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## À LIRE ET À VOIR, ENTRE MOT ET IMAGE: SELECTED TRANSLATIONS OF WORKS BY HENRI MICHAUX

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À LIRE ET À VOIR, ENTRE MOT ET IMAGE:  
SELECTED TRANSLATIONS OF WORKS BY HENRI MICHAUX

A Thesis Presented

By

VICTORIA L. AREND

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
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## ABSTRACT

À LIRE ET À VOIR, ENTRE MOT ET IMAGE:  
SELECTED TRANSLATIONS OF WORKS BY HENRI MICHAUX  
MAY 2014  
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This Master's thesis investigates the language of words and images in the work of Belgian poet and painter Henri Michaux (1899-1984) through the practice of translation. I have chosen to translate texts that serve as critical and poetic inquiries into the nature of verbal and visual representation. In the critical introduction preceding the translations, I analyze Michaux's relationship to the languages of words and images in the selected works. The selected translations appear in two sections: "On Words and Images" and "Images in Words." In the first, I translate selections from Michaux's reflective works on the practice of painting and writing. These include the essay "En pensant au phénomène de la peinture," first published in *Peintures et dessins* (1946) and selections from *Émergences-résurgences* (1972). In the second, I translate selections from works of ekphrastic poetry, including "Dessins commentés," first published in *La nuit remue* (1935), "Aventures de lignes," from *Passages (1937-1963)* (1950, 1963), *Lecture par Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki* (1950) and *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques* (1972). I propose that these texts reflect Michaux's hybrid view of representation. They embody a search for an ideal language that is neither purely verbal nor visual, calling for both words and images.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: WORD, IMAGE AND EKPHRASIS

*Un objet rencontre son image, un objet rencontre son nom.  
Il arrive que l'image et le nom de cet objet se rencontrent.*  
René Magritte, *Les mots et les images*

*Ce n'est donc pas dans la glace qu'il faut se considérer.  
Hommes, regardez-vous dans le papier.*  
Henri Michaux, « En pensant au phénomène de la peinture »

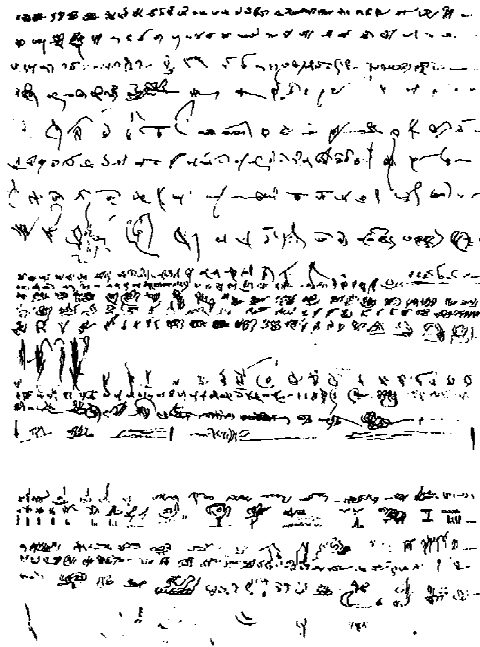


Figure 1: *Alphabet*, Henri Michaux, 1927

#### Seeing is Reading

*Ut pictura poesis*: As is painting, so is poetry. This principle implies the likeness of these two “sister arts,” each of which represents reality, one in words and one in images. With the canvas alongside the page, the painting alongside the poem, this principle assumes that these two visions of reality are in harmony with one another. Moreover, it suggests that the painter and the

poet speak the same language – that the language of images translates to the language of words.

Not merely similar, however, painting and poetry embody one another in *ut pictura poesis*. Bound together, the sister arts seek to represent, or imitate, reality. More than reality, however, they imitate one another. As W.J.T. Mitchell observes in *Picture Theory* (1994), ““*Ut pictura poesis* meant an art of mutual imitation and collaboration between two ‘sister arts,’ both dwelling in the realm of the aesthetic...”(222). More than merely a question of aesthetics, however, this principle proposing an apparent harmony between word and image concerns the very nature of representation. Is it true that words imitates images, and vice versa ? Is it true that a painting tells the same story as a poem, and that a poem paints the same vision as a painting?

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing proclaims that the answer to these questions is no: painting and poetry are not equivalent because word and image represent nature in fundamentally different ways. As Alison Vort Halász observes, Lessing divides painting and poetry. Not merely creating a dichotomy between the two, however, this division creates a hierarchy, for “...Lessing divides the sister arts, explaining that painting can only imitate reality whereas poetry represents truth...”<sup>1</sup> For Lessing, word triumphs over image: poetry embodies true representation, while painting is a mere imitation. In these terms, word will forever be separate from image, the dividing line between them undeniable.

Yet what of works where the two coexist with one another? Where the two sister arts share the page or the canvas with one another? Countering Lessing, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that representation is not as simple as the principle *ut pictura poesis* might suggest. Painting and poetry, word and image, can coexist with one another. In this regard, their difference or their likeness in representation cannot be compared: they form one and the same representation. Thus

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<sup>1</sup> Halász, Alison Vort. “Henri Michaux, poet-painter,” Diss. U. of Pittsburgh. 2007. p. 5.

instead of debating the principle of *ut pictura poesis*, determining whether painting and poetry are similar or different, whether a representation in words differs from one in images, let us abandon this dichotomous vision of representation. Letting go of the single principle of *ut pictura poesis*, we might consider a more multifaceted view of representation, as Mitchell does in his conclusion to *Picture Theory*:

But suppose we thought of representation not as a homogeneous field or grid of relationships governed by a single principle, but as a multidimensional and heterogeneous terrain, a collage or patchwork quilt assembled over time out of fragments. Suppose further that this quilt was torn, folded wrinkled, covered with accidental stains, traces of the bodies it enfolded. (419)

Rather than static, W.J.T. Mitchell's conception of representation is dynamic, "a collage or patchwork quilt...with accidental stains, traces of the bodies it enfolded." The dichotomy of painting and poetry, of word and image, loses ground when we define representation in these terms. Rather than a telescopic vision, this gives us a kaleidoscopic one. Like a kaleidoscope, representation can present an at once unified and multi-faceted vision of the world – word and image working together. And, like a kaleidoscope, this vision can change with a turn of the wrist.

### Poet and Painter

Belgian-born poet and painter Henri Michaux (1899-1984), whose works offer unique encounters between word and image, finds himself between page and canvas, between book and frame. Michaux explores the limits of painting and poetry beyond the principle of *ut pictura poesis*. His art is diverse, including paintings, drawings, poems, essays and hybrid texts that relate word and image in distinct ways, each of which represents a poetic and critical inquiry into the nature of representation. Certain texts are contemplations of poetry and painting, the sister arts. Others are hybrid works consisting of both poetry and painting. Still others are ekphrastic texts, re-imaginings of visual art in poetry. For Alison Halász, these texts represent "border

crossing” between word and image, beyond the divisions that genre imposes, and thus “...beyond Lessing’s separations: they break down forms thus bringing together words and images.”<sup>2</sup> Michaux’s work thus moves beyond the dichotomy between painting and poetry inherent to *ut pictura poesis*.

Like Mitchell’s “collage or patchwork quilt,” Michaux’s vision is kaleidoscopic. His works represent a diverse inquiry into language itself – the languages of both words and images. As Michaux passes between word and image, he seems to be seeking an ideal language, or, as Margaret Rigaud-Drayton describes it in *Henri Michaux: Poetry, Painting, and the Universal Sign* (2005), a “universal” language that “not only reproduces the formless chaos of nature, but performs it and is part of it” (117). For Michaux, representation is not meant to simply mimic nature, but translate it. Michaux seeks language between and beyond painting and poetry, word and image.

Michaux engages in this search in his reflective, hybrid and ekphrastic texts. While much attention has been given to Michaux’s hybrid works of word and image, the reflective and ekphrastic texts merit study for their own unique hybridity. In these texts, painting and poetry continually attract and repel one another. Michaux explores the language of each one through the language of the other, constantly shifting between the two. His reflective texts, in which he contemplates his practice of painting and writing, reveal a critical aspect of his poetic inquiry into the relationship between word and image. These works clarify the nature of Michaux’s struggle to find an ideal form of expression. In the essay “En pensant au phénomène de la peinture,” published in both *Peintures et dessins* (1946) and *Passages (1937-1963)* (1950, 1963) and in *Émergences-résurgences* (1972), Michaux articulates his vision as painter, reflecting on how word and image both shape his struggle toward an ideal language. These poetic reflections

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<sup>2</sup> See Halász, p. 5.

become foundations for his inquiry into verbal and visual language. In his ekphrastic poetry, Michaux translates the language of painting into poetry. Michaux explores how these two arts communicate with one another. Moreover, he interrogates how each art represents reality. In *Lecture par Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki* (1950), *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques* (1972), “Aventures de lignes,” published in *Passages* (1937-1963) (1950, 1963) and “Dessins commentés,” published in *La nuit remue* (1935), Michaux challenges the simple dichotomy of *ut pictura poesis*. Rather than simply describing the works of art from which he draws inspiration, Michaux reflects on how he sees these works. Poetry becomes a new way of seeing. Word engages image, and vice versa. Through one, Michaux sees and reads the other.

Michaux’s art embodies a relentless search for expression. Furthermore, Michaux seeks self-expression in his shifts between word and image. Thus his search for an ideal language beyond word and image embodies a search for self. Central to this self is the movement between the page and the canvas. As Halász writes, “Michaux combined words and images in pursuit of unity and reconciliation of the self” (5). Though his works seem at times divided by word and image, Michaux seeks the “unity” of the self in a hybrid language. For Rigaud-Drayton, Michaux explores the languages of both words and images precisely because neither language alone allows for self-expression, since “Michaux’s construction of the self as hybrid and ever-changing is intimately linked to a reflection on the limits that language imposes upon the articulation of identity” (59). Expression is hybrid by nature. For this reason, the single principle of *ut pictura poesis* proves insufficient when considering the nature of word and image in Michaux’s work. This static principle does not capture the dynamism of Michaux’s search for expression.

Let us return again to Mitchell’s “patchwork quilt,” a view of representation that allows

for evolution. Poetry and painting are not absolute in Michaux's work. His perpetual shifts between word and image challenge each genre, changing their relationship to one another. As Laurie Edson argues in "Henri Michaux: Artist and Writer of Movement," this change defines Michaux's work. Movement determines his conception of both self and language, requiring expression in both word and image:

In all of his poetry and his painting, Michaux explores the movements of the world within, seeking a heightened awareness of the continually-evolving self while experimenting with the possibilities of artistic expression. Having developed an ideology of perpetual movement as the basis of human existence, and having defined 'self' as a momentary position of equilibrium in an ever-changing reality, Michaux considered writing and painting to be the signs of that movement as well as the tools which aid him in self-exploration. (46)

Michaux does not see his world from a fixed point, seen as if through a telescope. Instead he sees it through a kaleidoscope. His art embodies Mitchell's multiple view of representation. Comprising words and images, Michaux's world is hybrid precisely because the world itself is hybrid, calling for the languages of both words and images. As Michaux passes from one form of expression to the other, he turns the kaleidoscope again, seeking another vision, hoping to capture it on the canvas and the page in his search for an ideal language.

### Dreaming of Language

When Henri Michaux first dreamt, he did not dream in words or images, passing in his mind, one after the other. Not yet inclined to the "movements" of his later years, he dreamt of stillness: "1900 à 1906, Bruxelles...Rêves, sans images sans mots, immobile. Il rêve à la permanence, à une perpétuité sans changement" (16). He recounts these first dreams in "Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence," (1959) a brief autobiography

composed, not wholly willingly, for a critical study of his work by Robert Bréchon.<sup>3</sup> Michaux's "uneasiness with the autobiographic project," as Rigaud-Drayton points out, is evident in the text's form, consisting of an annotated timeline, a brief catalogue of the most significant events of Michaux's life.<sup>4</sup> Though one of the only explicitly autobiographical texts that Michaux wrote, "Quelques renseignements" reveals more than objective information about Michaux's life. Despite its brevity, the text conveys both a wry sense of humor and a particular reserve, a reticence that keeps the autobiography from seeming in any way intimate. Writing in the third person, Michaux maintains distance from the events of his life, recounting them as if they had happened to someone else, "il" replacing the habitual "je" of the autobiography. More importantly, however, "Quelques renseignements" reveals how Michaux's first encounters with language, both verbal and visual, shape his identity as poet and painter.

The first dreams of "stillness" recounted by Michaux seem distant from those that led him to his subsequent explorations in painting and poetry. His life begins with refusal, mired in stasis. As time passes, however, with the years of the timeline advancing, the characteristic "movement" that would define his work first surfaces. As a young boy in Belgium, Michaux is sent to a Flemish boarding school where he finds only "Indifférence. Inappétance. Résistance," and remains "Inintéressé," uninterested in his world. (16) Here he remains until he returns to francophone Brussels, where he makes the discovery that will stir him: "1911 à 1914, Bruxelles...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" (17). Michaux will no longer dream "sans images sans mots," it seems, his head filled

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Bréchon, *Michaux*, Paris: Gallimard, 1959. This edition includes Michaux's "Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence" as a preface to Bréchon's critical study.

<sup>4</sup> See Margaret Rigaud-Drayton, "Michaux Between France and Belgium," for a full study of Michaux's troubled Belgian/French identity.

with these words, later filled with images. He recounts his surprise at the discovery of writing, and his voice as a writer: “Première composition française. Un choc pour lui.” He then continues by speaking of his first experiences with books as an adolescent, reading opening up an entire world for him: “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.” Later readings have an even greater effect on him, his exposure to Lautréamont’s having particular influence: “Lecture de *Maldoror*. Sursaut...qui bientôt déclenche en lui le besoin, longtemps oublié, d’écrire” (17). These literary encounters – “chocs,” “surprises,” “découvertes” – catalyze Michaux, waking him up from his early slumber and dreams of “stillness.” Through them, he is pushed to the page – to write.

Unlike those first years described in “Quelques renseignements,” spent “sans images sans mots,” the language of words drives Michaux to react to his world around him. Margaret Rigaud-Drayton observes that the discovery of the French language is pivotal to the formation of Michaux’s identity. In fact, she argues that Michaux’s attention to language is deliberate, his first literary discoveries allowing the future poet and painter to find his first sense of self. She asks, “Who is Henri Michaux at the beginning of this autobiography? Nobody,” arguing that Michaux’s “the process of individuation,” or rather his search for self, does not begin until his first encounter with the French language:

Early on, the four years that Michaux spends in the Flemish boarding school are represented as a forced exile from the bourgeois comforts of francophone Brussels into an uncivilized world of Flemish-speaking peasants....This rural universe is clearly contrasted to Brussels, where, on his return, he discovers the joys that the dictionary (French, but also Latin) can yield. (18-19)

For Rigaud-Drayton, Michaux is plagued by the “hybridity of his ancestors,” seeing his identity as split between cultural traditions and, more importantly, between linguistic traditions. In spite of this, it is evident in “Quelques renseignements” that Michaux deliberately chooses his own



identity. Drawn to the French language, through which he experiences a “gradual discovery of his literary vocation,” he finds new “forefathers” who are literary rather than biological.” Rigaud-Drayton regards this as the first voluntary “expatriation,” which liberates Michaux from his conflicted sense of self.<sup>5</sup> While Rigaud-Drayton concentrates on Michaux’s conflicted identity as a Belgian writer, our focus remains on the articulation of Michaux’s identity through his work.

Michaux seeks independence through identifying himself an artist. Just as Rigaud-Drayton defines his Belgian identity in terms of its hybridity so, too, Michaux’s artistic identity develops its own hybridity. His unique work makes him both poet and painter, and even in “Quelques renseignements,” the distinction between these two identities is evident. Both literature and visual art influence Michaux in this autobiography. Just as he identifies literary figures who come to shape his work, so he identifies visual artists who do the same. Michaux “discovers” the wonders of visual art in painting, just as he discovered the wonders of language in the dictionary: “1925. Klee puis Ernst, Chirico...Extrême surprise. Jusque-là, il haïssait la peinture et le fait même de peindre...” (20). For Rigaud-Drayton, Michaux’s discovery of these painters parallels his discovery of Lautréamont’s *Maldoror*. The two are definitive moments, set apart from others in the text, each of which greatly influences Michaux. His “surprise” at the surrealist painters matches the “choc” in the face of Lautréamont. Nevertheless, these two moments prove to be “antithetic,” as Rigaud-Drayton notes, since , “...the double discovery mediates the shift of focus between the concern with writing which dominates the first part of the ‘Renseignements,’ and the interest in visual expression which is pre-eminent in the second” (23). Even the style of “Quelques renseignements” changes as Michaux’s commentary becomes less

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<sup>5</sup> See Margaret Rigaud-Drayton “Michaux Between France and Belgium” for observations on the influence of travel on Michaux.

verbose. Compared with the first half of the text, the latter half is sparse. Michaux redirects his creative work following this encounter, privileging image over word for the first time: “1951-1953: “ Il écrit de moins en moins, Il peint davantage” (22). So it seems the poet, who had until this point been driven by a passion for language, becomes the painter. Michaux here reveals that one form of expression is more ideal than the other.

Though brief, this autobiography of his first fifty-nine years shows how Michaux’s divided cultural and linguistic identity mirrors his divided artistic identity. Rigaud-Drayton sees Michaux’s active search for the latter as a means to liberate himself from the former. As he sheds his Belgian identity and ties to Belgium itself, leaving his native land on a series of “voyages d’expatriation,” ultimately becoming naturalized as a French citizen, Michaux creates his own identity independent of his roots. What Rigaud-Drayton first identifies as ambivalence toward his native Belgium becomes a refusal as Michaux travels, leaving his native land. What interests us, however, is the way in which Michaux’s appropriation of identity through painting and poetry translates to his shifts between word and image. The “expatriation” Michaux seeks, this liberation, begins in his travels, but continues in the artwork and poems that follow. By discovering the outer world during these voyages, Michaux uncovers his inner world, taking his first steps toward that ideal language.

