



THOUSAND TIMES BROKEN

Three Books



Henri Michaux

Translated from the French
by Gillian Conoley

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INTRODUCTION

These three titles were all written between 1956 and 1959, during Henri Michaux's 11-year, on-again, off-again experiment with mescaline. Each is at once a departure from and a continuation of the Michaux we know, if one can say one can "know" Michaux—a writer and visual artist who marked little difference between the machinations of our internal and external worlds, and who viewed both as forces we should somehow throw off, exorcise, excise. The self? An impediment. World? Apparition. Language, marks, drawings, paintings? Failures, and with agendas of their own. Only the unknown, and within the unknown, only the uncontrollable, might be trusted.

Both Michaux's writing and visual art are marked by two obsessions: to delve into the darker, shadowy realms of human consciousness, and to record what he saw in the most scrupulous, exacting fashion he could muster, whether it be through language or drawing, with India ink (his most preferred medium), watercolor, or paint. Throughout, one can trace the struggle for, and his disappointment in not finding, a medium up to the task, or a universal language through gesture, mark, sign, and the word.

Never wavering from continual journeys into perception and consciousness throughout the almost 60 years of his creative life, Belgian-born Henri Michaux (1899-1984) was one of the most influential French writers and visual artists of the twentieth century. Difficult to classify, he was often linked to the surrealists, an identification he eschewed. Michaux published over thirty books of poems, narratives, essays, travelogues, journals, and drawings. His visual work—almost eclipsing his reputation as a writer—was shown in major museums of Europe and the United States, including the Guggenheim in New York, and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris.

In each of these three books, correspondences between the verbal and the pictorial become more pronounced, more urgent and dramatic than anywhere else within Michaux's entire oeuvre. We see the crucifix as icon appear as a broken mark or alphabetic letter. The human eye sprouts a watchtower whose "target" is either object or subject or some netherworld in between. A fluid, torrential "vibratile carpet" appears like an unending page on which word and image fly.

MYSTICISM AND MESCALINE

As a young man, Michaux immersed himself in mystical literature (Ruysbroeck, Pascal, Ernest Hello, Lao-Tse) to find "the same fugitive and contourless universe" of his experience. Michaux's shifts between external and internal stimuli can often be dizzying. Many have commented on the somatic, bodily experience the writing of Michaux can induce. One of his earliest translators, Richard Ellman, explained, "Reading Michaux makes one uncomfortable . . . if we try to reassure ourselves by calling it fantasy, we have to ignore the scalpel which is playing about our insides" (Ellman 14).

As in all his work, in these three books we find Michaux seeking to wrestle himself from the familiarity of his own consciousness through an adopted or induced experience: travel, mescaline, journeys into imagined worlds of creatures or beasts, Western or Eastern spirituality. These ventures into consciousness are relentlessly explored from his first book to his last, including the early *My Properties* (1929), the half-imaginary travel journals of *A Barbarian in Asia* (1933), the invented lands and mythical animals of *Elsewhere* (1948), the mescaline-induced textual columns and frenetic drawings of *Misérable miracle* (1956), and the mystical expeditions into Buddhism, Hinduism, and tantric art in *The Exalted Garden* (1984).

Throughout each exploration, one becomes aware of a split in consciousness. While there is a mind at play, courting chaos, there is also a mind acutely observant and vigilant, taking note of every synapse, each glimmer of the unknown. As much as Michaux is desirous of vision, he is desirous to chart the course. While the work is strange, dark, and fantastic, his stance is often scientific, rational, that of one who is taking account, detached. Thus, Michaux, who once attended medical school, is both “poetic” and “scientific” at the same time, taking Rimbaud’s statement: “contemporary poetry can no longer content itself with vague lyricism, but only with total self-knowledge,” quite seriously.

Michaux’s goal, however—like Rimbaud’s—was not to arrive at a more extensive personal self-knowledge, but to prove a more intimate contact with human consciousness available to those who brave it. “Communicate?” Michaux would ask in the aphoristic book *Tent Poles*, where the pronoun referent is left ambiguously open—either Michaux himself, the reader, or yet another—“You too would like to communicate? Communicate what? . . . You’re not intimate enough with you, poor fool, to have something to communicate” (Michaux, *Tent Poles* 97). And similarly, he would ask, “However weighed down, washed-up, bullied you may be, ask yourself regularly—and irregularly—‘What can I risk again today?’” (*Tent Poles* 85).

