foi, ils doivent flairer l'hérétique en moi; ils doivent sentir celui qui, quoique exigeant en littérature à l'extrême, tend, dans le moment même où l'on examine son livre, à se diriger ailleurs.<sup>109</sup>

Michaux's ambiguous desire to criticise literature and the book form using literary means and, furthermore, to forego, even to transcend, any literary classification is suggested in this quotation. This is confirmed by his appropriation of certain dynamic aspects of cinema and music in his literary and artistic production as well as the visual parallels which can be drawn with dance and various movement notation systems. Indeed, he made reference to cinema throughout his literary *œuvre* and used literary devices such as montage which are inspired by cinematographic techniques. But he considered music to be the ideal art form for rendering the inner pulse, and especially primitive percussion rhythms because of their repetitive and serial nature, and thus their proximity to cardiac rhythms.

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<sup>109</sup> 'Entretien avec Robert Bréchon', *OC III*, p. 1464.

## Conclusion

The present book has assessed the literary identity of Henri Michaux's radically innovative experimentation with signs contained in a series of four books, *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits*. By examining in close detail these four key texts and the circumstances surrounding their production, more meaningful distinctions between them have been established than has hitherto been the case. Research to date has tended to group the works with signs into a single undifferentiated category, whereas this study has examined each individual work in terms of its generic status, its relation to the other works incorporating signs and to Michaux's *œuvre* as a whole. In so doing, the works under discussion have also been analysed in relation to the artistic, literary and cultural traditions to which they variously allude.

What can only be described as an obsession with this interstitial expressive form meant that Michaux produced signs for much of his literary and artistic career alongside other activities. For this reason, it is essential to understand the development of his literary production, particularly as the signs examined in this study were published in book form. Indeed, a distinct evolution can be traced in Michaux's verbal production from its overall tone and content. His early writings can generally be described as more aggressive, struggling against linguistic and social conventions, whilst the texts published towards the end of his life are characterised by a calmer, more reflective element, most likely on account of his intense period of experimentation with drugs.

This does not mean, however, that he abandoned his confrontational stance towards Western signifying systems, and his experimentation with signs confirms this continuity. In many aspects, the latter differs substantially from his other artistic and literary experimentation, especially as the signs remained a constant preoccupation for the poet-artist during a period of over fifty years, that is, from *Alphabet* and *Narration* (1927) to *Par des traits* (1984). The same cannot be said for his experimentation with neologisms, his imaginary countries or his mescaline experiments. In this way, the



books incorporating signs can be described as marginal. And yet, one of the major characteristics of Michaux's output from a global point of view is its coherence for, although he experimented with many different forms and techniques, both visual and verbal that can appear discrepant, they all converge in a similar experimental trajectory in an attempt to render the mobile nature of the inner self and the body.

From this process of contextualisation, it soon becomes obvious that the major objective of Michaux's interdisciplinary experimentation, and indeed much of his visual output, was born out of a rejection of traditional forms of verbal expression, characterised by the grammatical and syntactical constraints of Western writing systems. Michaux was concerned with escaping these rigid forms in an attempt to express the dynamism of the thought process and the body, which would in turn bring direct contact with the inner self. Through his experimentation with various literary techniques, for example the *mots démontés* of 'Glu et gli', and with numerous artistic activities, such as watercolour and oil painting, he attempted to discover a direct, gestural and dynamic expressive form that found its inspiration in the 'pré-geste' of childlike or primitive creation. In this respect, Michaux's early experimentation with neologisms can be described as a forerunner to the experimentation with signs. One of Michaux's particular achievements, in the return to the primitive origin of the species, is to have struck a chord with the modern condition as this nostalgia for a prelinguistic state was shared by many writers and artists alike in the twentieth century.

Once the conceptual origins of this experimentation with signs are determined in relation to the totality of Michaux's literary and artistic output, certain questions arise concerning the signs' status. How can the signs be defined? Can they be described as ideographic? How do they function in order to render the constantly moving nature of the body manifest in the interaction and emergence of thoughts as well as the renewal of blood cells? Does this desire to express the inner self mean that we can call him a Surrealist? What reaction do the books incorporating signs prompt from their reader or viewer? Given Michaux's preeminence as both a writer and an artist, can *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* be called *livres d'artiste*? Does he experiment with other forms of expression with the same aims in mind?