### Seeking Language

Beyond the borders of his native Belgium, the poet and painter finds a new way of seeing the world as he travels through South America and across Asia. In fact, his voyages suggest a reaction against the way he perceived the world until that point, defined in his own words by a particularly Western identity. So he writes in “Quelques renseignements:” “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" (21). Michaux sheds the identity of his youth, his roots, in order to attain a new one as an artist. Like the "choc" and "surprise" of his first encounters with art and literature, Michaux's trips abroad reveal to Michaux a new way of seeing, awakening him. Thus these voyages refine Michaux's artistic vision, planting in him ideas that he will explore in his contemplative texts on painting and writing.

Michaux's broadened perspective leads him to a new means of expression. Moreover, Michaux begins to perceive expression differently during these travels, questioning the ties between writing and painting. According to Jean-Michel Maulpoix, Michaux is greatly influenced in this respect by the languages of Asia, in particular the Chinese language. Maulpoix observes in *Henri Michaux, passager clandestin* (1984) that Michaux's fascination with language grew while in China, Japan and India, "Lors de son voyage en Orient, Michaux s'est intéressé aux langues des pays traversés. Il les a observées, écoutées, analysées et décrites, avec précision....Chaque langue indique un caractère, une façon d'être, de se tenir et de se déplacer dans le monde" (131). Michaux's interest in these ideographic scripts, which consist of characters unlike the letters of alphabetic French, shows his dual interest in painting and poetry. More than that, however, this intrigue on Michaux's part shows the beginnings of his hybrid artistic vision. In the Chinese language, Michaux perceives a marriage of word and image. Thus ideographic languages like Chinese represent what alphabetic languages like French do not, for they speak in both the languages of images and words. For Michaux, the Chinese writing system, embodied in the art of calligraphy, spans both painting and poetry. There is no doubt that Michaux's vision of Chinese is founded on vision itself, on seeing an image rather than a word;

for though Michaux studied Chinese and other Asian languages, he could not read, speak or understand them.<sup>6</sup> For him, written Chinese is word-image, bridging the gap between painting and poetry – a hybrid form of expression. Rather than reading these signs, Michaux sees them.

Years after his travels, Michaux reflects on the art of Chinese calligraphy and the Chinese language in *Idéogrammes en Chine* (1975). Calligraphers represent “no mere scribes” for Michaux, as Rigaud-Drayton writes, for “Through the movements of their hands, calligraphers inflect the expressivity of signs, so that the same ideogram acquires new shades of meaning with each calligrapher, or indeed with each new inscription” (140). Their practice is both poetry and art, their expression evident even in the manner in which they transcribe their meaning, so moving beyond the meaning itself. Comparing ancient to contemporary ideograms in this reflective text, Michaux envisions a biography or portrait of the Chinese language, focusing in particular on what he perceives to be its hybridity. A language of painting and poetry for Michaux, Chinese distinguishes itself from other written systems, such as Michaux’s French, because it employs both verbal and visual elements.

To make the distinction between this and his native language even greater, Michaux includes Chinese ideograms in his reflective, and at times ekphrastic, text. Printed alongside Michaux’s text, the ideograms are in contrast to Michaux’s writing in their verticality and their red color. For Rigaud-Drayton’s, these are “non-discursive” signs for Michaux, ultimately visual. Michaux describes these signs in *Idéogrammes en Chine*:

Si éloigné que soit de l’ancien le caractère nouveau, il peut réanimer l’objet  
par let mot.  
Il y est poussé. Son graphisme tente.  
Sans autre savoir, il suffirait – grâce à ses subtils traits nuances.  
Le chinois, langue faite pour la calligraphie. Celle qui induit, qui provoque  
le tracé inspiré.

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<sup>6</sup> Michaux, “Notice: Idéogrammes en Chine,” *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 1654-1667.

Le signe présente, sans forcer, une occasion de revenir à la chose, à l'être qui n'a plus qu'à se glisser dedans, au passage, expression réellement exprimante. (833-835)

Rather than represent objects, beings and ideas, Michaux sees these characters as an embodiment. These objects, beings and ideas are “inside” the ideograms, inhabiting them. Thus the ideograms themselves “reanimate” these objects, rendering each character alive, “le tracé inspire.” Mirroring the gesture of the calligrapher, who writes them down, the lines of the ideogram move across the page. The language itself becomes a movement, tied as much to the hand of the calligrapher as it is to the mark on the page.

Rigaud-Drayton warns, however, that Michaux's vision of Chinese is to be read carefully. She cautions that his vision constitutes, in part, a “projection onto the Chinese ideogram of his desire for a natural sign,” (139) of that ideal language between word and image. Because Michaux's artistic tendencies begin to lead him from word to image, he sees Chinese in terms of a particular visuality. However, as Rigaud-Drayton points out, it is “... confusion of visual expression and ideographic writing systems that leads Michaux to describe ideograms as visual signs...” (139). While Michaux's discovery of Chinese seems a marriage of Michaux's discovery of the dictionary, as recounted in “Quelques renseignements,” and his discovery of painting, his vision of Chinese is highly idiosyncratic and personal. Michaux sees image and word as one, reflecting on this in *Idéogrammes en Chine*. This idea of unity represents a philosophy that shapes Michaux's subsequent explorations into the limits of painting and poetry.

### Seeing Within

“J'écris pour me parcourir, ” writes Michaux, “Peindre, composer, écrire: me parcourir.

Là est l'aventure d'être en vie."<sup>7</sup> A "parcours" never ceases, always in progress; a path that winds down hills, through forests, over mountains and seas. An "adventure," it leads Michaux to wander on the path to new places, yet unseen and unknown. This statement encapsulates Michaux's autobiography in art that, unlike the "Quelques renseignements," represents the movement and dynamism of the poet and painter's explorations. For Jean-Michel Maulpoix, who cites these words in a study of Michaux's "creative adventures," Michaux's "parcours" does not simply move through the world as we see it, as we know it, but through a world of the "imaginary." For Michaux, this "imaginary" world is an invisible one. His paintings and poems are an invitation to see this world – previously unseen and unknown – as it manifests on the page, for they bring the adventures of words and images together; they "...invitent à confronter l'aventure de l'imaginaire avec celle de l'écriture et de la peinture" (Maulpoix 105). In Michaux's contemplative texts, in particular "En pensant au phénomène de la peinture," and *Émergences-résurgences*, Michaux explores how the world of painting can render visible what is normally invisible, itself approaching an ideal language. In these texts, Michaux seems to favor the language of images. Nevertheless, his discussion is anchored in the language of words.

Visibility determines Michaux's "parcours" in these texts. In *Idéogrammes en Chine*, Michaux developed the idea that language holds both the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent, the real and the imaginary. A sign must embody what it represents; its visible and invisible qualities – its essence. For Michaux, the language of words could not always unveil this hidden life of objects as painting does. Painting, for Michaux, is the visible art of the invisible. As Maulpoix writes, "Le paysage de la peinture est à la fois un précipice et un miroir. Michaux se regarde dans le papier. Il y projette sa nuit et la colore. Mieux que l'écriture, la peinture est voyance: ainsi elle exorcise. Elle montre des fantômes et des démons que le poème parvient juste

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Michel Maulpoix cites from Michaux's *Passages* in *Henri Michaux, passage clandestin*, p. 103.

à suggérer...” (144). The canvas here is at once a “mirror” and an “abyss,” both reflecting and obscuring, walking the line between what can be seen and what cannot. The painting can show signs that are less concrete, less fixed than those of the poem, written in Michaux’s alphabetic French. These are signs that move – “signs of movement” – at once real and unreal, “fantômes.”

In “En pensant au phénomène de la peinture,”<sup>8</sup> Michaux concentrates on this dual nature of painting by contemplating on the painter’s ability to represent both the invisible and visible qualities of his subject. Michaux interrogates the art of portraiture in this poetic essay, proposing that the portrait painter ought not simply represent the physical characteristics of the subject, but its spiritual and psychological characteristics as well. Thus he promotes “fantômise,” or “psychologisme,” his invented school of painting that has for its primary tenet painting the “double” or “fantôme intérieur” of the subject – painting “les couleurs du double.” This “double” represents the invisible qualities of a subject, its soul, which are best captured by the brush of the painter, who must seek to “peindre la couleur du tempérament des autres...faire le portrait des tempéraments” (860). Unlike physical traits, which are of no interest to Michaux, this “double” becomes the subject of the portrait, its qualities rendered through gestures, “quelques traits écrasés,” and through colors, which reveal more than words could.

Central to Michaux’s study of the “double” is the human face. Speaking of his own practice, Michaux records observations of his own paintings, where faces appear on the page in countless iterations. The artist observes “faces de perdus, de criminels parfois,” and “visages des personnalités sacrifiées, des ‘moi’ que la vie, la volonté, l’ambition, le goût de la rectitude et de la cohérence étouffa, tua,” “visages de l’enfance,” and “visages de volonté...de la recherché et du désir.” Michaux sees not only his subjects in these faces, but himself as well, asking: “Est-ce

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<sup>8</sup> All citations from this text are taken from this edition: Michaux, “En pensant au phénomène de la peinture,” *Peintures et dessins, Œuvres complètes I*, p. 857-865.

moi, tous ces visages? Sont-ce d'autres? De quels fonds venus?" (857-960) Here the line between the artist and his subject blurs, the one who represents and the represented. The faces represent both self and other for Michaux, both "moi" and the "Foule infinie: notre clan," all humanity. They are in constant movement – "plastique et malléable" –between the inner world of the artist and the outer world he sees, forming before converging in a "synthèse." Just as the objects represented by Chinese ideograms are "inside" these signs, so Michaux finds the subjects he represents "inside" himself. One subject, for example – a girl whose photograph he found in a magazine – seems to inhabit Michaux before he paints her portrait, for, as he observes, "Elle est maintenant en moi. Bon! J'attrape le fusain..." (859). By looking at her, seeing her, Michaux seeks to understand her. More than drawing her image on the page, he hopes to draw her image inside himself. This process is not simple, as Jérôme Rôger observes in *Poésie pour savoir* (2000): "Mais, chez Michaux, l'objet du regard ne se dérobe ni ne s'offre, pour la simple raison qu'il importe moins de représenter l'image que d'y 'entrer' afin de s'en imprimer" (203). Seeing transforms, allowing Michaux to see more than an image, but an essence – to see the self. This is experienced not only in looking at his subject, but in looking at the resulting portrait. The self exists thus in both the subject and on the page. This is the lure of sight, its power over Michaux strong. Later he writes that if men and women were somehow all turned to statues in an instant, "statufié dans leur chair," he would gladly roam the world, "parcourir le monde," in order to see them, contemplating them solely in order to understand them, and thus understand himself.

Painting ultimately becomes a question of identity for Michaux. The invisible traces of a subject's "double," his "fantôme intérieur," reveal more than the shape of his nose or his mouth, the color of his eyes: they reveal his identity. Consequently, the artist's portrait of this subject reveals the artist's own identity, for "Un portrait est un compromis entre les lignes de forces de la



tête du dessinateur et la tête du dessiné” (863). Thus for Michaux, the identity of the artist and the subject are intertwined, their inner worlds meeting outside on the painted canvas. This is what Michaux hopes to capture:

Je voudrais pouvoir dessiner les effluves qui circulent entre les personnes.  
J'aimerais aussi peindre l'homme en dehors de lui, peindre son espace.  
Le meilleur de lui qui est hors de lui, pourquoi ne serait-il pas picturalement communicable?  
Dans la joie, l'enthousiasme, l'amour, l'élan combatif, l'exaltation de groupe, il est hors de lui. C'est là qu'il faudrait le peindre. Même sa méfiance est autour de lui.  
L'homme le plus réservé se fait encore un bain des alentours.  
Que serait un chez soi, des murs, si on ne s'y répandait vraiment? (863)

Here the borders between the inner self and the outer world fade away, blending the invisible and the visible. In fact, in order for a human being to be “himself,” he must, as Michaux writes, be outside of himself as well. In painting, Michaux finds a balance between self and other, inside and outside, visible and invisible. Here we see these elements in harmony with one another. Yet Michaux still asks whether these elements are “picturalement communicable,” Michaux wondering if this elusive “double” can ever be perfectly captured.

To counter the harmony of “En pensant,” we find the reflective *Émergences-résurgences*, a text in which Michaux’s identity as a painter struggles with his identity as a poet. The discordance between word and image is the central theme of *Émergences-résurgences*.<sup>9</sup> In this hybrid text, which features poetic fragments alongside reproductions of the artist’s paintings and drawings, Michaux fashions an artistic autobiography that chronicles his struggles with expression. Just as we saw in the autobiography “Quelques renseignements,” writing and painting exist in separate spheres in *Émergences-résurgences*. The split between word and image again becomes a split between selves. This is evident from the first pages of the text, where Michaux provides an epigraph in words and images. Born and bred in a tradition that he

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<sup>9</sup> All citations from this text are taken from this edition: Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences, Œuvres complètes, III*, p. 542-660.

describes as uniquely verbal, he writes in his epigraph to *Émergences-résurgences* that “Né, élevé, instruit dans un milieu et une culture uniquement du ‘verbal’ / je peins *pour me déconditionner*” (543). Language, defining his native culture, as a Belgian, as a European, imprisons Michaux. This institution conditions him to think, to see, to read in only one way: the written word. He seeks liberation in painting, where the world of lines replaces the world of letters. So we find the “monde des lignes,” the glimpse revealed in the image that accompanies the written epigraph:



Figure 2: Line drawing from *Émergences-résurgences*

A crowd of figures appears in this image, a face here and there, bodies standing up, bending over, forming a mass together. Where their numbers begin is just as difficult to discern as where they end, their forms curving and bending. Though many, these lines are ultimately one – a single line, consisting of “une ligne plutôt que des lignes,” a sign of unity and harmony. Immediately following on the next page, we find another vision of this linear world in the final part of the verbal and visual epigram:

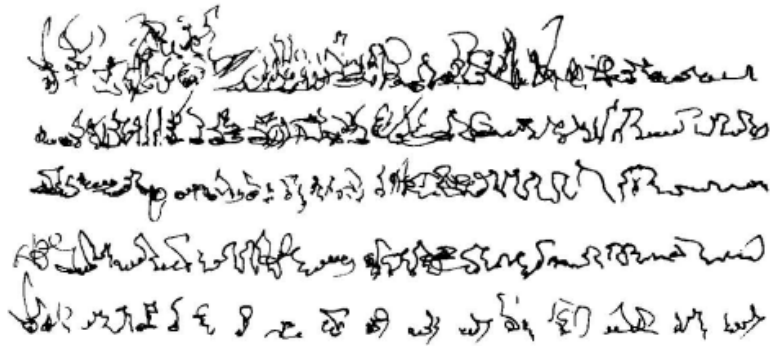


Figure 3: Line drawing from *Émergences-résurgences*

Here these lines begin to fragment, separating from one another. Resembling letters, these lines move across the page horizontally, as words do, coming together to form what could be a sentence or a paragraph. These “letters” evolve, gaining more definition, more autonomy, as the lines progress. Nevertheless, they are separate from one another, divided.

These first two drawings represent Michaux’s conflicted view of word and image as expressed in the verbal part of the epigraph. Moreover, they represent his conflicted identity as poet and painter. One embodies unity, its lines moving and gesturing, gathering together, while the other represents division: in the first, one line transforms itself, taking on many forms while remaining one; in the second, a single line splits into individual lines, each distinct from the others. Furthermore, in one drawing, line is image, and line is letter in the other. Michel Butor writes in *Improvisations sur Henri Michaux* (1985) that the line as image was a pure form for Michaux: “Il dépose sur le papier un fantôme de l’écriture, illisible comme écriture mais qui peut devenir lisible comme dessin. En passant de l’autre côté d’écrire, la ligne vit des aventures” (150). Writing and painting are bound together for Michaux, each one rendering “lisible” the “illisible.” Thus these drawings represent this duality in Michaux’s work, and in his identity as an artist.

In the first pages of *Émergences-résurgences*, Michaux relates to the line as a form. Movement comes to the forefront in his description, describing the gesture of tracing a line on

the page of the first drawing: “Ainsi je commence, me laissant mener par une, une seule, que sans relâcher le crayon de dessus le papier je laisse courir...” (545). The movements of his hand across the page match the line, the artist and his art becoming one through this gesture. Just as the Chinese language embodies unity in its representation and in its inscription at the hand of the calligrapher, so this drawing represents unity for Michaux. Furthermore, Michaux identifies with the line, himself becoming one with it. As the line searches, so too does the artist: “Comme moi la ligne cherche sans savoir ce qu’elle cherche, refuse les immédiates trouvailles, les solutions qui s’offrent, les tentations premières. Se gardant d’arriver, ligne d’aveugle investigation” (545). Michaux finds himself in this line, seeing the blank page that surrounds it as the world in which he inhabits. It has the potential to take any form: a face, a tree, even a letter. Blindly, the line searches, its form yet undetermined, “Ligne qui n’a pas encore fait son choix” (546). Michaux sees potential in these lines, which, for him, match the evolving movements of his inner world. They inscribe what is within him. While liberated by the lines of his drawings and paintings, however, Michaux expresses the limitations of his surroundings, again recalling the “verbal” culture in which he was brought up. This influences him, leading him to see his first drawings, his “premières sorties” as “échecs,” repeated failures. What liberates him becomes a limitation when Michaux looks at the “verbal” culture that surrounds him. He questions this process, asking whether drawing is a “poor” form of expression: “Ce que je fais, est-ce simplement dessiner en pauvre, comme fait celui qui joue de la guitare avec un seul doigt?” (545). Doubt drives Michaux to question whether painting truly is a “poor” means of expression in comparison to writing. Ultimately, however, he finds his faith in the visual and value in its signs.

While Michaux’s poetic fragments and paintings in *Émergences-résurgences* show the

connection between word and image on the page, these two languages distance themselves from one another in the text. The two are inextricably linked, almost identical, each one leaving signs on the paper. These signs, however, are ultimately different. For Michaux, one liberates while the other limits. He betrays an inclination toward painting, yet he always returns to the written language, relating its signs to those of painting. We see this in Michaux's attention to the formal qualities of his work. Michaux contrasts the apparent "poverty" of painting with its lines to the wealth of the writing with its words by focusing on the signs of each form of expression. Unlike the letters of written language, the signs of painting are not part of a shared system of meaning, excepting symbols or icons, which Michaux avoids in his artwork. For Michaux, painting's signs are purely formal: line, shape, color. This is perhaps the source of their poverty. Michaux, however, does not consider writing's wealth of words to be superior to painting's poor lines, as Lessing would.