It should be made clear that Michaux was far from an addict, and only took mescaline a handful of times over the course of the 11-year experiment. A teetotaler most of his life, Michaux began experimenting with mescaline sometime around 1954-55, when a neurologist friend encouraged him to try the drug. Michaux, apparently reluctant at first, was drawn to mescaline for its capacity to enhance a more precise division in consciousness he was already experiencing in his art, a state in which one part of the brain remains unillusioned and lucid during vision, fantasy, or hallucination.

Michaux himself has often been referred to as a substance. John Ashbery, in a preface to a 1961 interview he conducted with Michaux in Paris, described him as “hardly a painter, hardly even a writer, but a conscience—the most sensitive substance yet discovered for registering the fluctuating anguish of day-to-day, minute-to-minute living” (Ashbery 396). Octavio Paz, in an introduction to *Misérable miracle*, wrote, “When I had read the last page, I asked myself whether the result of the experiment had not been precisely the opposite: the poet Michaux explored by mescaline” (Michaux, *Misérable miracle* ix).

Quitting entirely at age 67, Michaux reportedly did not “like” the drug: “Should one speak of pleasure? It was unpleasant.” By 1961, Michaux writes: “Drugs bore us with their paradises. Let them give us a little knowledge instead. This is not a century for paradise.” Writing to his friend Octavio Paz, Michaux explains: “Devotees of the simple perspective may be tempted to judge all my writings as those of a drug addict. I regret to say that I am more the water-drinking type.”

EARLIER VISUAL/VERBAL EXPERIMENTS

Questions of perception and representation—the blur between the visual and the verbal—have early roots in Michaux, with the publication of *Entre centre et absence* (1936) and the later *Peintures* (1939), *Labyrinthes* (1944), *Peintures et dessins* (1946), *Apparitions* (1946), *Meidosems* (1948), and *Mouvements* (1951). In the first editions of each of these books, Michaux placed his original artwork next to his writing. On each title page, the visual works were described as being “illustrations of the author,” which resulted in these texts falling into the category of “illustrated books,” though Michaux never had the intention that the poems act as texts for the visual, nor that the visual stand as illustration for the texts. Instead, these books lay

the early groundwork for a dialog between the visual and the verbal in which Michaux sought to create a dynamic, rather than subordinate, interaction.

Michaux's earliest visual works (made around the same time as his first serious literary work) were ink drawings titled "Narration" and "Alphabet." Art critic and poet Barry Schwabsky, writing in *Artforum*, describes the work as suggestive of texts "handwritten in characters that only appear once, if such a thing were possible." From the outset of his creative life, we see Michaux trying to "draw" a new language. Schwabsky explains, "Michaux's draftsmanship was born out of an urge to depict the strangeness of writing—to produce something even more opaque than the invented words in his poems of the period, just as those words amplify the vivifying effect he had found as a child of isolated words in the dictionary, where 'words . . . do not yet belong to phrases, to phrasemakers'" (*Artforum* 42).

In 1956, Michaux would write one of the earliest of what would become six mescaline texts: the multi-columned *Misérable miracle*, accompanied by the discordant drawings and illegible, gestural handwriting produced under the drug's influence. Later in his life, in the 1960s-1970s, he would move restlessly between line, color and rhythm in both his poetic and visual art, and begin to work from the model of the Chinese ideogram, ultimately transmuting it into a new language of pure lines. In these pen and ink drawings, the human figure takes on the gestural aspect of the handwritten letter, and simultaneously seems to be running toward the next, in horizontal lines running left to right, as in an alphabetical text. Increasingly, letter, sign, and mark appear as human figure.

FOUR HUNDRED MEN ON THE CROSS

Four Hundred Men on the Cross is perhaps Henri Michaux's most haunting and enigmatic text, one in which we see

Michaux's life-long quest to fuse the visual and the verbal taking on a new trajectory. Appearing in 1956, between publication of the first two books written during the mescaline experiments—*Misérable miracle* (1956) and *L'Infini turbulent* (1957)—*Four Hundred Men on the Cross* is the only book in which we see Michaux shaping poems into object-like figures, creating a simultaneous, rather than complementary, visual and verbal experience.