Some of these questions can be answered directly. For instance, the evaluation of Michaux's appropriation of the Chinese writing system leads to the conclusion that his signs are ideographic in the literal sense of the term because, although lacking in conventional semantic and phonetic components, each sign is unique. And yet, the books incorporating signs are also emblematic of a renewed Western preoccupation with all things Oriental that had started towards the mid-nineteenth century. They therefore represent a crossover between Western and Oriental worlds in which an adaptation of the exotic, typical of a certain era, is figured. Furthermore, the pages of signs were originally conceived as drawings and this fundamental challenging of the book form, amalgamated with the substantial editorial input from both René Bertelé and Bruno Roy, means that the books incorporating signs cannot be described as *livres d'artiste*. In addition, Michaux did not only experiment with painting, drawing and writing. His interest in cinema and music and the similarities between his signs and movement notation systems all point to his constant endeavour to find an expressive form able to fulfil his aim of transposing the incommunicable inner self. Other questions emphasise certain paradoxes inherent in Michaux's texts such as his constant denigration of the written word in favour of the visual image despite the fact that he produced highly polished pieces of prose and poetry and the difficulty of reconciling his professed dislike of categorisation with his affiliation to certain cultural tendencies. Another illustration is his puritanical approach to experimenting with hallucinogenic substances which is unconvincing when we consider the amount of time he dedicated to this activity.

How then can we define these signs in isolation and in relation to the remainder of Michaux's *œuvre*? It is very tempting to simply cite the poet-artist's own words as a fitting conclusion to this book. In his short text on Klee's paintings, 'Aventures de lignes', he concludes mysteriously that it is enough 'd'avoir gardé soi-même la conscience de vivre dans un monde d'énigmes, auquel c'est en énigmes aussi qu'il convient le mieux de répondre.'<sup>1</sup> To finish on this note would hardly be scientific and in fact rather disheartening when one considers the energy invested in these signs by both Michaux and the author of this book. Another quotation, this time on his own

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<sup>1</sup> Michaux, 'Aventures de lignes', *OC II*, p. 363.

works, seems more conducive to our purposes and highlights the perhaps ludic nature of the previous excerpt:

Mais après des mois, des semaines, si je les regarde...  
 Non, je ne veux pas faire le détective.  
 L'œuvre doit rester le *black box*. Vivante ou pas. C'est tout. Si elle ne l'est pas, au panier!<sup>2</sup>

Here, Michaux asserts that he does not want to examine his own production, but this of course does not exclude anyone else from pursuing this task. The signification of the term 'black box' is particularly apt as it usually alludes to a unit in an electronic system, with contents which are mysterious to its user, thus keeping in line with the 'enigma' solution offered to Klee's works. More generally nowadays, it connotes a flight recorder in an aircraft, which when interpreted, for example, following an accident, can often contain vital information concerning the event. This second interpretation draws attention to the creative principles of chance and accident that Michaux adhered to in much of his artistic output and which were also advocated by the Dadaists and the Surrealists. Now that all we have left are the works, sometimes clouded by certain myths and the cult-like status accorded to this poet-artist, what can the reader or viewer discover when examining the 'accidental' traces, the legacy left by Michaux in his signs?

Malcolm Bowie begins the conclusion to his monograph on Michaux in English in a very personal manner by stating: 'Michaux can often be irritating.'<sup>3</sup> He also stresses the power of Michaux's literary output 'to alarm, infuriate, and outrage.'<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that Michaux's production can provoke strong, almost violent, reactions, but the adjective that comes to mind is not irritating, but rather destabilising. It is for this reason that a global knowledge of his production is necessary before pursuing analysis of a more particular aspect, in this case, the books incorporating signs. Every time an understanding is almost reached, a decision taken, a conclusion put forward, any absolute certainty must be revoked as all theories and ideas are challenged to their very core. As Michaux himself asserts:

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<sup>2</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences, OC III*, p. 575.