Dubious of written language, Michaux refers to it as a "cadeau empoisonné," a gift that takes away just as much as it gives. For him, the age-old reliance on writing as the sole form of expression leads to imbalance, to precariousness: " L'écriture comme seul pilier, c'était le déséquilibre" (550). Man cannot live on words alone in Michaux's mind. Expression is by nature hybrid. As Laurie Edson observes, "It is significant that he expresses writing, a 'horizontal' activity in terms of the vertical image of the pillar, as if to regain balance" (50). To counter the precariousness of written language, Michaux finds an anchor in the image. For Edson, Michaux's doubt in written language lies in its social nature. On the outskirts is painting, which draws Michaux in with its poverty of meaning, ultimately freeing him. She observes the following: "Because writing involves language, this means of expression contains inevitable limitations of which Michaux is well aware...Painting involves, for Michaux, a more original and spontaneous

gesture on the part of the artist. In painting, he claims, the primitive side of man finds its expression; language, as Rimbaud had already complained, is too civilized” (50). Not devoid of meaning, not “poor,” rather painting means something more than writing. The “primitive” man rather than the social man can find himself in painting. It is for this reason that Michaux begins to exalt painting in *Émergences-résurgences*, expressing that it is a more direct form of expression:

Dans la peinture, le primitif, le primordial mieux se retrouve.  
On passe par moins d’intermédiaires et qui ne sont pas vraiment intermédiaires, n’étant point partie d’un langage organisé, codifié, hiérarchisé.  
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 les 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. (550)

Michaux opposes the representation of verbal and visual language by commenting further on their “wealth” and “poverty.” Compared with the “poverty” of painting, the wealth of words becomes a curse, not a blessing. Plagued by “abundance” and “luxury,” written language’s complexities hinder expression for Michaux. Letters are “intermediaries” which prevent man from expressing what is most “primitive, primordial” in the words he writes. Consequently, Michaux praises the simplicity of the line, its poverty embodying a virtue. Written language cannot be poor, part of an “organized, codified, classified” system, that only limits expression. These restrictions lead Michaux to the visual image.

At a certain point in *Émergences-résurgences*, Michaux takes his preference for painting even further with a complete denial of words. The choice between word and image is no longer aesthetic, however, but visceral. Here Michaux speaks of expression rather than representation, writing of the difficulties he has following the death of his wife, a trauma that touches Michaux

deeply. Unable to express himself verbally, Michaux wonders “Des mots? Je ne veux d’aucun. À bas lets mots. Dans ce moment, aucune alliance avec eux n’est concevable. Je suis au-delà” (568). More than averse to words, Michaux is “beyond” them, his rejection absolute. Trauma has changed his vision of the world, and thus changes his artistic vision. With his wife’s death entirely out of his control, Michaux feels a victim of chance. As a means of catharsis, Michaux seeks to relinquish control in his expression. Michaux refuses writing, whose words require reason and skill, “expert maneuvering,” favoring instead painting precisely because it responds to the “primitive, primordial” woken within him by this trauma:

Je n’ai rien à faire, je n’ai qu’à défaire. D’un monde de choses confuses, contradictoires, j’ai à me défaire. À la plume, rageusement raturant, je balafre les surfaces pour faire ravage dessus, comme ravage toute la journée est passée en moi, faisant mon être une plaie. Que de ce papier aussi vienne une plaie!  
(566)

As the world is revealed as chaotic and “contradictory” by the death of his wife, representation, too, becomes chaotic. Michaux seeks to erase rather than create, which would be impossible were he to choose the “organized, codified, classified” language of writing. Choosing painting, Michaux becomes one with the page, which, like his body, is “wounded.” He and his art are unified here in his process, painting allowing him access to that direct expression he seeks – the ideal language in which to express himself.

Despite his denial of the written word, Michaux continues to reflect on the image, and see the image through words. He understands his painting through his writing, evidenced by the composition of “En Pensant” and *Émergences-résurgences*. Writing, like painting, is a means for Michaux to experiment with language in the hopes of finding an ideal form of expression, and himself. As he writes, he calls on painting, linking the two arts together. Similarly, as he paints, Michaux calls on writing. We see this especially in Michaux’s figurative drawings and paintings, which at times mimic the signs of language. He evokes “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...” (580).

Visual signs that mimic verbal signs accompany these descriptions:

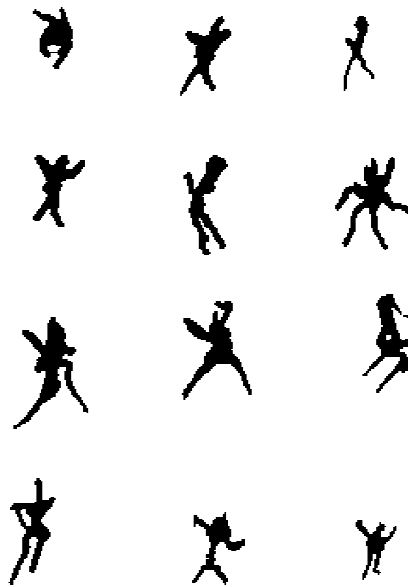


Figure 4: India ink drawing from *Émergences-résurgences*

These signs are more than letters, more than a written language, however. Suggestive of the Chinese ideograms Michaux was so drawn to in *Idéogrammes en Chine*, these signs are alive for Michaux, moving across the page. Unlike his own ‘horizontal’ language, these signs are more ‘vertical.’ They represent a new “pillar” surpassing that of writing. In creating these sign-like images, Michaux writes without writing’s formal restrictions. He invents his own language where word and image converge, which can be both seen and read, a language much like the one he saw in Chinese ideograms. Despite his struggles with the written word, it seems Michaux sees it in the same way he does painting. For Michel Butor, Michaux cannot separate painting from writing, his path in one informed by his path in the other:



La peinture de Michaux naît de ses impatiences vis-à-vis de ce qu'il écrit. Elle permet de continuer à s'exprimer lorsque les mots vous lâchent. Mais si la peinture s'installait dans l'insuffisance des mots, il serait devenu entièrement peintre. Or s'il l'est de plus en plus, il reste pourtant écrivain.

Les deux domaines ont besoin l'un de l'autre, s'épaulent, s'étaient. (145)

Michaux the painter could not exist without Michaux the poet. He reads just as he sees. The language of poetry informs the language of painting, though words limit where the line liberates. More than that, as Butor argues, Michaux's poetry and painting "need" one another. Jérôme Rôger goes even further, suggesting that painting and writing are one in Michaux's mind, that painting is a kind of writing, for "Le mot 'écriture' est donc chez [Michaux] invariablement polysémique, désignant tour à tour, ou simultanément, l'acte graphique, plastique, linguistique et poétique, bref, la capacité d'inventer des formes de signification" (198). Beyond *ut pictura poesis*, Michaux's poetry is painting, his painting poetry. Word unites with image in Michaux's work, though the poet and painter himself struggles to see it as he searches for that ideal language that somehow goes beyond word and image.

While *Émergences-résurgences* and "En pensant" reveal Michaux's "parcours" as a painter, these reflective texts reveal just as much about his journey as a writer. Painting and poetry come to speak to one another in these works, just as they do in his hybrid works of word and image. In these reflective texts, the dialogue becomes an interrogation, Michaux questioning the limits of painting and poetry. In his ekphrastic works, however, Michaux participates in the dialogue, not pitting the two arts against one another, or seeking one in the other, but allowing them to converse openly with one another.

### Dreaming, Seeing, Reading

More than poet and painter in his ekphrastic texts, Michaux is a reader and a viewer. While in *Émergences-résurgences* and "En pensant," Michaux reflects on his own practice as a

painter, in his ekphrastic texts, he contemplates the practice of others, focusing on the experience of a painting rather than its composition. However, just as Michaux struggles to write and paint, so he struggles to read and see. United by vision, seeing and reading become one in Michaux's ekphrastic texts, much like "écriture," as Butor points out, suggests both writing and painting. Nevertheless, the experience of reading a painting differs from that of reading a book, where "Le chemin est tracé, unique," the writer's words arranged carefully for the reader, who is meant to follow along closely. Books restrict readers, and are thus boring to read, "...ennuyeux à lire. Pas de libre circulation."<sup>10</sup> A painting, whose reading is "[i]mmédiat, total," allows for free movement. The reader may explore the painting in any number of ways, not limited to one alone, "Pas de trajet, milles trajets, et les pauses ne sont pas indiquées." Reading paintings thus sends Michaux on a journey, "Car c'est de chemins qu'il s'agit, de voyage, si l'on veut."<sup>11</sup> Similar to his own voyages across the globe, his voyages in reading paintings take him places not yet seen or known.

Michaux's ekphrasis is a testament to this journey because of the particularity of its passage between word and image. In ekphrastic texts like *Lecture par Henri Michaux de Huit Lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki*, *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, "Aventures de lignes" and "Dessins commentés," Michaux reads the paintings of artists René Magritte, Paul Klee, and Chinese artist Zao Wou-Ki, in addition to his own drawings. Yet the painting is only a point of departure for Michaux, who declares in the preface to *En rêvant*, "Le déroutant tableau est une mise en route qui s'arrête net" (695). For Michaux, as soon as the journey begins, it stops short. Unlike words, whose meanings share in an "organized, codified, classified" language,

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<sup>10</sup> Michaux, *Lecture Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki. Œuvres complètes II*, p. 263. Note that all citations from *Lecture* are taken from this edition, p. 261-279.

<sup>11</sup> Michaux, *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques. Œuvres complètes III*, p. 695. Note that all citations from *En rêvant* are taken from this edition, p. 693-715.

images form a language that is less absolute for Michaux. Painting represents an “enigma” that can be more fully explored through ekphrasis – through the translation of the mysterious language of images into words. Elsewhere words only mystify Michaux, but in his ekphrastic texts, they provide him with a path by which to “parcourir” the world of the painting. So he observes in the preface to *En rêvant*, “Les mots à écrire me furent utiles, ces habituels empêcheurs à me balancer indolemment entre plusieurs impressions indéfinies me remettaient constamment au devoir des correspondances et de ne pas prématurément m’écarter des réseaux aperçus” (695). Where words once imbalanced Michaux, they balance him in his ekphrasis, allowing him to navigate the space between word and image – to translate and unify them.

In writing ekphrastic poetry, Michaux takes part in a tradition that dates back to antiquity. Classical ekphrasis is a poetic mode in which a poet describes a work of visual art, whether real or imaginary. According to James A. W. Heffernan, “*ekphrasis is the verbal representation of graphic representation.*”<sup>12</sup> Here we find the principle of *ut pictura poesis*, the ekphrastic poet aspiring to represent verbally what the painter has represented visually. More often than not, as Heffernan argues, ekphrastic poetry seeks to narrate a work of visual art or to describe it, for “ekphrastic literature reveals again and again this narrative response to pictorial stasis, this storytelling impulse that language by its very nature seems to release and stimulate” (301). To this end, ekphrastic poets traditionally follow certain conventions. In particular, these poets favor certain literary devices, such as personification and prosopopoeia over others. Most notable, however, remains ekphrastic poetry’s emphasis on the visual work of art as an object. As Elizabeth Keohane notes in “Ekphrasis and the Creative Process in Henri Michaux’s *En rêvant à*

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<sup>12</sup> See Heffernan’s discussion of the ekphrastic tradition in “Ekphrasis and Representation.” *New Literary History* 22.2 (1991): 197-316. p. 299.

*partir de peintures énigmatiques (1972):*” “These traditions include the acknowledgment and discussion of the work of art as an object and, accordingly, an emphasis on the importance of the encounter with the art object” (266). The ekphrastic poem references the place where a work of art is seen – on a wall, in a museum, in a gallery – and often refers to its artist. While ekphrasis takes many forms, these conventions help define the literary mode in the most basic terms.

It is clear that Michaux’s ekphrasis goes beyond tradition, often breaking its conventions. Rather than describe, narrate or represent painting, Michaux questions painting, interrogating it. The painting is no longer an object to be seen or read, but a dynamic experience to be had, an enigma to be explored. It is not frozen in “pictorial stasis,” but is dynamic, an image that moves – and moves Michaux. He thus questions representation itself, in both images and words, through his ekphrastic poems. Michaux, like other poets who push the boundaries of ekphrasis, “use[s] these ekphrastic traditions to reflect on representation : not just on a particular work of graphic representation, but on the nature of representation itself” (Heffernan 304). For him, paintings are enigmas to be explored. Thus Michaux does not simply seek to represent their images in words, but to interrogate the nature of representation in both images and words, itself an enigma. *Ut pictura poesis* becomes a precarious principle, the symmetry between painting and poetry blurring in Michaux’s ekphrasis, just as Karl Kürtös observes in *Henri Michaux et le visuel: Ekphrasis, mimésis, énergie* (2009):

[L’écriture ekphrastique chez Michaux] s’oppose cependant d’emblée à une conception de l’ekphrasis qui vise à ‘constituer’ un rapport mimétique ainsi que symétrique entre le texte et l’image. Car au lieu de chercher à reproduire verbalement l’image en tant que simulacre transparent car lisible, l’écriture ekphrastique chez Michaux intègre l’image en partant de ses effets (‘déroutants’) afin d’en parcourir les possibilités.... (21)

Rather than the equation of word and image, Michaux seeks their integration in his ekphrasis. We observed this tendency in *Idéogrammes en Chine* and *Émergences-résurgences*, where word

and image, writing and painting, bind themselves to one another. Rather than imitating one another, poetry and painting come together through ekphrasis. In contemplating the “déroutant” quality of painting’s visual images, Michaux builds a reading of painting around the idea of the enigma. Moreover, Michaux’s ekphrastic poems engage this enigma in dialogue. As Jérôme Rôger argues, Michaux is also singular in his treating of ekphrasis as a dialogue, for he engages the paintings as “interlocuteurs” rather than objects of study: “Si, comme nombre d’écrivains contemporains, Michaux renverse ou réinvente le genre de l’écrit d’art, il semble être le seul à concevoir le tableau comme une sorte d’*interlocuteur*, et donc le langage du peintre comme une forme de ‘voix’ exposée à la vue” (199). Michaux reads the language of images in his ekphrasis, leaning in to hear the “voice” of the painter, writing so that it is “revealed to the eye” of the reader. Thus Michaux’s poetry challenges the ekphrastic tradition, seeing representation in both words and images as an enigma to be explored rather than explained.

Michaux’s ekphrasis distinguishes itself further in its diversity. Each of his ekphrastic texts relates poetry to painting in a distinct way. For example, in “Dessins commentés,” a suite of ten ekphrastic poems, Michaux’s subject is his own artwork, exploring his dual identity as poet and painter. In “Aventures de lignes,” a prose poem and essay on the art of Paul Klee, Michaux performs ekphrasis not of one work in particular, but of Klee’s entire body of work, seeking to embody the spirit of all his painting’s in one poem. In *Lecture par Henri Michaux de Huit Lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki*, a suite of eight poems written in response to eight lithographs by Chinese artist Zao Wou-Ki, Michaux places his ekphrastic poems alongside the lithographs of Zao Wou-Ki. Lastly, in the collection *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, Michaux writes prose poems in response to the paintings of René Magritte. Overall, Michaux’s ekphrasis

concentrates on the mysterious, arresting power of the visual image, each ekphrastic text engaging painting and poetry in a new dialogue.

Mystery defines Michaux's ekphrasis. More precisely, the theme of the enigma shapes Michaux's poetic voice in his ekphrastic poems. Michaux sees the painting as the point of departure for a mysterious journey, "Le déroutant tableau est une mise en route qui s'arrête net." Although Michaux conceives of paintings as enigmas in his ekphrastic works, he does not seek to solve their riddles. Rather than interpreting the images, he seeks instead to reimagine them, seeing them again through his poems. As Gérard Dessons observes in "Lire la peinture," Michaux's ekphrasis is rooted in the idea that the language of the painting is enigmatic, unknown, and that the known language of poetry is a means of approaching it. Michaux's ekphrasis thus welcomes the unknown, seeking it out, for "Il s'agit de '[s]'introduire dans l'inconnu,' et non de le résoudre, de l'annuler en le rendant fréquentable. La lecture du tableau n'est pas une entreprise d'élucidation...Née 'à partir' des tableaux, l'écriture, en réalité, va vers eux, se crée dans la tentative de rejoindre leur intempestivité" (50). The visual image of the painting presents a whole world that Michaux tries to reconcile with the written word, despite the "intempestivité," or inopportuneness, of their meeting. The dialogue between word and image is not didactic, focusing on what could be seen rather than what is seen.

In order to see and read these enigmatic paintings in a new way, Michaux seeks to inhabit them. Just as he seeks to inhabit the subjects of his paintings in "En pensant," where he writes of painting the inner world of his subjects, painting what cannot be seen from the outside, so he seeks to see these paintings from within. In doing so, he hopes to "enter into the unknown" of the image, and thus "enter into" the painting itself. Thus ekphrasis is a means for Michaux to see the invisible qualities of these paintings rather than the visible. Michaux searches for moment before

the composition of a painting, just as the artist paints the first stroke. He seeks to “enter into” their paintings in order to catch this moment, again to see the paintings from the inside out. His ekphrasis allows him to do that. This is the nature of his ekphrasis in “Aventures de lignes,” a work in which Michaux embodies the “monde des lignes” of Paul Klee’s artwork.<sup>13</sup> In this ekphrastic poem, Michaux reimagines the work of Paul Klee, translating its visual forms into words. Mimicking the form of the line in writing, giving voice to the chorus of lines that inhabit Klee’s paintings, Michaux uses parallel structure in his poem to characterize Klee’s visions. Personifying the lines, Michaux shows us how one line meets another – “Une ligne rencontre une ligne” – or how a line dreams, waits and dreams – “Une ligne rêve,” “Une ligne attend. Une ligne espère.” Michaux rebuilds Klee’s paintings, line by line, hoping to cross the threshold of the painter’s world. At the end of the poem, Michaux steps back to comment on how he sees the work by “entering into” it, writing “Pour entrer dans ses tableaux et d’emblée...Il suffit d’être élu, 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” (363). For Michaux, Klee’s enigmatic world is also the world of enigmas in which we live. When met with mystery, one must respond in kind. Through his ekphrasis, Michaux seeks to paint its portrait – the portrait he defines in “En pensant,” where he writes “Un portrait est un compromis entre les lignes de forces de la tête du dessinateur et la tête du dessiné” (863). The lines of the poem are thus a compromise between Michaux and the lines of Klee’s paintings. Rather than dividing painting and poetry, they unite them.