Four Hundred Men on the Cross is a series of quick, fleeting portraits of the crucifixion, wherein Michaux presents the human body as an image that can no longer find corollary with myth and metamorphosis. Again and again, Michaux tries to render Christ on the cross, but cannot seem to get him to stay put, either through language or drawing.

Noting that the exact date of composition of *Four Hundred Men on the Cross* remains a mystery (whether Michaux wrote the book just before or just after he first took mescaline is unknown), Bellour suggests that in this writing Michaux is preparing the human body for further experiment in the mescaline texts. Bellour calls “this enigmatic book a perfect transition to the books about drugs” and contends that in this text, Michaux leaves behind the invented suffering body of his earlier work, and replaces it with “a body that has become experimental, biological and physical, offering itself to question thought, with no further detours” (Michaux *Œuvres complètes* 1326).

In his depictions of the human body on the cross, Michaux begins to meld the two worlds of the pictorial and the poetic, tracing a shifting universe of verbal and visual signification found within and between the graphic images of his printed texts and the gestural expressivity of his drawings. In the opening pages, the shifting font sizes and shaping of fragments give the poems a sense of objecthood or sign, which Michaux then takes a step further, as the poems themselves become the cross, or a text hiding the infant Christ, or a Christ figure floating in air.

Three pen and ink drawings of the crucifixion also appear in the book; the other drawings, to which the writing ostensibly refers, Michaux leaves absent. In *Four Hundred Men on the Cross*, the reader/viewer must continually shift foci between reading and seeing. While seeking to regain his lost faith, Michaux is also asking, “What is reading? What is seeing?”

Margaret Rigaud-Drayton, writing in her groundbreaking *Henri Michaux: Poetry, Painting and the Universal Sign*, explains, “It is in the experimental *Quatre cents hommes en croix* that Michaux goes the furthest in graphic writing . . . its typographically unconventional fragments take on the function of visual signs, even as they remain discursively legible texts . . . they transcend the opposition between ‘to show and name; to appear and say; to reproduce and articulate; to imitate and mean; to look at and read’ somewhat as calligrams do according to Foucault” (Rigaud-Drayton 148).

In *Four Hundred Men on the Cross*, Michaux grapples with his lost faith by trying to write and draw the crucified Christ, the model through which the self can only try to conform, bound to failure. Writing and drawing become a substitute for belief. The “draftsman” in the text eventually multiplies into many draftsmen, mirroring the multiple crucified beings represented both visually and verbally—creating a sort of pictorial/poetic house of mirrors in which Christ refuses to appear or remain.

With this book, Michaux aligns himself within the long and continuing tradition of the malleable form of the auto portrait through Christ, joining Saint Augustine, Montaigne, Dante, Rousseau, Nietzsche (and closer to us, Roland Barthes, and among filmmakers, Federico Fellini, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Martin Scorsese, and Jean-Luc Goddard), each of whom—in various ways—depicted the passion of the self transmuted through the crucified Christ.

Shifting in typography between different fonts and

font sizes and the direction of its print, *Four Hundred Men on the Cross* contains discontinuously numbered poems and fragments which nevertheless move forward much in the same way a person of Catholic faith walks through the stations of the cross toward resurrection. In both drawing and writing Christ on the cross—the crucifixion itself a sign—Michaux seeks to somehow reunite himself with an earlier, profound faith experienced in adolescence and early adulthood.

As a young man Michaux wanted to join the priesthood, but was dissuaded by his father, a Catholic lawyer, who preferred he become a doctor. Born in Namur, educated at Putte-Grasheide and a Jesuit school in Brussels, Michaux began medical studies at Brussels University, but eventually rebelled against his parents' wishes, dropped out, and traveled North and South America as a ship's stoker in the French Merchant Marines. In 1923 he moved to Paris, supported himself by working as a teacher and secretary, and began to paint and write. In 1925, Michaux wrote, "I love without restriction nor explanation: Lautréamont and Ernest Hello. In all honesty, Christ as well" (Michaux *Œuvres complètes* 1319).

Thirty years later, we find Michaux, now accomplished as both a writer and an artist, working the tools of both mediums in an effort to return to his earlier experiences with Christ. We also find Michaux, in reference to his lost faith, being uncharacteristically eloquent: "United with Him, surrounded by images of Him on the cross, finding all meaningful life in Him, through Him, with Him, in preference to all other beings on earth, but that was long ago, that was in the serious years of my life, in my adolescence. . . ." (Michaux *Œuvres complètes* 802).