<sup>3</sup> Bowie, *Henri Michaux*, p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

‘Même si c’est vrai, c’est faux.’<sup>5</sup> In a constant quest to unite his multiple self with his frenetic environment, he always seems to be starting again and this is characteristic of his verbal and visual production in general.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, his appropriation of Chinese characters in his books composed of signs is revealing as it highlights our own ignorance manifest in the flawed appreciation of this signifying system by the Western world for centuries. Furthermore, when ascertaining the relationship of the signs to the book form, it at first seems clear that Michaux is attempting to destroy this support through the signs’ lack of conventional semantic value. But these signs are actually a form of writing that are dependent on the page and the book in order to be able to figure their own impossibility. In this respect, the signs are typical of Michaux’s output because they are the by-product of destruction, much like his neologisms born out of a similar opposition. The signs are not ‘signifiants sans signifiés’,<sup>7</sup> they are instead, using C. S. Peirce’s terminology, most definitely indices because they evoke a plethora of possible significations, whether it be almost figuratively in the insect-like shapes in *Saisir* and the humanoid figures of *Mouvements* or in the fact that the signs are a meeting point for both Western and Oriental signifying systems (intertext) as well as writing and drawing (intermedia). The mescaline works also thrive on the same instability: the reader or viewer is confused by the impossible crossover between the aims of harnessing scientific knowledge and experiencing mystical transcendence which hovers over each book produced under the influence of hallucinogenic substances. They are both scientific studies and poetic essays, and yet, at the same time, neither. They can in fact be situated somewhere in between these two genres and therefore also function as intermedia.

The four books incorporating signs all form part of a creative continuum, essentially dealing, both verbally and visually, with Michaux’s quest for a universal graphic language, the utopian implications of which were well known to him. A development in Michaux’s thoughts on this subject can be mapped out, evolving from

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<sup>5</sup> Michaux, ‘Tranches de savoir’, *OC II*, p. 462.

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, Sylviane Goraj’s use of the adjective ‘réfractaire’ to describe this constant creative movement is highly pertinent (Conference at the Institute of Romance Studies, University of London, 17 September 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See Roland Barthes *par Roland Barthes*, p. 189.

a celebration of the liberating capacity of the sign in *Mouvements* to the line in *Par des traits*. The line, Michaux proposes, is able to transcend the restrictions of figurative drawing and conventional writing systems through its very purity and simplicity. The books incorporating signs radically question our reading habits because of their visual nature and lack of semantic value. They resemble writing systems yet do not function conventionally. They are structured using repetition and the blank space and page which create a type of rhythmic punctuation, thereby providing the reader with some orientation with regard to the book's page. Michaux still draws attention to the healing dimension of this quest for, and ensuing discovery of, the ascetic line. The creative possibilities of destruction, again emblematic of Michaux's output, are highlighted here as a positive consequence because the therapeutic qualities of the written or drawn line are issued from an extremely violent critique of words and the book form.

Although presenting similarities in conception, production and reception, each book is distinct from the others, in much the same way as each sign is unique, and adds its own individual elements to the series of books incorporating signs as well as, on a larger scale, to Michaux's creative itinerary in general. These books could in fact be interpreted as providing metatextual commentaries on the visual and verbal activities in which he was engaged at the time. They are also distinct from the usual literary and generic categories concerning definition. The interaction between text and image undergoes a fusional transition from *Mouvements*, in which the pages of signs and text are separated, to the textless *Par la voie des rythmes*, and finally to *Saisir* and *Par des traits*, in which signs and text intermingle on the same page. *Mouvements* sets itself apart from the three other books through its publishing history, its inclusion in *Face aux verrous*, Bertelé's major intervention in its creation and the fact that its signs are composed with a brush in Indian ink. The three remaining books incorporating signs are all composed mainly in black fibre-tipped pen, thus further reducing the gap between writing and drawing. *Par la voie des rythmes* radically questions conventional reading methods and the traditional book form because of the absence of any verbal text. In *Saisir*, the reader witnesses Michaux's struggle with both mimetic and abstract representation so as to create a type of bestiary or lexicon. Directions which had not been taken before, such as

diagonally ascending figures and the aim of expressing a situation, are explored verbally and graphically. *Par des traits* provides a particularly significant case as it constitutes the end of a creative series with the most abstract signs as well as the clearest definition of the aims of this graphic activity.