Michaux explores the enigmatic even further in “Dessins commentés,” an ekphrasis of

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<sup>13</sup> All citations from this text are taken from this edition: Michaux, “Aventures de lignes,” *Passages (1937-1963). Œuvres complètes II*, p. 281-395.

Michaux's own artwork.<sup>14</sup> Even Michaux's own drawings are an enigma to him, depicting a world the poet tries to inhabit again through ekphrasis. In this suite of poems, Michaux describes a series of drawings he has done previously, rediscovering them as if they were new: "...je fus surpris comme à un spectacle jamais vu encore, ou plutôt jamais compris, qui se révélait, que voici : ...."<sup>15</sup> Compared to "Aventures de lignes," here Michaux sets himself at a distance before the images he observes. He describes his drawings as though someone else had created them, disconnected from their composition. Michaux responds not with a critical eye, not reading and interpreting the images, but experiencing them as mysterious phenomena. Catherine Mayaux characterizes Michaux's descriptions as "lacunaire," his style reflecting the enigmatic quality these drawings have for him. Unlike his ekphrasis in "Aventures de lignes," however, Michaux finds it difficult to inhabit these images that he himself drew. As Mayaux writes, Michaux's ekphrasis thus seeks to invigorate these drawings, giving them a voice and a body. The poems of "Dessins commentés" constantly shift between what Mayaux calls "une écriture contrariée," oscillating as it does between "une écriture du corps" et "une écriture de la tête," never satisfied with one or the other. This is the distinction between a moving body and a thinking mind, between action and reflection. In these poems, Michaux's ekphrasis shifts between the clear and the vague as he seeks to "...accomplir son dessin, l'informer par le recours – retour – aux mots."<sup>16</sup> The enigma of these drawings, which Michaux himself created, leads him from image back to words. For Karl Kürtös, Michaux's "Dessins commentés" thus creates a tension between vision and knowledge – between what Michaux sees in these drawings and what he knows or

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<sup>14</sup> All citations from "Dessins commentés" are taken from the edition of *La nuit remue* published in Bellour's and Tran's edition of Michaux's *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 419-512.

<sup>15</sup> Dessins, 436.

<sup>16</sup> See Mayaux's discussion of the enigma in "Dessins commentés" in "Dessins commentés ou le fantôme du poète," p. 18-19.



does not know them to be: observing that “L’écriture ekphrastique met donc ici en scène la tension entre voir et savoir, entre ce que l’on reconnaît comme une relation de ressemblance et ce que l’on peut ‘voir’...” (39-40). This distinction between knowing and seeing relates directly to the enigma Michaux finds in painting. Ekphrasis is his response to this enigma, testing the boundaries between “savoir” and “voir,” between what we know and what we see.

For Michaux, the enigmatic world of a painting cannot be entered through “savoir,” or study, but experience. As we observed in both “Aventures de lignes” and “Dessins comentés,” although Michaux conceives of paintings as enigmas in his ekphrastic works, he does not seek to solve their riddles. They are thus available to all readers, no lack of knowledge or experience preventing them from reading and seeing the paintings. As he writes in his preface to *Lecture par Henri Michaux de Huit Lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki*, “Tous peuvent lire un tableau, ont matière à y trouver...Oui, tous ont quelque chose pour eux dans la toile, même les propres à rien, qui y laissent simplement tourner leurs ailes de moulin, sans faire vraiment la différence, mais elle existe et combien instructive” (263). In this text, where Michaux’s poems are accompanied by the lithographs that inspired them, Michaux invites his readers, all readers, to engage with visual art in the way he has. Michaux’s readers are not to compare the poems with the lithographs, but rather to read the lithographs as Michaux has, to engage with them as he does in his ekphrasis. On first encountering Klee’s work, Michaux expresses that he has moved beyond the “savoir” of the critic. As Karl Kürtös points out, citing Jean-François Lyotard, in its dynamism, Klee’s work evades the critic’s eye, for “...selon sa propriété qui est ni figurale ni discursive mais plutôt une force à l’œuvre non pour donner à voir ou à lire mais à fantasmer ou à éprouver” (70). Experiencing Klee’s work is a “fantasme” for Michaux, dreaming rather than seeing or reading. Unschooled in painting, Michaux expresses that understanding a painting does not come from

“savoir,” for its enigma cannot be solved. Instead, understanding comes from practice rather than study, writing that “Fermé à la peinture, ce que j’y voyais, je ne sais. Je ne tenais pas à le savoir, trop heureux d’être passé de l’autre côté, dans l’aquarium, loin du coupant” (360). Michaux’s eye does not simply read or see Klee’s world, but swims in its sea, its “aquarium.” Michaux writes that he does not know what he sees in Klee’s enigmatic paintings, but instead sees beyond them. So Michaux conceives of vision as a whole experience, touching both mind and body. His ekphrastic poetry provides a testament to this.

In *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, Michaux’s theme of the enigma is explored even deeper than in his other texts. In this collection, the ambiguous relationship between Michaux’s poems and the paintings by Magritte that inspire them affects our experience of the text. More than in his other works of ekphrasis, Michaux interrogates the limits between poetry and painting here. In *En rêvant*, the enigma pervades Michaux’s poems. Michaux moves even further beyond “voir” and “savoir,” he seeks to dream rather than to see or know, but to dream. A dream itself is an enigma, full of images that correspond to our world, even mimic our world, but are not of this world. In *En rêvant*, Michaux’s ekphrastic poems are dreams of Magritte’s paintings. Magritte’s paintings thus are only a point of departure for Michaux, his ekphrasis “à partir de peintures énigmatiques.” The concept of the enigma is central to Michaux’s ekphrasis in *En rêvant*:

L’énigme, y explique-t-il en substance, ne représente pas, mais elle agit à la manière d’une question imaginée par le poète qui lui donne forme et voix. Le procès de la description n’est donc pas ici une péripétie parmi d’autres de l’histoire littéraire, elle correspond à l’invention d’une forme autonome de connaissance et d’énonciation, douée de sa temporalité propre. Ici, le lecteur ne se tient pas *devant* l’univers du décrit, comme il peut se tenir devant un tableau dans un musée. (Roger 213)

Michaux’s ekphrasis aims to understand Magritte’s paintings through words, an active search for understanding fueled by naming – “une forme autonome de connaissance et d’énonciation.” Yet

as Michaux writes in his preface, the paintings of Magritte invite him to dream more than to see, observing that “Les tableaux de R.M.<sup>17</sup> qui ont servi ici en quelque sorte de ‘supports de méditation,’ généralement donnent à rêver” (695). From the first page, this text exudes ambiguity, Michaux referring only to the artist who has inspired his ekphrastic poems as “R.M.,” the artist of the “peintures énigmatiques,” himself becoming an enigma. Michaux defines the paintings by their enigmatic quality, each one a point of departure for further “meditation” or “dreaming.”

Not only are the images of the painting enigmatic, but Michaux’s relationship to them is, as well. While shrouding Magritte’s identity in mystery, Michaux also shrouds the paintings in mystery, not mentioning the title of a single painting, except one.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, Keohane observes that Michaux takes from the paintings their status as “art objects.” They become even less “art objects” as Michaux describes his first viewing of the paintings, not in a gallery or museum, but as reproductions in a black and white catalogue, “Les peintures mêmes, desquelles la matière me gênait plutôt, je n’en avais guère vues. En photographie presque toutes, souvent en noir et blanc, d’un format pas bien grand, pas assez pour tous les détails : inconvenient, certes, inconvenient” (695). The material quality of the paintings holds no interest for Michaux, proving to be a hindrance, in fact. Magritte’s paintings are not objects for Michaux, but are pure images. For Keohane, this fact supports Michaux’s ekphrastic project, allowing him to “project himself” into the paintings – to “enter into” them, as he describes in “Aventures de lignes.” Thus the way he sees the paintings affects the way he experiences them:

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<sup>17</sup> Magritte is, however, mentioned by name in the afterword to *En rêvant*, written in a second publication of the collection. See Bellour and Tran’s note to *En rêvant*, “Note sur le texte,” *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 1619.

<sup>18</sup> Magritte’s “L’enfance d’Icare” is the only painting mentioned in one of Michaux’s ekphrastic poems. However, a number of critics have studied *En rêvant* in relation to Magritte’s body of work, managing to match certain poems with paintings by Magritte. For a list of these paired paintings and poems, see Bellour and Tran’s note to *En rêvant*, “Note sur le texte,” *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 1619-1620. See also Keohane, “Ekphrasis and the Creative Process in Henri Michaux’s *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques* (1972),” p. 271.

The photographic reproduction of a Magritte painting refines Michaux's focus on the images he perceives...accordingly, the canvas itself or the museum environment become peripheral concerns in Michaux's ekphrastic work. Rather, Michaux proposes to project himself into the environment constructed in the painting, creating a privileged vantage point from which to comment imaginatively on connections amongst objects he «encounters» in this alternative world. (Keohane 269)

By viewing reproductions instead of paintings themselves, Michaux liberates himself from them – from their bothersome “matière.” Moreover, he liberates his poems from an assumed fidelity that ekphrastic poems must have for the paintings that they represent. Michaux concentrates on image alone, distancing himself from both the artist and the paintings that support his “rêve.” By keeping the relationship between his poems and the paintings ambiguous, Michaux allows himself to explore more fully the enigma of the image through his words.

More than reflections on the paintings, Michaux's reflections are on representation itself. He frames his inquiry in the preface by writing about his “dreams,” summing up his intentions with a quote René Magritte himself, still only referred to as “R.M.:

““Quels que soient les traits, les mots, les couleurs, disposés sur une page...la figure que l'on obtient est toujours pleine de sens” (695). Whether word or image, the “figure” is still full of meaning. Michaux's ekphrasis in *En rêvant* contemplates this fact, blurring the lines between verbal and visual representation by attempting to unify them. Michaux does not attempt to see what Magritte sees, but rather to see how he sees; to see the enigmas not of his paintings, but of the world itself. Thus Michaux questions representation through Magritte's vision, allowing himself to “enter into” his paintings, inhabiting them from the inside, if only to better see the world around him.

In his reflections on representation in *En rêvant*, Michaux subverts the ekphrastic tradition, interrogating the nature of both verbal and visual representation. Magritte's surrealist paintings in particular provide fertile ground for Michaux's reflections, as they themselves question the nature of representation by juxtaposing unlike objects. As Karl Kürtös observes,

Magritte's imagery is by nature enigmatic, "cette étrange disharmonie inhérente aux tableaux de Magritte." Michaux recognizes this quality, deeming it essential and thus seeking to translate it in his poetry. Just like Klee's artwork, Magritte's requires "la conscience de vivre dans un monde d'énigmes, auquel c'est en énigmes aussi qu'il convient le mieux de répondre." Michaux's responses vary. Certain poems relate to one of Magritte's paintings in particular, while others relate to motifs in Magritte's works, and still others provide general reflections on Magritte's work. An atmosphere of doubt pervades the collection, Michaux's ekphrasis itself enigmatic. Representation becomes suspect; the world of the painting not always in harmony with the world it represents:

La pièce n'a pas de fenêtres, mais des tableaux, représentant des fenêtres et même quantité. Des fenêtres traînent partout, pêle-mêle avec d'autres « en train », pas terminées. Sur le chevalet, des nuages, les mêmes nuages que dans la campagne. Les mêmes, captifs, captifs d'un tableau. Et le tableau, lui, captif d'un cadre. D'ailleurs, tout ne peut-il pas être « retenu » dans un cadre ? (703)

Taken from the only poem that refers directly to one of Magritte's paintings, "L'enfance d'Icare," here we have a subversion of the ekphrastic tradition in disguise. Although Michaux gives details of Magritte's painting, describing it meticulously, he goes beyond pure description by reflecting on the nature of the images he sees. In his ekphrasis, the world of the painting collides with the world that it represents. Furthermore, this represented world threatens the "real" world. In place of "real" objects, we find representations of objects – "La pièce n'a pas de fenêtres, mais des tableaux, représentant des fenêtres." This *mise en abyme* – a painting within a painting – reflects mistrust in representation, highlighting its enigmatic qualities, suggested further by Michaux's characterization of these images as "captifs, captifs d'un tableau." Even the painting itself is "captif d'un cadre," captive to a frame. Michaux thus asks if everything, if our "real" world, could not be "held" captive by a frame. He wonders whether these representations in words and images are kinds of prisons, imposing boundaries on the subjects that are

represented. Here inhabiting the paintings becomes a kind of imprisonment. By entering into the painting, Michaux sees that it renders its subjects “captive” through representation. However, these subjects are again imprisoned in Michaux’s poem since, as he asks, “...tout ne peut-il pas être « retenu » dans un cadre ?” Even though Michaux speaks of the painting’s frame in this poem, we understand, too, that his poem represents a frame.

Representation is precarious, whether in words or in images. Beyond the enigmatic world of painting, the world, too, is enigmatic. Before its enigmas, as Michaux writes, we must, too, respond with enigmas. As in “Aventures de lignes,” where he observes that while painting may represent a world of enigmas, we must remember that we, too, live in such a world, keeping “...la conscience de vivre dans un monde d’énigmes, auquel c’est en énigmes aussi qu’il convient le mieux de répondre” (363). Thus we must do as painters do, turning the world on its head:

Nature ! nature! La nature est un tableau, que le peintre seul peut aisément  
mettre à l'envers, lui, enlevant, son règne le règne de son perpétuel “endroit,” la  
faisant lâcher, la renversant, la faussant pour l'éternité (du moins celle de son  
tableau). (707)

For Michaux, however, the response to the enigma of the world, of the self, requires both the languages of words and images – or rather, a language beyond word and image, an ideal language that translates both the language of words and images. Thus he explores the visual through the verbal, speaking to “the absent image” of the paintings through the words of his poems, even though, as Gary Shapiro suggests, “Words will never be the equivalent of visual images, and images will never speak...” (13). For Michaux, images do speak. In his ekphrasis, he does not simply wish to make paintings speak through his poems, but perhaps to make the two speak the same language – an ideal language. He thus translates images into words, though the translation remains mysterious, word as enigmatic as image.

## Beyond Language

*Ut pictura poesis*: As is painting, so is poetry. We return again to the principle that began our discussion. We ask again, does the language of images speak the language of words? Perhaps. In fact, word and image have the capacity to speak a language beyond their form – an ideal language as Henri Michaux imagined. To see this language, to read it, to speak it, one must not accept the limits of language itself. More precisely, one must question language at every turn; question words, question images and the limits of representation, seeing it through a kaleidoscopic view.

Henri Michaux does just this. We have seen how both Michaux's contemplative and ekphrastic texts refine his inquiry into language, and how his artistic practice reveals a search for an ideal language – and for himself. Ultimately we can define Michaux's art as a translation. The poet and painter moves from the world, to page, to canvas, and from world, to word, to image. All the while, he moves toward self, toward its translation in an ideal language. Is his translation faithful? Perhaps. However seamless Michaux's passages between the canvas and the page may be, they betray the palpable doubt that this ideal language, the self, could never be found – or, if found, could be lost forever. Yet as he paints, as he writes, at times forgoing one for the other, at times unsure whether either will lead anywhere, Michaux still holds hope that the search is not in vain. Again and again, he picks up the brush and the pen, still searching, relentless, since, for Michaux, it is through the language that we find ourselves. To see ourselves, we need not look in the mirror, but on the page: “Ce n'est donc pas dans la glace qu'il faut se considérer. Hommes, regardez-vous dans le papier.”

## CHAPTER 2

### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Among all the words and images I have come to associate with Michaux, there is one image in particular that sticks in my mind: an apple. Red, round, I imagine an apple like the one in Michaux's poem "Magie." In this poem, our speaker experiences a series of transformations, the first of which occurs as he observes an apple he has set on a table. The speaker becomes one with the apple, entering into it, exclaiming "Je mets une pomme sur ma table. Puis je me mets dans cette pomme. Quelle tranquillité!"<sup>1</sup> What peace, what calm he has, finding himself in this apple. He goes on to do the same with a river, the Escaut, standing before it for a time, but ceases, less successful. Its flowing waters, moving constantly, leave him at a loss to keep up, with "de nombreuses et inutiles vues." So our speaker returns to his apple, still on the table, immobile, hoping again for the "tranquillité" of before. Yet it seems the apple has changed – or rather the speaker has. As he becomes one with the apple again, this time, the speaker, too, stills, freezes– "Quand j'arrivai dans la pomme, j'étais glacé."

In this apple, I see Michaux, the poet who sought to "enter into" paintings, the painter who hoped to "imprint" his subjects within him, by the same "magie" the speaker of his poem passes into the apple that sits before him. Michaux did not only inhabit the world, but language, living inside of words and images – and inside what those words and images were meant to represent. In this way, Michaux sought a living art, an expression of himself – a self that is "a momentary position of equilibrium in an ever-changing reality,"<sup>2</sup> as Edson describes. Michaux seeks the most dynamic *Émergences-résurgences*, "Je suis de ceux qui aiment le mouvement, le mouvement qui rompt l'inertie, qui embrouille les lignes, qui défait les alignements, me

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<sup>1</sup> Michaux, "Magie," *Plume precede de Lointain intérieur, Œuvres complètes I*, p. 559.

<sup>2</sup> Edson, "Henri Michaux: Artist and Writer of Movement," p. 46.



débarrasse des constructions. Mouvement, comme désobéissances, comme remaniement.”<sup>3</sup> Michaux’s poetry and painting are “signs of that movement,” as Edson writes, shifting between word and image in hopes of capturing that fleeting self. Yet like the speaker of “Magie,” Michaux finds himself caught between the “tranquillité” of this expression, and being caught by it, “glacé.” Once the word is written on the page, the line drawn on the canvas, the moment is fixed; what was once moving becomes still, imprisoned by expression. Above all, Michaux’s poetry and painting moves against this imprisonment, seeking in word and image a freedom of expression – an ideal expression in an ideal language.