Upon completion of *Four Hundred Men on the Cross*, Michaux wrote to his friend, the French writer, critic and publisher Jean Paulhan. In this note, Michaux explains that the two blank pages he inserts toward the end of the

text are there to indicate the 30-year time lapse between Michaux's faith and this writing. The note also refers to the importance of Christ to Michaux:

As for the man on the cross, he's completely stopped being interesting to me since the last drawings. After I described these last ones, it seemed to me that if I didn't add how important He was to me, I wouldn't be able to make people understand anything about me. So the extra pages were strictly for other people; restoring me to the state I was in thirty years before, for them. Restoring me too much. I never knew how to compose! But there was no morning after. Everything was truly in the grave.

(Michaux *Œuvres complètes* 1321).

While English language critics and translators often mention Michaux's interest in and use of Eastern spirituality, especially as found in *The Exalted Garden*, one of the last works Michaux published before his death in 1984, scant mention is made of Michaux's conflicted relationship with Christianity, and in particular, the Christ figure. For this, I would direct the reader to Bellour's extensive commentary in the Gallimard edition of Michaux's *Œuvres complètes*. In *Four Hundred Men on the Cross*, on the title page, Henri Michaux literally nails his name to the cross, and begins another journey to the infinite.

WATCHTOWERS ON TARGETS

Watchtowers on Targets, published in 1959, two years after *L'Infini turbulent*, and three years after *Misérable miracle*, is a collaboration with Chilean abstract surrealist Roberto Matta, the painter with whom Michaux felt the closest affinity. Matta and Michaux set up the following rules for

their project: for the first two sections, Michaux would respond to Matta's etchings, and for the third, Matta would work from Michaux's writing. With its quick starts and abrupt stops in narrative, and without the overall narrative arc—however tentative—one usually sees in Michaux, the book is unusual within Michaux's oeuvre. Early on, a crime is committed, but this storyline vanishes, only to be replaced by characters, beasts, and insects who appear unannounced, often disappearing as quickly as they appear. What remains central throughout the book is the activity of the eye in the flux of perception, in the rapid-fire correspondence between the visual and the verbal as supplied by Matta and Michaux.

Watchtower on Targets' title enacts the ever shifting, tilted perspective of the book: a watchman, who, from his observation post, also becomes the target of observation, so that the very activity of "watching" turns back upon itself. The book is unedited and unrevised, most likely to keep the quick pace of response between Michaux and Matta intact. As though in continual correspondence, the whirlwind qualities of Matta's etchings and Michaux's quickly shifting verbal tableaux create a sense of upended spinning and multiplying that only ceases with the book's last line, "*Sun that is able to reunite.*" This final line, which declares a re-stitching, or coming back together of the sun, Michaux takes care to italicize, to indicate a repair of, or response to, "sun's slit throat," the infamous last line in Apollinaire's great poem "Zone."

The middle section, "Correspondence," is the only epistolary writing Michaux was to create. Playing with both the visual and verbal qualities of a postcard—and with its qualities of being "sent" and "received" within a correspondence—Michaux uses the word "card" in naming each of the six sections he also numbers in sequence. This distinct, separate quality of each "card" draws attention to the individual world Michaux builds within each correspondence.

In response, Matta presents each of Michaux's "four observers" folded over the image of a playing card. The four observers, seated at a card table, are as intent upon the card as object as they are upon the spinning world of their own individual psyches, all while simultaneously concentrating on the activity of exchange in a game of cards.

In his notes on *Watchtowers on Targets* in *Œuvres complètes*, Raymond Bellour writes: "Actions and accidents, codes and phenomena crop up, making themselves known and disappearing just like dead stars . . ."

It remains unknown whether it was Michaux or Matta who created the title, but Matta, who died in 2002, 18 years after Michaux, often spoke of how, years after their collaboration, he experienced Michaux's writing still "playing around in his head." Matta explained, "Death interrupted me, I was counting so much on his presence, on the watchman. He was vigilant against my enthusiasm that could be a little too spontaneous at times, he restrained me and that was friendship. Now I am an orphan of this vigilance and I am becoming a target exposed to everything."