In an article on the visual artist, Gérard Fromanger, Michel Foucault affirms that by mixing various visual media in their works, such as photography and painting, the Pop artists and the Hyperrealists manage to convey the image in its trajectory between one art form and another:

Car ce qu'ils ont produit au terme de leur travail, ce n'est pas un tableau construit à partir d'une photographie, ni une photographie maquillée en tableau, mais une image saisie dans la trajectoire qui la mène de la photographie au tableau.<sup>8</sup>

If this idea is applied to the crossover between text and image in the four books incorporating signs, Michaux renders a figure in the transient space between writing and drawing. This intermediary form expresses the rhythmic movement of the thought process as well as the gestural operation that has produced it. Foucault concludes his essay with a suggestion:

Nous sortons maintenant de cette longue période où la peinture n'a pas cessé de se minimiser comme peinture, pour se 'purifier', s'exaspérer comme art. Peut-être, avec la nouvelle peinture 'photogénique', se moque-t-elle enfin de cette part d'elle-même qui recherchait le geste intransitif, le signe pur, la 'trace'. La voici qui accepte de devenir lieu de passage, infinie transition, peinture peuplée et passante.<sup>9</sup>

The images in the final sentence of this quotation again correspond to Michaux's experimentation with signs, which is without doubt 'peuplée' by humanoid, animal and insect-like figures, and indeed, with the introduction of 'passage', to his literary and artistic output in general. In Michaux's *œuvre*, the reader or viewer witnesses many 'passages' between different genres and activities. The poet-artist may choose to write aphorisms or poems, to write or draw, to paint or

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, 'La peinture photogénique', in *Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Gérard Fromanger: Photogenic Painting / La Peinture photogénique*, ed. by Sarah Wilson (London: Black Dog, 2000), pp. 83-107 (p. 91).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

compose music, to travel or experiment with hallucinogenic substances. Rather than a mere return to the gestural trace, Michaux's books incorporating signs can be interpreted as an intermediary passage between drawing and writing, between Western and Oriental signifying systems. The French term *battement* lends itself perfectly to describing this passage, this gap, this interval between two creative practices. For, as well as evoking an interstice, a silence and various scientific and choreographic connotations, it also alludes to the beating of hearts and drums, highlighting once more the analogy between cardiac rhythms and physical movement, and a fluttering or flapping that evokes the chaotic movement of the inner self, all of which Michaux hoped to render in these books.<sup>10</sup>

Despite receiving little critical attention until now, the four books incorporating signs are essential to apprehending Michaux's literary and artistic experience. They are important to him because they constitute a liberating, therapeutic act which allowed him to escape periodically what he considered the paralysing nature of Western signifying systems. In many respects, these signs are a failure because they do not function as Michaux had wished, that is, as a universal language. But they are an absolute success in terms of their visual and verbal impact and their shattering of generic boundaries. Although Michaux did not theorise this interdisciplinary practice, he often commented on his different approaches to these creative modes, for example: 'Né, élevé, instruit dans un milieu et une culture uniquement du "verbal" / je peins *pour me déconditionner*.'<sup>11</sup> In a footnote inserted after 'verbal', Michaux states: 'et avant l'époque de l'invasion des images', thus emphasising the fact that he was aware of the ever-increasing role of the image in our society. Furthermore, when discussing the interdisciplinary dimension of his production, he suggests: 'Je crois que dans l'avenir mon cas deviendra quelque chose de moins rare.'<sup>12</sup> And indeed, many contemporary artists have no qualms about blending text and image in their conceptual creations and installations. But, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, creators able to express themselves successfully using different media

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<sup>10</sup> Yve-Alain Bois also uses this term in his introductory essay to *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi*, p. 28: 'ce que le battement dénote est une pulsation sans finalité qui déchire l'assurance désincarnée de la pure visualité et y précipite l'irruption du charnel.'

<sup>11</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-Résurgences*, OC III, p. 543, Michaux's italics.

<sup>12</sup> Rey, *Henri Michaux*, p. 30.

are still relatively rare and this type of hybrid production unfortunately even more so. In this respect, the series of *Mouvements*, *Par la voie des rythmes*, *Saisir* and *Par des traits* provides us with a dazzling interfusion of text and image by one of last century's greatest poets and artists.





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