As Michaux saw the paintings of René Magritte as enigmas in *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, so Michaux’s writing was enigmatic for me. His poems and poetic essays drew me in, in particular his reflective texts on painting and writing, and his ekphrastic texts. I chose to translate these works because, for me, they ask an essential question: What can we see? What can we know? Moreover, these texts engage readers in a search for these questions, asking them to see what cannot be seen, as in the ekphrastic texts, and to interrogate how we represent what we see, as in the reflective texts. Through words and images, Michaux asks readers to pass between the visible and the invisible, leading us on the journey he himself takes on, always moving, never ceasing.

As I began my translation, I aimed to “enter into” Michaux’s texts, as he himself “entered into” the paintings of Klee, Magritte, Zao Wou-Ki and others, and into the subjects of his paintings. I hoped to enter his texts – not simply to read or see them, but live in them. Just as the speaker of “Magie” found himself in the apple on his table, so I sought to find myself in Michaux’s texts. Yet the texts I have chosen to translate have been more like the flowing Escaut than the immobile apple on the table. Both the reflective texts, “En pensant au phénomène de la

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<sup>3</sup> Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences, Œuvres complètes III*, p. 595.

peinture” and excerpts of *Émergences-résurgences*,<sup>4</sup> and the ekphrastic texts, the poems “Dessins commentés and “Aventures de lignes,” and the collections *Lecture par Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki* and *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*,<sup>5</sup> move between painting and poetry in a manner unlike his other texts. In their movements, Michaux comes to understand one art through the other, allowing words to inhabit images, and images to inhabit words.

A sense of movement also defines Michaux’s style, which provided its own particular challenges to translation. In particular, the poet’s syntax proved important in my translation. Michaux alternates between long, flowing sentences, rife with dependent clauses linked by commas, and short, declarative sentences, often fragments. Take the first poem of *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, whose first sentence is as long as a paragraph:

Deux nuages sont entrés dans la chambre, rodent auteur des meubles, mais sans insister, toujours nuages, toujours pour au-delà, pour absence, entre fenêtre et porte, distraits, pas apprivoisés, petits, véritables poussins de nuages, pas pour cela moins nuages, toujours dans *leur* espace, dans *leur* monde, érudant les relations comme l’œil du guépard dont, quoiqu’on fasse, on ne peut croiser le regard, qui toujours se porte au loin, attendant du lointain seul l’événement.<sup>6</sup>

In his description of two clouds floating into a room, Michaux suspends this moment through his syntax, allowing it to unfold into a singular, yet diverse, thought. The rhythm in this sentence is measured, each clause adding only a few syllables, excepting the beginning and end of the sentence. Moreover, parallel structure and repetition add to the even rhythm – “toujours nuages, toujours au-delà,” “toujours dans *leur* espace, dans *leur* monde.” I aimed to recreate this in translation, seeking the sense of movement and rhythm in Michaux’s syntax:

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<sup>4</sup> “En pensant au phénomène de la peinture,” *Peintures et dessins, Œuvres complètes I*, p. 857-865. *Émergences-résurgences, Œuvres complètes, III*, p. 543-547, 549-551, 562-566, 569-659, 580-583, 600, 605-613, 642, 645.

<sup>5</sup> “Dessins commentés,” *La nuit remue, Œuvres complètes, I*, p. 439.

“Aventures de lignes,” *Passages (1937-1963). Œuvres complètes II*, p. 281-395.

*Lecture Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki. Œuvres complètes II*, p. 261-279.

*En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques, Œuvres complètes III*, p. 692-715.

<sup>6</sup> *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques, Œuvres complètes III*, p. 697.

Two clouds have entered the room, loiter around the furniture, but without insisting, still clouds, still far beyond, still absent, between window and door, distracted, untamed, small, fluffy little chicks of clouds, not any less clouds for this, still in *their* space, in *their* world, eluding all contact, like a cheetah's gaze which, no matter what one might do, will not be met, which stays at a distance always, awaiting, from afar, the definitive moment.

Here I sought to maintain the repetition and parallel structure of Michaux's dependent clauses and still maintain clarity, which was especially challenging in the final lines when Michaux compares the clouds' elusive "gaze" to that of a cheetah, as the relative pronouns "qui" and "dont" can prove cumbersome in translation. While long sentences like these create movement in Michaux's writing by establishing an even rhythm, Michaux creates a similar effect with sentence fragments. Take these sentences from *Émergences-résurgences*:

Opération-cr ation.  
Au d part: insularit .  
Puis une certaine tension. Une tension grandissante. Une tension qui ne finit pas. Naissante n cessit  d'expansion.<sup>7</sup>

These fragments show clear action, creating a more punctuated rhythm that I tried to recreate in my translation:

Operation-creation.  
At first: insularity.  
Then a certain tension. A growing tension. An unending tension. Nascent necessity for expansion.

The rhythm of these sentence fragments mimics the even rhythm of Michaux's longer sentences. Each one functions in a similar way to the dependent clauses of the longer sentences, like the one above. Yet with these fragments, Michaux evokes the passage of time rather than a single moment. Nevertheless, Michaux uses syntax to create rhythm and affect his readers' perception of the images he creates in his writing.

Another important element to Michaux's work is his use of sound. I have chosen to translate prose poetry, where the element of sound has a different effect than in verse. In

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<sup>7</sup>*Émergences-résurgences, Œuvres compl tes, III, p. 603*

Michaux's prose, devices like rhyme, assonance, consonance and alliteration mimic the repetitions of his syntax, creating repeated sounds that advance the rhythm of Michaux's language. Whenever possible, I tried to preserve rhyme and assonance. At times, this required straying from the meaning of Michaux's original, or changing the repeated sound in French to a different one in English. Take, for example, the final sentence of the sixth poem from "Dessins commentés," in which Michaux describes the movements of a horse in one of his drawings: "Et il rue vers le ciel, il rue des ruades de flammes."<sup>8</sup> In the interest of maintaining the assonance of "ru-," in the verb "ruer" and the noun "ruade," I chose a different sound in English: "And he kicks at the sky, kicks licking flames." The repetition of sound here suggests the movements of the horse as he kicks, a gesture in words. Another example from *Émergences-résurgences* concentrates on movement as well, the repeated sounds of Michaux's writing a parallel to the repeated, continual movements of his hand across the page: "À la plume, rageusement raturant, je balafre les surfaces, pour faire ravage dessus, comme ravage toute la journée est passé en moi, faisant de mon être une plaie."<sup>9</sup> Here the alliteration of "rageusement raturant" and the consonance of "je balafre les surfaces," begin Michaux's sentence with movement, the sounds pushing it along. They mimic the dynamic gesture of writing described – writing as a "ravage" that lasts all day, writing again and again. In my translation, I sought to maintain the repetition of these sounds and the movement they create: "Pen in hand, in a ruinous rage, I slash into surfaces, ravage them, as a ravaging has raged in me the entire day, making my whole being a wound." These instances of repeated sounds are ubiquitous in Michaux's writing, including examples of alliteration, rhyme, assonance, and consonance. For the most part, finding a solution

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<sup>8</sup> "Dessins commentés," *La nuit remue, Œuvres complètes, I*, p. 439.

<sup>9</sup> *Émergences-résurgences, Œuvres complètes, III*, p. 566.

in English proved difficult. Still, it was important to me to translate these where I could, as both sound and syntax combine to give Michaux's work its definitive sense of movement.

More than these linguistic challenges, the challenge of the image in Michaux's texts influenced my translation process. Michaux's images must be read just as much as his words. Especially in his ekphrastic texts, the visual image was an important part of my translation. Because, as discussed in the critical introduction, Michaux creates a dialogue between word and image, I tried to do the same. In *Lecture par Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki*, where Michaux's poems are published alongside Zao Wou-Ki's lithographs, I read the poems not as descriptions of the images to which they corresponded, but as meditations on them. In other texts, instead of observing these images, however, I imagined them. In "Dessins commentés," this was particularly difficult, as Michaux's description of the visual is enigmatic. However, in imagining these drawings, I found more meaning in them than if I had had the images to consult alongside the text. I imagined them as Michaux saw them, hoping to translate these visions. In other texts, such as *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, however, this was more problematic. With this text in particular, I felt conflicted between my vision and Michaux's, as I was familiar René Magritte's paintings that had inspired Michaux to write his ekphrastic poems. In fact, in my research, I discovered that critics had studied these poems and paintings, identifying which poems corresponded to which paintings. While I believe reading the poems and paintings together is an enriching experience, my interest as a translator was to recreate Michaux's reading of these images, not my own. So I made the choice to translate the poems of *En rêvant* without looking at the paintings that inspired them. By not consulting Magritte's paintings, I hoped to see the paintings solely through Michaux's description – to imagine them through his eyes. This is the magic of ekphrasis – like the "Magie" of the poem at

the beginning of this translator's note: in this way, we can "enter into" images, even when we cannot see them; we can see the invisible.

Walter Benjamin writes in *Illuminations* "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work."<sup>10</sup> This is what I hoped to do in my translations of Michaux's reflective and ekphrastic texts. Michaux always searched for "that pure language that is under the spell of another," under the spell of word and image. His passages between word and image, poetry and painting, approach that ideal language – a language perhaps beyond translation. I searched for a way to translate that language, or at least to translate Michaux's search for it.

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. p. 80

## CHAPTER 3

### SELECTED TRANSLATIONS: ON WORDS AND IMAGES

#### Thoughts on the Phenomenon of Painting

Draw with no particular purpose, scribble mechanically, and, on the page, faces will almost always appear.

In the grossly face-filled live we live, we, too, are in a perpetual frenzy of faces.

As soon as I pick up a pencil, a brush, they come to me on the page, one after the other – ten, fifteen, twenty. And, for the most part, wild.

Are all these faces I? Are they other people? From what depths did they come?

Might they not simply be the workings of my own reasoning mind? (Grimaces on a second face, just as the grown man in suffering stops crying in his woe for the sake of propriety only to suffer more within, so he stops grimacing only to grimace more within.) Behind the inert face, blank, a mere mask now, another face, much more mobile, boils, shrinks, simmers in an unbearable spasm. Behind the frozen features, desperately seeking a way out, expressions like a pack of howling dogs...

From the tip of the brush, as best they can, black splotches flow, look: They free themselves.

The first few times are a surprise.

Lost faces, criminal at times, neither familiar nor entirely unfamiliar (strange, distant connection!)...Faces of lost souls, of “selves” that life, will, ambition, penchants for decency and consistency have stifled, killed. Faces that will appear over and over until the end (it is so difficult to stifle or drown things out once and for all).

Faces of childhood, of childhood fears, whose particular weft and waves have been forgotten more than the memory itself; faces who do not believe that reaching adulthood has resolved anything, who still fear the atrocious journey back.

Perhaps faces of will who always outstrip us and try to predict all things: Faces of pursuit also, and faces of desire.

Or a sort of epiphenomenon of thought (one of many that the effort of thinking cannot help but provoke, however useless it is for intellection, any more than we can keep from making useless gestures on the telephone)...as if a face were constantly taking shape in our mind, a fluid face, perfectly plastic and malleable, that would take and change shape according to ideas and the impressions they form automatically, in an instantaneous moment of synthesis, and, in a way, cinematographic, lasting all day long.

Untold crowds: our clan.

So it is not in the mirror that we must look at ourselves.

Men, look at yourselves on paper.

How can we have the guts to paint a faithful portrait of someone, to see a face only for its features. A face! A man's face, a woman's face almost always hits me with a sucker punch, right where it hurts. I do not know where or how the hit comes. But what has just happened inside me, a mysterious and painful reaction, keeps me from having command over the features of the face staring at me over and having command enough over myself to track and record them in an impartial drawing.

And who knows what part of me this face sees in itself as it fumbles around, trying to be seen truly?



Sometimes I manage to recreate the features, though never with any great success, having somehow erased myself in the process, me and my own life, so much so that that the life of the portrait is erased, too, turned to stone.

Really funny things, these portraits that I paint. Here in front of me, for one, a girl in hysterics, terrified. The photo of her face, printed in a magazine – I looked at it for a while, not budging once.

She is now within me. Good! I grab the charcoal and, with a few more strokes, my drawing is done, without hesitation, without retouching. A living portrait.

In that moment, I am not particularly struck by the fact that she is not the one portrayed, the portrait fit the moment so perfectly. I need a couple of hours to detach myself from it, to realize that, despite the hair hanging down to the neck, this is a man, unmistakably a man who sits before me with a noble and learned brow, and whose lip betrays an indescribable pout. Contempt, not entirely cold, that is so fitting for this hysterical girl, without any “self-control,” and that she would call her perfect complement.

Having looked at her closely, I thought I was steeped in her when I was really only steeped in disdain for her, mixed with a little indulgence, a feeling that I painted, imprinted within me, with the slightly haughty face to match the feeling.

This long-haired man, with a metaphysician’s brow – the more I look at him, the less I am able to turn my eyes away: kind, intimate, above all: the witness.

Dissatisfied with paintings of bucolic landscape and cows in bucolic landscapes, Chesterton said: “What *I* would have wanted to do is paint the cow’s soul.”

There is, within us, a certain spirit that must be painted – not the nose, the eyes, the hair on the surface...like the soles of shoes.

A fluid being, corresponding not to the bones or skin that we at first – friends, enemies, lovers, family members, acquaintances – and that makes it possible for us to immediately recognize how a person “is” at that precise moment, not two minutes after; one’s true nature revealed at last to anyone perceptive enough to see it – except precisely to painters. Bad luck charm.

So if I liked –ism’s and leading people, I would happily start a school of painting: SPIRITISM (or psychologism).

The face has features. I couldn’t care less. I paint the features of the double (who doesn’t necessarily need nostrils and could even have a web of eyes).

I also paint the colors of the double. Red isn’t just found on the cheekbones and the lips, necessarily, but where one’s fire is, in a sacred place. So I add, I add blue to the brow if need be (since I forgot to tell you that I have been practicing psychologism for some time now).

These colors are the individual’s soul; define the beautiful and the ugly, the infinite variety of dispositions.

There are no doubt humble caricaturists who have divined the real features within, and, infinitely more rare, some painters (with other concerns in mind, however) who have rendered some of the double’s *colors*, but, by and large, they have only seen their own temperament, or their own pictorial problems. What I want is *to paint the colors of others’ temperaments*. To *paint the portrait of temperaments*.

One could certainly say that I've painted mostly the souls of monsters. This is true, I see them better than others. Yet out of embarrassment, or a regrettable aversion to conflict, I have kept away from making a spectacle.

But it might be best not to trumpet this spiritism, nor, going on nothing but intuition, to anticipate the day when it will be unveiled.

Because one day, this spirit, this double that is our nature and these strange paths we follow and call feelings, which only manage to flush cheeks and color deeds – one day, not too far in the future, we will see them, I am convinced. Happy be the guys who will see them. In the light of a new day, we will see feelings, emotions form, develop, grabbing our attention over time, every last one of us.

We will see love. Outside our peripheral vision, literary stammering, swearing, we will be able to make it visible.

Who wouldn't give up Europe as it is today or a shot at fame just to see that? And we could observe despair, true despair, not the fake, rookie-despair of narcissists.

I wonder if hate wouldn't be more structurally sound than love and, considering the drama of it all, I would, of course, wager on anger.

To get back to the point, love nevertheless really must be truly astonishing (budding hatred, too).

This choice made unconsciously, the first fluid fibers of it bending down and trembling at a distance, changed by color, gilded, all the while, a glance cast on the sly, moving across space as if it were of no importance, can make or break two lives.

And lust, which quickly becomes tedious in literature, and noble sentiments so excessively complacent and monotonous...

We will see on what foundations goodness will come to rest, or whether it will be on shaky ground.

Above all, we will find sanctity. If they only let us see it! Who would not want to become a saint after that, after looking upon one's inner self in all its wonder?

We will see – but probably not me, stuck in this wretched 20<sup>th</sup> century homicide that does not see what it can do.

I'm repeating myself here, but you can never repeat things of importance enough in the interest of having them understood.

I start painting again, stretched out on my bed, photos strewn around me.

I look them over. I look them over a long time, somehow without any shame.

The “portraits” (?) I then draw have, after a few minutes, no basic resemblance whatsoever to the subject, but at times another resemblance, this one charged, almost hallucinatory.

But first I look. I have always looked in this way, and know I understand why I look and why I am simply alone (with them) in my room: these faces/heads: I WALLOW IN THEM.

My fever, a kind of endosmosis, secret at first, cultivated over time with my sense of purpose, combining with the joy of work that is all-consuming, grows, shakes me, in touch with fiercest of impulses (since I prefer the fiercest), this fever is the only thing that has helped me escape this quagmire, all the adversities of this year, of my life.

Totally new still even with the strong hold it has taken within me, totally new, complete, seeming to me to have drowned out and engulfed the blues, the war, all that will come of it.

The hugeness of the wave as it breaks within me, right at this indefinable moment is such that soon enough, despite being at my peak, I will need to stop, while my heart, waking up in its cave, falsely pronounced dead, comes back to its senses, beating in a chest that does not seem full enough, sending forth formidable, unbearable waves of joy.

O, world, which I feel just barely, briefly, you reappear again, overflowing! And I, like an invalid, lost at sea, just as quickly, I am capsized in Your Presence.

...If I paint hysterical faces, it is not that I am hysterical in these moments, nor that I hope to send myself into hysterics because, for one reason or another, that would make me happy. Rather, I start out calmly most of the time, and am determined to proceed calmly, but whether it is the paper absorbing too quickly, or an unforeseen blot forming, or a technical mishap occurring, whatever it may be, panic (a feeling that I have a penchant for, though I keep it at bay in everyday life), panic to see the paper absorbing too quickly, or the blot diverting my plans, this panic finds within me, almost instantly, the echo of a thousand panics, resounding from my not too happy past. Resonance, a swell rising in no time with the “technical errors” made in my agitation, and the blots I cannot help but make, immense resonance, overflowing everywhere.

My hysterical soul, its initial purpose out of sight, suddenly recognizes itself in the blackened paper, recognizes the hysterical, human face it can relate to, all that is left is to highlight one feature here, one there. And there you have a well-formed head and, in spite of me, expressive, entirely different from what I first saw.

A portrait is a compromise between the defining lines of the faces of the painter and the painted.

The final trajectory is the result of the struggle. Certain courses emphasized, others canceled, some diverted.

I would like to be able to draw the breath that flows between people.

I would also like to paint man outside himself, paint his space.

He is at his best outside himself – why can this not be conveyed visually?