PEACE IN THE BREAKING

Peace in the Breaking, the fourth of Michaux's mescaline texts, appeared in 1959. In this book, Michaux continues to explore both the furrow shape from *Misérable miracle* (1956) and the practice of the "endless poem" in *L'Infini turbulent* (1957). The text begins with spine-like, seismographic drawings that grow bigger and wider until they no longer form anything but a dust of signs, with the last page containing only the small beats of wings without birds. The poem, also shaped into a furrow-like spine, traces the shocks and sensation of being, the blockages and accelerations of rhythms and senses. Noting the rapid occasional rises that run through many of Michaux's poems, ascensions that appear then quickly dissipate, critic Reinhard

Kuhn writes that in *Peace in the Breaking*, a peak or point of rupture, “an upward slope” or “simple unstoppable ascent” is sustained for the first time, a gesture “that modifies not only the direction but the substance itself of Michaux’s poetic enterprise” (Kuhn 190).

In *Peace in the Breaking*, not only do the title poem and drawings find formal corollary, but also the constraint of book as object begins to break down. The book is composed of four parts: drawings, two essay-like prose pieces, and poetry, all unrolling in a vertical, kakemono-like shape similar to the Chinese or Japanese scroll—and imitating, in its descending/ascending form, the drug experience from which the book was born.

As Raymond Bellour explains in Michaux’s *Œuvres complètes*, the visual format of the original book appeared “*a l’italienne*, (on the smallest side of the rectangle) . . . so that the book is read vertically, as a notepad, with the binding on top and not on the left.” The effect was one of a continual stream. Bellour continues: “So much so that one hesitates to talk about six or twelve mescaline drawings to evoke the twelve pages they cover. These drawings, in fact, are read or are seen two at a time, each time according to the continuity of the two pages opened together. . . One tends to forget the gaps in the motif in order to feel the dominant effect: a single drawing that unfolds as though it were endless until its final disappearance or evanescence, an immense dorsal spine, a central furrow around which words gather.”

Desiring a “volume with a single page infinitely refolded,” Michaux called both the drawings and the poem “leashes of reflections” (a term which, as Bellour points out, brings up notions of anchorage at sea, or links or furrows in the space defined by the oscillation of tides, or a wave’s “breaking”). Throughout what Michaux called “the involuntary evocations” of either drawing or poetry, he invites the reader to enter his vision of “a nervous projection

screen,” or “vibratile carpet,” over which images or visualized words pass.

If we view *Four Hundred Men on the Cross* as a preparation of the body for the mescaline experiments, then in *Peace in the Breaking* we see Michaux, with the assistance of mescaline, freeing himself of the unwieldy body. Michaux once said, “I wish I could paint man when out of himself, paint his space.” One also thinks of Michaux’s statement: “True poetry will always belong to those who were looking for something beyond the human, who strove to dominate and overtake it . . . it will belong to the great scientists, the mystics . . .” (*Œuvre complètes* 1368). Present throughout *Peace in the Breaking* is what Maurice Blanchot called “the pure vibrating emanation of presence.” Most significantly, in the title poem “Peace in the Breaking,” the rational and the irrational mind unite, the only time this occurs in Michaux’s oeuvre, through pure ascension.

Alain Jouffroy once asked Michaux about the compositional process of *Peace in the Breaking* with the double question: “how are images that later form your drawings born within you” and “how was the poem that your internal vision suggested to you born afterwards?” Michaux responds:

The rolling, effervescent passage, the same passage of being itself, in its incessantly colliding continuation, there is what is drawn then within an abrupt silence, and, some time later, either well or badly, from a memory still freshly etched.

In the storm without water, sometimes in an immense, settled, undulating cloth, the words appear, stammering visionary rags of a lost knowledge, all new, which the accident renders blindly clear.

Words and drawings both come out of the capsizing. But of an inapparent and profound

capsizing they will come out insolently, days and weeks later, word-buoys of strange, unequal return. But more pushed, more “returning.”

Michaux also called “Peace in the Breaking” a “strange poem, where sense is increasingly absent, where the enigmatic dominates, it tends to the dissolution of being, to the immense detachment that would have cleared the self and that would have ended the separation of the subject from the world” (*Œuvres complètes* 1368).

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