In joy, enthusiasm, love, in bursts of anger, in the thrill of the crowd, he is outside himself. That's where he should be painted. Even his mistrust is outside himself.

The most reserved man is still submerged in his surroundings.

What would “home” be if we did not truly spread ourselves out? Four walls?

I want to talk about looking again, since I share with typists and ghostwriters the simple joy of looking at photos in magazines for hours and hours. But I think that looking is not as simple as one might think, and I would like to encourage everyone to think about what he is really doing when he is looking at something in that way.

And as for me, while understanding that it is very important – capital – to the question of painting, and of the self in general, I have not yet fully analyzed the matter, nor the total satisfaction it gives me.

Real presence requires a certain level of “care” in the observer, a certain courtesy, dignity, rigidity, at times hostility, domination, and finally an intervention that, as negligible as it is, thwarts the enviable state of being in someone else's shoes. If all the men and women in the world all of the sudden turned to stone, in flesh and bone, just as they were at that moment, I think I would just about die of happiness to roam a world where I could gaze at them, to go

around the world shamelessly a hundred times over, and with the devotion, impudence and meticulousness of a true contemplative.

I am talking about my first and strongest impression. Then, of course, I might possibly return to distractions, that a kind of moral philosophy, as they call it, might come to me. I should even, I bet, expect it.

I had a dream three years ago, around six in the morning. I ran into a childhood friend. He seemed surprised that I'd shown, from what he'd gathered, an exhibition of gouaches, even though painting had once held no interest for me, and even bothered me and, as he was quick to remind me, from which I shied away.

For the moment, he is in my room, stretched out nonchalantly on a couch when he weakly asks to see my paintings.

He is a childhood friend. He does not mean much to me anymore. His indifference bothers me slightly, perhaps.

Without haste, I take out a box. I find only blank sheets of paper. Another: nothing. A third, smaller: still nothing but untouched sheets. Finally, I pull out a big one bearing a few watercolors.

I show them to him quickly... They resembled old drawings of mine, better ones, besides. They were foreign to me...I observed them and showed him quickly. He didn't say a thing.

I took out another box and, to my surprise, I discovered large gouaches that were brilliant and elaborate, certainly my style, but which I would be totally incapable of composing. I gaped at them, at my ex-friend, too. A great deal of elements, many architectural. Constructed with

splendid colors. Completely new subject matter for me. An unknown wealth inside me that is normally in poverty. An unexpected blossoming.

I admired them quickly and handed them to him, only having time to leaf through a portion of this extraordinary heap of work, my heart wholly beating (not hysterically, no, but impressively in my chest and in my happy being).

Finally I saw, no longer a fleeting sketch, but the world as I imagined it, in its abundant display. They finally landed on my page. So I was a painter!

My hand falling on an ashtray that sat on the end table woke me up just as I finished showing him the series, and as I prepared myself, already in awe, to open another box.

Ten years of painting were undeniably there, of that I am sure, of that I am still convinced.



Emergences-Resurgences (excerpts)

Born, brought up, taught in an environment and culture of the uniquely “verbal”

*I paint to decondition myself.*

Me too, one day, much later, as an adult, the desire to draw came over me, to be part of the world through lines.

Or rather line, not lines. So I begin, letting myself be led by one, one alone, letting it go, not lifting pen from paper, until, by virtue of straying rather than settling in this reduced space, it inevitably comes to a halt. An entanglement, that is what we see, drawing as a desire for soul-searching.

What I’m doing, is it just an impoverished kind of drawing, like someone who strums the guitar with only one finger?

Like me, the line searches without knowing what it’s searching for, refuses its initial findings, solutions that present themselves, the first temptations. Holding off its "arrival," blind line of inquiry.

Leading to nothing, not beauty or intrigue, moving itself along; without flinching, not turning away, not getting itself tied up, tying itself to nothing, seeing no object, landscape, figure.

Bumping into nothing, sleepwalking line.

Curved in places, though not encircling.

Enveloping nothing, never enveloped.

Line who's yet undecided, not ready for fine-tuning.

No preference, no inflection, not giving in entirely to appearances.

...Who stays up, who strays. Unmarried line, who's inclined to remain that way, to keep its distance, who won't submit, blind to what is material. Neither dominant, nor cooperator, nor subordinate

Later, signs, certain signs. Signs say something to me. I'd like to make some signs, but a sign is also a stop sign. At this time, I hold onto another desire, above any other. I'd like a *continuum*. A *continuum*, a murmur that does not die out, like life, whatever it is that keeps us pushing on, that more important than any quality.

Impossible to draw as if this continuity did not exist. That is what needs to be captured.

Defeats.

Defeats.

Attempts. Defeats.

For lack of any better attempts, I draw pictograms, pictographed meanderings, really, yet without any guidelines. I would like these contours to be the exact phrasing life itself, but supple, undoable, sinuous, embarrassed. Heads shaking around me, people who want the best for me...I was getting off track...instead of writing, simply put.

What coincided with a dire necessity, that seemed as natural to me as the need for water and bread and sleep, coincided with no such necessity for those around me. What they saw above all was my subsequent embarrassment, inhibition.

How could I be any different? How could I dare to act so casually?

How impertinent to even do anything at all!

I was not brought up on drawing. These are my first excursions.

I needed to get accustomed to the conductor's impudence.

Defeats. Not utter (definitely a seed...perhaps meant for later).

I surrender.

I put my desire to sleep. I take a few trips. The well of writing has not dried up, calls to me.

...

Writings lack *rusticity*.

Some men, in poems, dictums, aphorisms, have found how to use a small number of words and few analogies; have been able to “*make*” themselves poor. The rich man playing the pauper.

Immense prefabricated structure that we pass down from generation to generation: language, a sentence to be handed down, to honor; that strains to show its significance.

The whistle of the reed, forsaken for the orchestra.

In painting, the primitive, the primordial can better get their bearings.

You go through few middlemen, who aren't actually middlemen, not part of an organized, codified, classified language.

You can paint with two colors (draw with one). Three or four, tops, have, for centuries, been sufficient means for man to make something important, essential, unique, something that would have otherwise been ignored.

Words, that is another story. Even the most remote tribes have thousands of them, with complex groupings and numerous cases, which require *expert* maneuvering.

No truly poor language. With writing, on top of that, it's worse. Encumbered by abundance, luxury, the number of inflections, variations, nuances, if we make it "crude," if we speak it crudely, it is in spite of language.

Generally disconcerted by it, men everywhere, even those of great civilizations, when contemplating it, concluded that a god had at one time bestowed language upon them as a gift.

Poisoned gift.

With writing as a sole pillar, it was precarious.

Writing, too close to other disciplines, philosophies (that it cannot separate itself from at times, that it encompasses or is encompassed by it...), the human sciences, social, behavioral, physical.

When people acknowledge that, on one page or another, I have managed to describe a few details well enough – well, I honestly would have preferred ending up anaphylactic.

. . .An accident. Serious. Very serious. Affecting someone close to me. Everything halts. It no longer makes any sense, reality, another reality, the reality of distraction, which has no business with Death.

Fate is not determined in a hospital. Nor in healing, nor in giving up.

My days are spent there, I try not to see, not to show that Death...but that name shall never be spoken. I have to provide hope, courage.

Coming home after a day at the hospital, on a weak and weary night, I consider looking at some pictures. At least I think that is what I'm going to do. I open a box. A few reproductions of artwork are inside. The hell with that! I shove them aside. I cannot enter into them. Next are a few blank sheets of paper. Those, too, changed. Immaculate, they seem to me ridiculous, odious, pretentious, having nothing to do with reality. Somber, I start, having grabbed hold of one, start to fill in some dark colors, sulking, plopping on water on at random, splashes, no interest in make anything in particular, especially not a painting. I have nothing to do, only undo. In a world of confusions, contradictions, I have to undo myself. Pen in hand, in a ruinous rage, I slash into surfaces, ravage them, as a ravaging has raged in me the entire day, making my whole being a wound. May this page, too, be scarred by a wound!

...

“Why not try to write?”

Write!

Words? I do not want a single one. Down with words. At this moment, no alliance with them seems possible.

I am past that. I need to let myself go, let everything go, let myself sink into total despair, without resistance, without trying to explain it, a man stunned by trauma, longing to be stunned even more...I need to untangle myself from the web of lies, my false tranquility, the declarations of hope and faith in the future, even while I was losing faith. Once again everything has tumbled down.

Once again the futility of a life hanging on by a thread, the absurd and false sense of harmony, the stupidity of every undertaking, imposes itself – and the immense, terrible world of suffering is never far-off, deaf to everything else.

To ease my mind, painting suits me better. My near complete lack of training. My lack of savoir-faire, my inability to paint, preserved after all these years, allow me to let myself go, to let everything go – and without any effort – in disorder, in discord and chaos, in pain, everything upside down, without malice, without turning back, without correcting anything, innocently.

...

Signs back again, not the same one as before, more than what I hoped for, and not just with belonging to type - all appearing like men, though perhaps legs and arms and torsos might be lacking, men nonetheless in their dynamic inner life, bending, bursting; men who I subject (or I feel as though I subject) to twists and turns, expanding them in every direction.

Shaped like a root? A man nonetheless, a man who counts on the blind underworld so he may later live in the light of day.

In hundreds of pages, *one by one*, as if numbered (four or five per sheet, each in its own invisible niche, not communicating at all with one another), the man comes to me, he comes back to me, the unforgettable man.

I jostle him about on the blank page, or I watch him being jostled, flogged, the human-flagellum.

No head, head on the bottom, hammer head, cut-out head, a human being drawn and quartered, rushing toward a point unknown, spurred on by who knows what.

Fluid expansions, elevated, turned to triplets, into a rake, thin, unrolled, unfolded, unwound, boundless, slender, less commonly enormous (it can happen), a capsule, ready to launch, or spread out like pavement.

Then they came two by two.

Rounding them up carefully, could we have catalogued them (with lots of repeat entries), catalogue their inner lives, an encyclopedia of invisible gestures, of spontaneous metamorphoses that man needs all day long to survive? Doubtful. Too imperfect.

Much later interactions between forms, between characters, begin...and there you have a painting.

...

With my inability, which at least has the element of surprise, I surprise myself. More than in other endeavors, novice with a novice's knowledge. By bewilderment, by blunders. (Concerned not with the end result as such, but with knowing what comes next. Paint-by-step.)

Paint to work the world (its forms), to feel it more closely, directly. I absolutely had to experience painting. Painting provides a foundation to start from scratch. Medium owing less to its forebears. At least I'm able to blow the lid off what's holding me back.

...

Operation-creation.

At first: insularity.

Then a certain tension. A growing tension. An unending tension. Nascent necessity for expansion.

First setback: where can space for expanding be found? (Paper, stone, clay, canvas, stage.)

Find space, space to live a life, a life pending, a new life to realize, *hic et nunc*, a life not there before.

Space found, now onto operation displacement.

Not to muddle things up. Not by seeking to divert or degrade things, or to compensate for them either, but instead by essential displacement. One and only operation required.

To be able to find true engagement, for a life *realized*. An author isn't a copyist; he is one who has, before all others, found the means to free the suppressed, to defeat the intolerable. Even the failed author, among the blissfully shortsighted, never fails. In freeing himself from his circumstances, he is freeing hundreds of others from their own, freeing this age, or an age looming on the horizon.

The artist is ahead of his time. This is why he pulls others along.

To look back all the time is to understand your intention while missing the point!

A writer searched, so as to take the mescaline that had been handed to him, for a suitable place where no one would bother him. Maybe at my place... I would join in.

Embarrassed, not seeing how I could get out of it, I accepted.

Barely wanted to. Expected nothing. It would be a flop. It would not work on me.

On the chosen day, in the shadows, nearly one hour had already passed by...



All of a sudden, the astounding ringing of a gong, the ringing of a gong in color, countless colors, strong, strong, which beat down on me, pressing, piercing, dissonant as white noise. Martyrizing.

And I could only see but the most superficial things.

The impression was like nothing I had seen.

If ever there every were a sight to see, to paint, this was it – a sight which, those first times, almost continuous, then intermittent, lasting eight hours, was bestowed on me as it had been to many others.

Truly, an astounding optical spectacle. But it was inflicted more than it was offered.

I was flooded, swamped.

Phenomenal, acute confluence, rhapsodic, made of distinct colors, each pressing itself against the other, point by point, never blending, never slowing down their endless zigzagging, never hinting at whether it was microscopic or “metropolic,” cosmic or maybe even of another world...

This inundation, this invasion, this dynamism that was not at all like a painting, or a painted surface, or even a colorful detail we might want to contemplate, but a response, the reaction of a nerve deep in optic pathways that had been assaulted, martyred (the colorful spectacle is only secondary)...

My impression was that colors were being pulled from me, my being, my head, from a certain place in the back of my brain.

It was, no doubt, an invasion of colors, (which, like an inundation, already had an excessive side that inspired fear, that made you feel as though you'd rather be rid of this chenille blanket of colors covering you) but I couldn't forget that these were colors born from damaging my integrity. I was the one who, without wanting to, was engaged in the colorofabrication.

Extreme aggravation, like a hot, feverish skin, itchy; an aggravation of pure brilliancies, radiant sparks, punctuated, a terrible eternity of photons, but without any light...fi...without any photons.

Brutal stimulation of a nerve in the dark. Images as response. Images as energy.

Images as stings.

The day, nearly the entire day spent having visions.

During these drawn out hours, I constantly saw, eyes shut, definitive proof than an image has an immediacy that language can only translate approximately, and that it speaks to a different part of the mind, the fundamental material of thought.

The passage from one to the other, the disappearance of one in the other (where it comes to rest), here (often) we can see it, watch the spectacle.

I also had visions.

I believed I was seeing apparitions.

I witnessed my capacity – rhapsodic and deranged – for hallucination.

If in the subsequent hours, during which I felt, or at least believed, I was freed, although still weary, and although it cost me a great deal of time and effort, often unrewarded – if in those hours I began drawing, the first strokes sketched were soon overlaid with others, zigzagging, miniscule, numerous, much more rapid than those I could have drawn otherwise, uninvited guests, people, or small creatures, in the front line of a considerable, persistent force marching toward me, or toward the page, or to the drawing site. The blank page did not stay blank for long, even if I couldn't draw more than half a dozen strokes at first, the effect of a rapid fatigue, those half dozen were enough so that – from all directions – sudden afflux – an entire mass would begin to move.

Occupied space, over-occupied; an occupation constantly being renewed, space abounding with newcomers.

Incredible how they have stretched out across blank space from all directions, though my pencil could never have kept up, despite a quick hand, even in the tiniest corner of the page.

...

Looking at these paintings, some people think they see battles. But the battles of a disorganized mind, disordered as no one has ever seen, a dislocation that carries on indefinitely, different, in every way, all plausible. Battles and passages over rushing rivers.

Shipwrecks, too, numerous shipwrecks, on waves high, raging, rapid, breaking. Looking at them is dizzying.

Complete dismantling brings on a disturbance at the core.

More than before, there are shocks, climbs, crossings, tumbles and trips, creating thus a different space, a scattered space, unknown, a space for spaces, perspectives, layered,

intercalated, polyphonic, spaces that, as much as their forms, I had hoped to see for a long time, to see them dislocate, dismantle, divide, tear to shreds, lift up, intoxicate...

I rediscover some of my problems.

More than expressing myself better, I wanted, through drawing, I think, to print the world inside myself. In a new way, more profoundly.

To balance the transcendence that was never reached. In part by provocation.

I have painted to render the world more “remarkable”, refusing the “realism” of behavior, of ideas. So I opened on one side, keeping the other closed.

*Signs*, my first pursuit

It's the *reduced* world, to the maximum

Some people reduce the world to intelligibility, which is to partly reduce it, as abstract thinkers, becoming more and more abstract, more and indeed more repressed.

Heavy, thick, cumbersome – so the world is, in a way.

To be able to tolerate it, you have to reject a lot of it one way or another. Everyone does it.

I did it rather early, too early. In my own way. Aspiring to see the trans-real, and to live there forever

## CHAPTER 4

### SELECTED TRANSLATIONS: OF WORDS AND IMAGES

#### Annotated Drawings

*After going through a drawer and rediscovering several pencil drawings that I had done a few months earlier, I was just as surprised as if I were seeing a spectacle never seen before, or rather never understood, that revealed itself to me:*

1

Unmistakably, there are three men; each one's entire body, the entire body is laden with faces; these faces shoulder one another, scrawny shoulders inclining toward the thinking and the acting life.

Right down to the knees trying to see. And it is no joke. At the expense of all stability, they resolved to turn into mouths, ears and noses for themselves, and especially eyes; despairing sockets stuck in the kneecap. (The knee's moving complex, is the most complex, so they say.)

That's how it goes, my drawing, how it goes.

A face, yearning to break the surface, protrudes from the pit of the stomach, invades the rib cage, though many intruders have already arrived, manifold, another mattress of heads surely waiting below, and would start to beat – but it's just a drawing, don't listen for its heartbeat.

This heap of heads forms three people more or less, all shudder at the thought of losing their sight; on the surface of the skin, wild eyes burning, yearning to know; anxiety devours them at the thought that they'll miss out on the spectacle they've emerged for – life, for life.

By the dozens these heads appear, much to the dismay of these three bodies, an appallingly intellectual clan, willing to do anything for knowledge; even the ankle wants to get a feel for the world, not just the ground, but the world and the woes of the world.

So not one part will agree to being waist or arm; it must all be head, or nothing.

Together these pieces form these three sorry souls, who, stupefied, are left to console one another.

2

How he looks! (his neck craning until it is a third of his size). How afraid he is to look! (on the far left, the head has drooped down).

A few strands of hair serve as antennae, transmitters of fear, and the horrified eyes serve as ears.

Haggard head struggling, hanging on to two or three straps (are they straps, or bits of intestine, or sheaths of nerves?).

Unknown soldier, dodging some war or other, his Spartan physique, reduced to barbed wire.

3

Ragged, an archipelago of fabric, a large parasol, made of niceties and lace, of spidery webs – its ethereal body.

What could it matter to this this little head, hard but vigilant, who seems to be saying “I’ll press on.”

What could it require from the scattered bits of this body sixty times more vast than itself? Just holding on to it, the head must be in great pain.

This head is a fist, in a way, and the body, a disease. It prevents an even greater dispersion. It must be content with that. Bringing together the bits and pieces of the body would be more than it could bear.

But how the body sails! How it cuts through the air, this body, so like a sail, like the countryside beyond the city, like everything...

How this flotilla of heart-beating rafts would set sail – but the stern head won't allow it.

The head doesn't manage to get the pieces to join and stick together, but at least they don't abandon ship.

4

This one here, three arms are not too many to protect itself, three arms in a line, one right after the other, and hands ready to dismiss any intruder.

Because your enemy will take advantage of your hours asleep, you have to worry that he wants to strike...

Behind raised three arms, the peacemaker waits for the next offensive.

5

Here, an octopus turned man, his eyes too deep. Each one has annexed a little brain for itself (a pair of spectacles turned head!), but surely they are thinking too much. They think in great halos, excavations, it is dangerous: the glasses help him to see, but not to think, and clear out his head (the man) over time, by the shovelful.

6

This would surely make a good flame were it not a horse already, would surely be a great horse, were it not in flames. He bounds through space. How far from a horse's croup this croup is, dazzling through fervent plumes of smoke, impetuous flames! As for his legs, they are as fine as insect antennae, but his hooves are sharp, though too "lozenge"-like. This is how my horse is,

a horse never to be mounted. And a sash, both light and delicate, gathered under his chin, gives him an almost feminine finesse, as if it were blowing its nose in a lacy handkerchief.

Luckily, thankfully I drew him. Otherwise, I would never have had the chance to see another like him. A tiny little horse, you know, a pure idea of a “horse.”

Much closer to the breeze than to the hard ground, much more stable in the pure atmosphere despite his front legs jutting forward like two pencils. And he kicks at the sky, kicks licking flames.

7

This horse says something to this stag. He says something to him. He is much larger than the stag. His head rises over him, a head that speaks volumes; he has suffered greatly, no doubt, for a long time, humiliations he has left behind him. His eyes betray a serious protest. Have you ever seen wrinkles above and below a horse’s eyes, rigid, rising up just on his brow? No. Yet he looks more like a horse than any other horse I have seen. Without these wrinkles, he would not express himself with so much authority. Naturally, he is no horse that one could imagine harnessed...though worse things could happen.

And there, a little further, another animal runs up. He stops – stop! On his feet, he observes the situation, first aiming to get a better idea of it, it is clear he is aware of it.

However, the first, not ceasing to address the stag, says in his telling stubbornness: How could you? Look, how dare you? The stag plays dumb. Anyway, it is just a buck. How I could I have mistaken it for a stag?

8

Through a park full of flowers, fowl and fly traps, though little hills and tufted seeds taking flight, the great and graceful hydrocephalic rolls on his scooter. Roadster-scooter, he can



sit on it, but not comfortably; it has a tall, straight chair back, on an angle, multi-colored, but, far above the top of its head rest, with a long, strong hand holds the handlebars, the majestic head appears, soaring, debonair, a delicious egg-head, oblong, formed according to the twists and turns, the intersection of its lofty thoughts.

On an entirely different plane, though still nearby, a linen-legged clown sprints.

9

There is more than hair growing on this head: there is a round of young maidens. Or rather they are assembling for the round, and three of them are already in place, taking the others by the hand. And where is all this taking place? On the great, dreaming head of the beautiful black princess, with tiny breasts – what a tiny waist, what a tiny princess.

10

Did those two there, did they show up on this page so they could see? Or to scare themselves, frozen by fear in the face of this strange spectacle they see, that only they can see?

And nothing to process their fear. No relief. No body. Nobody will ever have a body here.

But once the terror has subsided, maybe will they turn their backs on the paper, these silent lovers, pressing their delicate frames against one another, two alone, on the other side of the world, come here like the byproducts of chance, unseen, setting off again for other lands.

## A Reading of Eight Lithographs of Zao Wou-K by Henri Michaux

Books are boring to read. No room to move. We are invited to follow along. The path has been sketched, single and solitary.

A painting is entirely different. Immediate, complete. At once left, right, in-depth, all we could want.

Not a route, a thousand routes, no designated pit stops. Whenever we want it, there it is, new, full. It's all there, in an instant.

All of it, but none of it's familiar yet. That's where you really need to start to READ.

Adventure little sought after, though there for everyone. Everyone can read a painting, can find depth in it (and months later new meaning), everyone, the respectful, the generous, the insolent, disciples of reason, captives of passion; lab-workers with pipettes, people for whom a line is a salmon shooting out of the water, and every dog ever met, a dog to put on the operating table in hopes of observing his reflexes, people who prefer to play with the dog, to know him by recognizing themselves in him, people who, in others, only celebrate themselves, and lastly people who behold the tide of spring, at once portent of painting, painter, country, climate, environment, the entire age and its makers, events still unheard of and others who are already sounding off like a furious bell.

Yes, everyone can find something of his own in the canvas, even good-for-nothings who simply let their sails blow in the wind, not making much of a difference, but it exists, how edifying it is.

Let's not wait too long for it. The time is now. There aren't any rules yet – but they're on their way.

May I be able to drive some of them, readers unaware, drive them to read in turn.

And may Zao Wou-Ki excuse me.

His lithographs were brought to me. I wasn't familiar with him or his paintings. The next day I wrote the pages that follow, almost word for word. He deserved a more "serious" reader.

slowly from the other side  
 slowly sail the fish  
 cruisers to meditate on hunger

those of the impeding air watch  
 strangers  
 those of the impeding water

to lose friends over gills !

the dream of life absolute  
 mute  
 fulfilled in drops  
 spheres  
 repelling spheres  
 in amorphous space

with grave looks precedence takes  
 modeling and remodeling  
 like a virtue  
 their form  
 under the gentle pressure of invisible aqueous spindles  
 the calm ones take the crown

sovereigns still exist!

sovereigns?  
 all along their hearing lateral line  
 at all times they must listen  
 at all times the muffled signs reaching them from afar

in the mist a shadow eclipses them  
 the fine watery abode enclosed

how milk covers the dead star  
 how whiteness spilt across the sky!  
 below the meeting passed  
 arms meant to hold held one another

today  
 limitless eternal today  
 comes to pass  
 stretches out to the ends of the earth  
 no more  
 distance

there is no beyond for the souls bound by red string

space is silence  
 silence like abounding spawn tumbling slowly  
 through calm waters

this silence is black  
 in essence  
 there is nothing any longer  
 the lovers escaped in themselves  
 "coming"

happiness  
 profound happiness  
 happiness as paleness

the moon has taken every life every splendor every emanation  
 to prepare their heart withdraws into the reflecting star

a flock of birds charges at the valley

from a sky squall  
 from the lenticular of a thunderstorm  
 the squadron emerges

there is an enormous blank  
 above  
 below  
 beside  
 around  
 the blankness of grief

the busy trees search their pulled-off branches that explode  
 crazy trees  
 trees like bloodied nervous systems

but no human beings in this drama

the modest man does not say      I am unhappy

the modest man does not say  
 we are suffering  
 our own are dying  
 the people have no home

he says      our trees are suffering

there are in this red storm  
 in this blood flow in every direction  
 in this perfect red covering all things  
 in this global spread  
 there are two wolves confronting each another

as innocence preserves the wild beast  
 white space preserves each of them as they consider one another

one blue-eyed  
 the other black-eyed and firm

out of the sky of days gone by  
 drunk to the last drop  
 objects fall

they were birds  
 an instant ago  
 even wild ducks or teals with plaintive cries

small pollarded trees are scorched in the distance

no being on this earth is allowed the imprudence  
 of trust

but the moon does not leave China  
 not yet  
 it fights to keep it  
 keep it close to its heart  
 it is blue at this moment  
 blue like a bruise  
 nearly black

a ring of snow closes in relentless  
 three trees  
 the house  
 the countryside  
 two lovers

it is overtaken only by another ring  
 surrounding it entirely  
 with blood  
 paprika of tomorrow

the double ring surrounds the planet  
 dangerous surroundings

phoenix of a bird  
 nothing of a bird  
 a bird in the making  
 working drawing of a bird  
 like a ruler transects the plain high up

low down  
 another still more skeletal  
 erect  
 the real trappings of a bird  
 and two more on the branches below  
 bowed

as reptilian as they were said to be in the Jurassic eve  
 for they live in this plump pomegranate  
 girdled by evil  
 as long as we make ourselves small  
 be it bird or tree  
 man or woman

for them their heart is their voyage  
 they are not tall  
 they care not for being tall  
 they have no need  
 they are one as tall as the other  
 it would not be prudent either

winter surrounds but does not touch them  
 without lifting their heads  
 they know that they are living among the cherries



it is not strange  
a transparent house  
nor that but one joist and a few beams bear it  
nor that everything passes through it  
that even the muddy road passes through it  
that the clouds of dust in the air also pass through it

does any own a grander house?

but the trees are there  
final companions  
experts on the art of revivification

one ladder near one

so we hope still to get somewhere!

yet no one  
unless this vague landscape  
the color of iron (train station) is the human race  
crowd of absentees  
crowd of still formless futures  
their faces impossible to behold  
we have to wait  
the hour is ripe  
the hour brings life

it is not yet signed

7

fibrous skeleton of the trees

they look as though they're bleeding  
undeniably  
flags not too far off

a cart  
like a case  
like a coffin  
carried by a skinny horse  
pulling  
pulling  
leaning so far forward until it falls  
almost

several black forms follow

elsewhere widening an oblique lake of vermilion volition with no growth  
rather a wash and what will resist this wash

keep its form – find another?

the trees their heart does not seem to despair

in adversity life's beauty is not absent

there is tonic too in the little flag

on the world's blank canvas

he's going to do something

he's positive  
for the moment

he's walking  
although undoubtedly a bird and made to fly

but flight is not in his sights  
not for him

on his right  
midair  
an double-winged insect  
bugs him with ideas of ascension

really?  
is it a little grasshopper  
would its flight lessons benefit a bustard?

no

so we won't turn our heads

instead we'll take a tree's advice  
(more pragmatic a tree is  
more in touch  
to hold on first  
to take root)  
a tree  
for whom  
sucking at earth and hard gravel  
is already the good life

## Adventures of Lines

When I saw the first exhibition of Paul Klee's paintings, I came back, I remember, stooped over in profound silence.

Unacquainted with painting, what I saw, I don't know. I didn't need to know, happy as I was to have moved past it, to the other side, into the deep of the aquarium, far from the cutting edge.

Perhaps I was looking, above all, for the sign that whoever wrote this had seen: "What artist would not wish to establish himself at that point, where the epicenter of all motion through space and time – whether you call it the brain or the heart of all Creation – determines all action?"

I had reached the musical, to the true *Stilleben*.

Thanks to the moving and meticulous modulations of his colors, which did not seem forced at all, but as if they had been released at just at the right moment, or had even taken root spontaneously, like rare mosses or mold spores, his "tranquil lives," hued with age, seem to have matured, to have lived a slow natural life, to have come into the world through gradual exhalations.

Several red dots were softly singing tenor in chorus. Nevertheless, you felt as though you were underground, by a spring, under a spell, yours the very soul of a butterfly waiting in a chrysalis.

The complex network of lines appeared bit by bit:

Lines living among the delicate denizens of dust and dots, crossing over crumbs, bypassing cells, fields of cells, or spinning, spinning in spirals, to fascinate you, to find just what has fascinated you, umbellifers and agates.

Lines that walk. The first like this ever seen in the West to walk like this.

Travelers, tracing not so much the outlines of objects, but of routes, roads. (He's even included arrows there.) This problem children have, that they later forget, and put in all of their drawings at that age: perspective, gained here, lost there, distance, orientation, the path leading to a house, just as necessary as the house itself...this, too, was his.

Trailblazers, going against the grain, against the powerful, eager to envelop, to encircle, fabricator of forms (so what else?); lines for the lowly, finding the nerve center, not in a facial feature, but inside of the head, where a hidden eye stands guard, keeps its distance.

Lines that, going against the grain, against fanatics of framing, of form – the vase, the contoured mountain of the body, clothes, the skin of things (he hates these things) – that search far and wide for depth, far from epicenters, yet an epicenter nevertheless, a less obvious epicenter, but more so the puppeteer, the hidden sorcerer. (Curious parallelism, he died of sclerosis).

Allusives, laying bare a new metaphysics, assembling hollow objects, symbols much denser than these objects, sign-lines, traces of poetry, rendering weightless the weightiest of things.

Fools for catalogues, contrasts as far as the eye can see, repetitions, rhymes, for the note played indefinitely, cells multiplying, forming microscopic hotels, innumerable pinnacles – and in a small, simple garden, thousands of herbs growing, the labyrinth of the eternal return.

Line meets line. Line evades line. Adventures of lines.

A line for the joy of being line, of moving, line. Dots. Dust of dots. A line dreams. No line had ever been permitted to dream until now.

A line waits. A line hopes. A line remembers a face.

Flourishing lines. Lines as small as ants, but themselves not ants. Very few animals in this nature sanctuary. Only once their animalism has been stripped away. Plant life is preferred. The pensive fish is allowed in.

Here is a line that ponders. Another is in the midst of pondering. Betting lines. Deciding lines.

A line rises. A line goes to look. Sinuous, a line of music crosses twenty bars.

Budding line. Surrounded by a thousand others, bringers of burgeoning: grass. Dune grass.

A line surrenders. A line slumbers. Rest. A resting place with three crampons: a habitat.

A line withdraws. Meditation. Threads of it still go, slowly.

There a common line, a summit line, and just beyond, a vantage-point-line.

Time, time...

A line of consciousness has been reformed.

They can be followed easily or arduously, without risking being moved to eloquence, always evaded, always evading the spectacle, always building, always the proletariat of this world's humble citizens.

Sister splashes, his splashes that still seem mackled, appearing backward, turning around only to return again, to a secret space, in the humid belly of Mother Earth.

I'll stop myself here. Paul Klee must not have wanted us to get off track. Too Goethean for that. With his horological attention to what can be measured, he would not have wanted us to walk awhile with him on a path so imperfectly parallel to his.

To enter into his paintings, and at once, no need for any of that, thankfully. Being chosen is enough, keeping conscious that we live in a world of enigmas, to which the only appropriate response is an enigma.

## Dreaming from Enigmatic Paintings

*The paintings by R.M., which serve, in a way, as “guides for meditation,” induce dreams...and induce confusion. The perplexing painting is a point of departure that stops short.*

*What to do? How to go on, to participate?*

*I tried. I wanted most of all to discover where they would lead me, these paintings, how they would carry me, stall me; the desires that would be woken within me, the reflections, my replies to the sphinxes and what our encounters, and missed encounters, would be.*

*Edifying operation, recommended even if it is imperfect, a part of which, absent here, was only concerned with me.*

*The paintings themselves, whose materiality generally bothered me, I'd barely seen before. Photographic reproductions for the most part, often in black and white, in small format, not big enough to see all the details: inconvenient, certainly, inconvenient.*

*Having words to write proved useful, these habitual killjoys that have made me lose my bearings among the many vague impressions I experience constantly pushed me to follow correspondences and not prematurely abandon the connections I perceived.*

*Since it's about finding paths, about travel, really. Only I'm sorry not to have found so few of the many possible paths.*

*“Whatever the lines, the words, the colors left on a page, wrote R.M. (in Rhétorique), the figure we make is always full of meaning.”*

1964.



Two clouds have entered the room, loiter around the furniture, but without insisting, still clouds, still far beyond, still absent, between window and door, distracted, untamed, small, fluffy little chicks of clouds, not any less clouds for this, still in *their* space, in *their* world, eluding all contact, like a cheetah's gaze which, no matter what one might do, will not be met, which stays at a distance always, awaiting, from afar, the definitive moment.

Full painting, though it empties, negator who persists, traitor who undoes what he comes up with, having cunningly worked in what turns "is" to "isn't," these very same cottony beings of airspace.

\*

Houses all lined up.

Painted on the façade, standing, back to the wall, up to a certain height, suspended without support, motionless, men in a row, neat, dressed to go out, in overcoats, hats atop their heads, all absolutely alike except for their size. There are three of them.

The façades of houses, the façades of men.

Not one goes in, nor goes out. Not in any position to go in. As if stuck, they stay on the surface. How alone men are! No welcome in the inhuman house, though it advertises "men."

Anonymous, keeping their distance, fixed, each one in its habitual, cramped space that must not be reduced. Maintenance to maintain.

\*

On a beautiful, still face, a face without a body, a face of plaster or marble, will we ever see a sudden memory, of one thing or another, furrow the frozen brow, the temple perspire at the memory of a long-forgotten tragedy?

Yes. It has happened. Right here. A bloodstain has appeared, and it is growing.

The “remarkable” memory, secret at first, betrays the shadowless, white face. Blood will seep out from the injured soul.

Just above the temple, the deep red spreads, worsens, will soon become indelible.

Outside the window, in the world outside, clouds pass, which seem thought up: who seem stalled, who remain, like a serious incident that will never be resolved, and on whom the curtain, at the window, will only ever be half-closed.

Out of the hands of the sculptor, becoming matter, life goes on.

On her own, finally, the stone feels, manifest. At present, she is reliving a dream.

Bleeding face of marble, otherwise unchanged, expressing itself in silence.

\*

In the clearing, near a tree lying on the earth, felled, the part of the trunk still lodged in the ground has seized the woodsman’s axe. One of the knotted roots, or more precisely one of the woody buttresses, must have advanced slowly and, like a bear paw, came to rest on the murder weapon, holds it, and will not give it up again . At last, some justice. Equity. Fresh protest.

Fresh malaise for human beings.

How long did it take the stump to seize the assassin’s weapon, to immobilize him, preventing him from doing any further harm? The unimaginably slow move has now been made. On the ground, wholly held by a supreme “tree paw”, a paw that, unlike an animal’s, never tires, and once it comes to rest, will not lift itself up again, the murderous axe will never again be freed.

Fascinating spectacle. Response of a being who was unable to respond quickly enough, never able to respond on time. In the name of the voiceless, the stump of the felled tree provides this belated response.

Since time immemorial, millions of trees have been felled by the axe of the modern and prehistoric man alike, felled without any sign of resistance, any protest. Here is something that will make you think. New insurgents. What will remain of man's dominion over "creation"? Human anxiety will take on a new dimension.

\*

Two men in conversation. Small. Insignificant. Behind them an enormous monument with giant mounts, stones stacked up, slabs in every which way, barely leaving any usable space. The two men continue to speak. Speak! It is precisely speaking that has left bulky edifices everywhere, needless, turned enormous, colossal, increasingly needless, with no use, with the addendum of new words, new speakers...who always leave behind ruins. And before one of these vast monuments of interlocking stones, where there isn't even room for one to stand, where one can't get by, the two men, without batting an eyelash, without paying attention, converse, oblivious! In the course of their discussion, could they not see that their cumbersome addendums will take up what little space is left? No, it'll take some time. It'll be others who'll see it, who later, speaking, too, will come pass by the expanded monument, increasingly massive, increasingly unusable.

It is precisely for having spoken and written that so many ruins remain the world over, with their "out of place" seriousness, ruins who have a stone will, resistant to every truly new thing that needs to be done. From these muddled stones comes a silence, an impediment, stones to impede the soul, to impede the step forward, to impede the future. Stones! Republics of Words.

But perhaps these two men needed to feel themselves walking on an important foundation, archaeological? Humanity – in sum – is their family.

\*

There are, in old neighborhoods, identical houses, by all appearances unoccupied, who, left to themselves, unruffled by any disruptive presence, betray a singular sort of connivance at certain hours of the day... even with delayed passerby on occasion, who, too, feels some kind of complicity. The houses have turned into men. Or the passerby has turned into a thinking house. Their near exact resemblance to one another, relatives, twins even, oddly makes him feel another resemblance, one much greater, that envelops him. They have become his sisters, an extension of "himself." It's evening. Because it's almost always in the evening. An old-fashioned gas streetlight is looming, bourgeois, stuck-up, adorned with a self-satisfied arrogance that has been shown off not once, but thousands of times, on many streets, all the streets in the country, streetlights that are not so much there not so much to shine, since no one passes, as to be the *tic of civilization*.

Yet the speechless onlooker, ceasing to go down the street where there is nothing to see, which is a street due only to the misfortune of being a street, the last onlooker, fascinated, now a house among houses, frozen, can no longer take a step forward.

\*

At a bend in the road – still a road– in a neighborhood far from the noisy city center, or on a bridge, over the lifeless banks of a neglected canal, you can sometimes make out a rose, which you can see at this very moment; a rose that resembles a person, especially because of its unusual size, and the way it shows itself off – too white, posed – and because it stands alone.

A streetlight with three lamps is ready to light the scene if need be. But the time of day doesn't call for it. It's not very late.

Only the passerby, a solitary passerby with broad-shoulders, on whose right-hand this exceptional rose rises on the bridge, epitome of the diurnal, so white it is just about immaculate, the passerby in his dark overcoat, underneath his black hat is nocturnal, funereal. Does he just want to fade away? Or does grief make him seem to fade, unable to stand living on this earth with nothing but “the rose of memory”, the rose that takes up so much space?

Perhaps that’s the necessary condition for this unique meeting, which would not otherwise present itself.

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A canal. The street, quiet, leaden, waiting...like when there’s nothing more to wait for.

The windows the same, stern, closed, windows to throw out the window...

\*

The lover who knows how to see, and see anew, takes in the full view of two breasts in a thin nightgown, hanging empty on a hanger, not under the nightgown, in transparency, half-hidden and half-covered, but without a single attenuation, *substituted* for the light fabric that, at this point, gives way and disappears entirely, though elsewhere it keeps itself together, but here, interrupted by a vital force, a vital memory, it lets the admirably formed breasts come forth, unveiled, to touch the senses as much as the eyes. In this ordinary wardrobe, made from a fir tree with its light grain, they again attain their fullness, like no other, demi-spherical fullness, enjoying a gentle and radiant, an unparalleled dominion over men, women, and even ascetics, none of whom can resist.

Behind, the fir shows these intersecting, dreaming lines, making lackadaisical rings, irregular curves that form multiple paths, all tangled, groping again and again. In the background, it plays its own part in the breasts’ spell. It’s no surprise that they should reappear with this groping

going on in the background. The background will be otherwise untouched. The breasts are there only for those who can't touch them.

\*

Not too many showed up for the earthquake. Houses, once upright, are no longer standing, forever exposing this drawing and quartering. This sight might hold some of its grandeur, nature's grandeur, its disdain for men. You often have to catch sight of it. This is not really the kind of spectacle the urbanite, living in an earthquake-poor country, has any need for.

Having retired to his room, slave to his emotions, anxieties, futile tantrums: he lives in this room, narrow-minded, overwhelmed, where he'd be ecstatic to welcome nature to take an interest in his sorry state, at the very same door that separates him from everything, closes him off, and embodies his "prison."

So there: a door quaked. One of those paneled doors, ridiculous and ornate, burdened by unimaginative and trite 19<sup>th</sup> century adornments, like the ones you see when you rent a room or spend a night in any one of those old European boarding houses. So there you have it – finally, a doorquake. Done. That long bondage, imposed on us by doors, was necessary for this satisfaction, the satisfaction of revolt, to be so sweet, so perfect. As if terrified itself – victim to some inconceivable misfortune – it let go. (Took long enough!) Its stupid, pretentious, impassive immovability didn't hold up. As if finally it experienced a real emotion, it doubled up, grimacing – a door's orogeny – subjected to the unexpected, horrifying crumpling-drawing-and-quartering. The unbearable disparity between the desperate suffering and the stiff upper lip of the unshakeable door can finally be quashed. Splendid "recovery."

\*

The childhood of Icarus.

Even while he whips his galloping horse, starting off from this spot (not riding stables, more of a workshop, but also an apartment), it is not at all certain that the horseman dressed in jockey's clothing will ever be able to reach the threshold, though not prevented in any way from doing so, except maybe (doubtfully) on one side, by a statue that looks more like a tall wooden pawn. But the large opening that serves as carriage door is totally unobstructed. So? Outside, trees. We can see them. Inside, the same ones (painted), identically, ironically, confusingly similar, responding derisively, prematurely, to the vain temptations of travel and adventure. There are no windows in the room, but paintings representing windows, and many at that. Windows lie about everywhere, pêle-mêle, with others – “works in progress” – not yet finished. On the easel, clouds, the same as the clouds in the countryside. The same – captive, captives to a painting. And the painting, the painting itself captive of a frame. But really, can't anything be “held” by a frame?

Yet on his nervous horse, galloping, though stuck in place, the jockey.

Useless, no doubt, is the gaping hole, useless the mount, useless the gallop, useless the ardor. Whoever might own the outdoors has virtually reduced it to nonsense. Travel and transportation, useless. What is the point? One was made to amount to the other, to amount to nothing: indoors and outdoors, the latter now offering nothing extraordinary or enticing, nothing worth attempting escape. In the room, clouds and skies are procurable, portable. A portable outdoors. Who could ask for anything more?

The horseman, who will find fame and will, for a very, very short time, find his way out, but by other means.

\*

Night and day are rarely seen together. When it does happen, it is particularly exemplary. What a perfect, supreme harmony they find together when the day is calm – so very calm, filled with mystery. This mystery allows night to unite with day, unimpeded. They unite and, as one, are fulfilled in the midst of a great relief.

Whoever lets himself be bound by the natural order of things, which leads only to slavery, is not moved by this. What is nature attached to? To so little that a simple painting changes it.

A blue and white sky, a clear afternoon sky doesn't manage to illuminate the trees, however set back they are, nor a secluded house, revealed by a lone streetlight, illuminating it with a wan light. The atmosphere is quiet, too quiet, its immobility like a warning. But nothing will happen. Everything has already happened and has been halted, for who knows how long

\*

Two men, tiny. Others, giant wooden pawns, like those that fight in a game of chess, but five hundred times more formidable... while still not appearing to reign over the scene. Nothing here has reign over the object, immobile, seeming to be turned around: the "object," never-ending, looks – enigmatically, without respite – at man.

Leaves of gigantic proportion, their petioles planted in the ground *standing up*.

And the men – two or three – are busy talking! Talking, that's just the desire to make something stand up, right ? The desire to stand up?

And isn't it curious that everything – leaf, man, violin, fish, index finger, bird – seeks, above all else, to stand up?

\*

Whoever responds to intuition more than fact, whoever feels the first, faint step forward, will, on a silent street lined with modest houses, at times get a glimpse of a giant stringed instrument



standing between two of these cramped dwellings, stretching all the way up to their roofs. This is the constricted music of these houses, poor and defeated and all the same, without any courage; the restrained music of these places, with no individual identity; this music that tries to express itself. Because it is here, on these profoundly silent streets, dark, where hardly a resident ever appears and where one sigh, one single sigh, would make you jump.

Here the houses listen, while their rigid windows, useless but “de rigueur” are, as always, closed off, aloof, shuttered with conventional curtains, where peeking in is forbidden. In these unescapably contemplative places, sounds heard nowhere else can be heard, extraordinary sounds. Yes, we will hear them, the gigantic cello is on its mark. They cannot be muffled, these enormous sounds...

\*

Painting of single subjects, painting nevertheless cold, near indifferent, near academic, expressing no emotion but for extreme placidity...However, music is not far off, or rather expression itself. At least there is a musical instrument planted there, alone, absolutely calm and “poised.” Yet it has just caught fire. It is in flames. But no performer. No audience.

All alone, off on a table, the saxophone caught fire.

\*

Taking up nearly the entire painting, an upright bass, *the* upright bass, a formidable body, an air of self-importance, marked with two big commas, or clefs.

Closed off from nature, from the voices of the forest, voices of life’s ardor, voices of audacity, or voices of the impossible, this fat, stubborn, duke among instruments sits in a false collar.

\*

A bird that might pass through clouds, that clouds might pass through...

As it flew, wings outstretched, far above the sea, cawing no longer, perpetually starving, but grown contemplative...

Bird in the open sky, traversed by skies.

\*

For an apple to see, all you need to do is take it, as it sits on a table, and place a mask on it – even better, a demi-mask.

Masked, nothing will prevent it any longer from being like a person in this quiet room, where nothing will bother it. There it is, instantly ready, restless or resolute.

And what if there's a pair ? Both of them masked? Well, then you have a household, not of apples but masked people, who look like they live together, who pretend to get along, who attempt to hold their own with one another; the critical look, the look of a couple, the look of a duo, the look of those who are overtaken with domestic, bourgeois sentiments, which demand authoritatively to be felt, even in an apple; a mask ready to wear.

...Mask: all that's left of the band of outlaws.

\*

Nature! Nature. Nature is a painting that only the painter can sturdily upend, stealing its crown, its reign of perpetual "place," making it let go, overturning it, falsifying it forever (at least in his painting).

\*

We have never seen an eagle hurl itself into a blaze. But here we see it in the painting, a witness to its downward spiral. He will surely perish, just as proverbs from all over the globe

have told and retold, though he will probably not realize it. Now we see it, the painting shows it. We watch it plunge into the blaze, stupid, but inevitable. Fate foretold.

\*

Let us grant the departed one final favor.

Coffins bent, meant for the dead would prefer to be laid to rest seated...already half-“risen.”

\*

The moon, morose, always left behind, shows up in front of the trees in the forest for once, in front of a secluded house, acting natural, no less strange still, stirring dreams, seeming to be the same one that each month remakes its eternal faces, one following the other, no surprise at all.

\*

Leaves shape the hedge on the edge of a lake in front of a house with windows lit. Leaves of considerable stature and with giant limbs, straight like fully-grown people, leaves “in place of people,” leaves who no longer have any inclination (or aptitude) to bend to any will, whether wind or rain, unshakeable leaves. Finally! Finally stilled, these restless leaves.

Leaves like faces, too, large, sage faces, untroubled, leaving you at peace, anonymous.

\*

A name scrawled across an amphora : “sap.” A piano crossed out by the billboard tag “dog,” which is on it, and so designates it, makes it disappear, deletes and sends it barking in the distance.

An ankle boot with pink toes waits in a room. A formidable apple props up a table. A hunter, head down, is seen by a wood pigeon. But everything remains unexciting, seems to have become, by way of the uncommon, more nature, a nature more invincible, which this time cannot be overturned.

The ordinary world has not ceased, could not be overtaken.

Everyday objects, whose everyday will be changed, objects that are no less objects because of that...

They have let go of their habits, but only to otherwise find habit, the everyday in perpetuity, forever.

Inseparable companions who appear everywhere. Gods of the hearth, powers lost.

Deranged, but who are only more here, more bourgeois, more canapé.

Stripped objects, absolute, facsimile objects, objects post-distillation, objects for an abecedarian.

\*

Drawn around every show, before the eyes of the contemplative observer, are two huge curtains, heavy and dark, ready to close. Effacing trees and people and parties.

Ennui, forever ennui. Recurrent disappointment that will close out everything.

So that there will be nothing more to see. Nothing more to come.

Makes sure that nothing more will happen, that finally everything will be stopped.

\*

Between a man who stands and a big fish who stands, the resident of a provincial capital who stands, bowler hat on his head, and a big fish who stands, there's a strange parity, recognizable to the connoisseur – a parity that must have been far more apparent during the Thirties, when appearances were dignified, respectable.

Side by side, there they are: one specimen from a school of fish, one specimen from a school attended by men. Expressionless, placid...but voracious, voracious.

.....  
This new, unexpected assembly is where a certain unity, equality set in, hold on with strange force.

A strange and invisible mortar that unites where we have divided.

An owl is never more owl-like as when he is leaf, an outstanding, unrivalled leaf. And a leaf is never more a leaf than when it stands up, flat as though meant to stick between the pages of an herbarium, a titanic herbarium, no doubt, just the kind well-suited to a leaf the size of a tree; a tree where birds have come and perched themselves as if it were nothing at all, failing to see the painter's imitation, which here has triumphed. He has looped the loop.

\*

Minor characters in memory, who return assembled differently. So returns the day-to-day, weighed down by thousands of previous meetings. It returns, toting the vestiges and vertigo of eternity.

Welcome to banality.

Upon whom, in particular, it is incumbent to return.

Nothing could bolster the extraordinary as much as banality does.

The unexpected addendum does not bash it in, but is itself absorbed by it. After a moment of shock it returns, composed, tied to habit, like a step on the street.

The incredible amalgamation was unable to beat the ordinary. Abnormality did not defeat it.

The mackerel sky over Brabant, now plastered on a cabinet door, on a riding saddle, on a shirtfront, or on a naked young woman's backside (who does not seem to notice) remains an ordinary sky, the same one you have always seen in this province, when, on any old brisk spring morning, you lifted your head. Now in various strange places, suitable or not, there he is, always

at ease, unchanging, unvarying, the same in every painting, in every season, everywhere – ever-renowned, having become sky universal...

\*

Ordinary objects – pipe or well-worn shoe, or brush or balustrade, or flowerpot – participants in the unremarkable life, the routine life, speechless witnesses thus far who now mutely speak having themselves, too, become universal.

The table leg is back, the bell, the wall hanging, and the cup-and-ball game, and the eternal easel, ever-near, and the frames – laid flat, and the balustrade and the wallpaper, and the streetlight, fragments of the everyday. And man, the inseparable, average man, fixed, definitive, dressed up, buttoned up, the one we meet everywhere, about whom there's nothing to say, the man only as a "sign of the city."

Black mushroom in the grey of the streets, the umbrella is back, the extraordinary cupola of "comme il faut," protecting us by depriving us of the sky, raining down on its protégé grief and sadness.

The umbrella, the umbrellas, the world of umbrellaed men, the umbrella-world that arched over an entire epoch.

Now that their illness has subsided, they remain, the *hmm* of a tuning fork, resounding indefinitely.

Real, gawkily real and unreal, cumbersome, signs of a place where it pours rain (where it rains, on parades, too), signs of overcast weather, overcast horizons and of a reigning down-to-earthness. Even though they're "extending" and are thus open, these umbrellas, the rain doesn't appear in these paintings, no need. It falls endlessly, however, the rain in question...

Umbrellas, chairs, balustrades, bicycles, cigars, shoes: ghosts of communal life, the uninviting life, the lifeless life we cannot stop living.

The heads, too, we can be sure to see them come back, everywhere, at every turn, not like glory, not like domination, but rather, as the streets, sexes, seats are: heads like steps back.

.....

The meaning this head had is disseminated differently. By losing meaning, it has taken on a great deal of meaning. It has even reached its full potential.

Just so a wayward block, no doubt weighing hundreds of tons – a block that ought to be flying through the air at a breakneck speed – calmly halts before a window, having also reached its destination, in total calm, the scene painted, wish granted.

Already there, up above, standing straight, a representative of the inexorable species *homo*.

Thus the weight of the unknown world effortlessly unites with the painting.

Things, things, things that say so much when they say something else.

Things that have always been accepted, though their relationships were not.

Otherwise classified, unyielding, nevertheless pacified.

Every thing with another thing, with many other things, tends voluntarily toward *resonance*.

And every being with another being, practically in harmony, and every object with another object, and every whole with another whole.

Everywhere there are the beginnings of resonance, provided that we don't interfere with any ill-conceived notion, provided we only let it happen.

Everywhere there are also the beginnings of dissonance, beginnings of the shifting toward more *dissonance*, magnificent dissonance.

For whoever grasps it, the walled city opens up, the one that had kept him prisoner. But it'll will become necessary to him. The prison, he'll no longer be able to break free from it. Habit, the sheer pleasure of periodically being able to ruin it, destroy and ridicule it, now has him.

A prisoner? Not a prisoner? Otherwise prisoner.



*The text was going to be published in a magazine in three or four days when I was introduced to the painter, who was visiting Paris.*

*So I approached the man who made Magritte's, who had made many, almost regularly, et would probably continue to make them, who was Magritte himself, a way of moving, of orienting himself, of protecting himself, an accent, an origin, habits, strong habits.*

*There was an exchange, conversation, interest.*

*Afterword I saw exhibitions and a number of his paintings, I also learned certain particularities about his life and, what I would never have guessed, how he managed to "scheme," for there was also a chess player in him.*

*For me, the operation was complete: to enter into the unknown. It had been like entering into the writing of a stranger, where, with very few points of reference, and all of the same kind, ceasing to criticize but instead approve of, we give way without any resistance to an unexpected life, an otherness that blurs distinctions.*

*Whether it was successful or not, I know too well now that other means must be explored.*

*When I wanted to start over, the known bothered the unknown, and soon blocked the way.*

*The tour of refusal had come; come back. There they were, in force...after my long detour.*

*The addendums here come from, for the most part, my first "crossings."*

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