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Henri Michaux: Poet in Rebellion.

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HENRI MICHAUX:
POET IN REBELLION

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by
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ABSTRACT

Like other major writers, Henri Michaux is concerned with giving full measure to both inner and outer reality and their interaction upon each other. Yet his work stands apart from the main current of contemporary French literature. This is no doubt due to the fact that the world which he depicts bears little resemblance to the imaginary creations of other authors. In his very personal genre of prose poetry, he removes the reader from his usual surroundings, and leads him into a fantastic world where the real and the unreal are so intimately mingled that it is difficult to separate one from the other. It is there that he unveils the richness and complexity of his own inner universe.

He has had noteworthy predecessors in the creation of a dreamlike, alien world. Although he is extremely reticent concerning literary influences, he has admitted his debt to Lautréamont and Franz Kafka. After reading Lautréamont's work, he found the courage to express his own, not dissimilar, world. Like Kafka, he presents a strange and distorted universe in which the grotesque is treated as everyday reality. In Michaux's work, however, a keen, sardonic and pervasive humor restores a measure of equilibrium and normalcy to an otherwise nightmarish world.
Even as a child, he found it difficult to relate himself to a world which seemed alien and hostile. He read the works of Freud, in which the subterranean world of the psyche is explored at great length. He became particularly interested in the abnormal and irrational manifestations of the unconscious. This interest led him to experiment with drugs in order to examine their effect on the mind.

Although the outer world seemed alien, he wished to see as much of it as possible. His voyages proved disillusioning. After his exploration of inner and outer reality - two realms of experience not of his own making, he resolved to create an imaginary universe. He transformed to a certain degree his inner world into an imaginary one: making a deliberate and constructive use of the imaginative faculty, he exercised a choice among the teeming primordial images which surge to consciousness and gave them concrete form. In this way, he dominates the manifestations of the unconscious mind. He also incorporates the exterior world into his universe of fancy through imaginative "intervention" and "exorcism." With the former procedure, he fashions a world more to his liking; with the latter, he makes use of his unique and colorful invented language to strike back at his inimical surroundings. His victories over the hostile world are
only short-lived, however; reality can be transformed through the imagination, but only partially and temporarily; the harsh contours of reality can be softened through humor, but only momentarily. The world remains elusive and indomitable, despite the poet's efforts to deal with it creatively.

At the beginning of his literary career, Michaux asked himself the question: "what does it mean to be a human being in an apparently hostile and absurd world?" That question is still valid today. The poems which he began composing over forty years ago, and which he continues to write today, are a courageous attempt to supply an answer.
INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Henri Michaux often proves disconcerting to both reader and critic. It is composed of many elements which may at first glance seem contradictory, but which in reality complement each other: keen irony tempered by gentle humor, rich and vivid imagery balanced by a sober appreciation of the real, restraint offset by a readiness to retaliate violently against threats to the integrity of the self, and an attitude of detachment from life bordering on impassivity, counteracted by an ardent desire to participate fully in all that existence has to offer. In order to be able to profit fully from life, Michaux believes that one must not be blind to any dimension of reality. This involves a clear recognition of the polarity of life, in which the forces of repulsion and conflict are counterbalanced by those of attraction and harmony. Man is the instrument by which these colliding forces can be woven into a meaningful pattern of reality. Like Michel de Montaigne, Michaux begins and continues the search for meaning primarily within himself. Montaigne vividly describes the method he employs for accomplishing his goal in these terms: "Chacun regarde devant soy. Moy je regarde dedans moy ; je n'ay affaire qu'à moy, je me
Je m'estudie plus qu'autre sujet: c'est ma metaphisique, c'est ma phisique." These words would not be amiss in describing the means which Michaux uses to attain his objective, which is the full realization of all his capacities through self-knowledge.

Although Michaux began writing in the years just after World War I, he has not long been known to the general public. Until the end of World War II, his name was relatively unfamiliar even to those who moved in literary circles in France. The reason for this lay in the nature of the transformation that poetry has undergone. Since the advent of Surrealism, it might be said that poetry has become the province of the many rather than of the few. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish the poets of real worth from those whose reputation may not withstand the passage of time. Poetry now occupies such an immense and labyrinthine domain that the critic, as well as the reader, has very little but his own uncertain judgment to rely upon; clearly defined criteria concerning its value and role are lacking.

Such was the difficulty which confronted Marcel Raymond, the author of *De Baudelaire au Surréalisme*, a work which first appeared in 1933. In the 1940 edition of this study, he mentions the names of Jacques Prévert,
René Char and Henri Michaux, poets who did not appear in the earlier edition. But their names are given only in passing, and attracted little attention among those of greater and more established poets, such as Saint-John Perse, Pierre-Jean Jouve, Jules Supervielle, and the Surrealists. Only a few years later, however, Prévert, Char and Michaux had earned the right to a place among them. Although they belong to the same chronological generation as Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon, they are not a part of the same poetic generation. Why did they become known later? we ask. The answer may lie in the fact that they were looking for their own, different ways of expression, and that perhaps there was not yet an audience for their words.

In any case, there is no doubt that Michaux's reputation as a poet of the first rank is now firmly established. Little is known of his personal life, however. He is a man of discretion and reserve, avoiding the public eye in order to lead a quiet, studious and productive life. In so doing, he may have in mind the words of Max Jacob, who gave the following advice to a young poet of his acquaintance: "Aller le moins possible dans le monde. Tous y ont un masque. On n'apprend absolument rien dans le monde. Ou ce qu'on y apprend ne vaut pas le temps qu'on y perd."³

Michaux was born into a middle-class family in 1899
in Namur, and spent his early childhood in the Flemish region of Belgium. His family moved to Brussels during his adolescent years, where he lived through the German occupation of that city. We are fairly familiar with this period of his life, as he sometimes refers to it in his writings. If we bring together these allusions, we form a picture of a child who was unhappy living with his father, mother and older brother. He was never really at ease at home, feeling that he had little in common with the other members of his family. In his work entitled *Un Certain Plume*, we find a piece bearing the heading "Portrait de A," that acquaints us with that unhappy period of his life:

Jusqu'au seuil de l'adolescence, il formait une boule hermétique et suffisante, un univers dense et personnel et trouble où n'entrait rien, ni parents, ni affections, ni aucun objet, ni leur image, ni leur existence, à moins qu'on ne s'en servit avec violence contre lui. En effet, on le détestait, on disait qu'il ne serait jamais homme.4

As a child, Michaux was unable to adapt himself to the strange, often threatening, world surrounding him. The ordinary child is able to grasp and incorporate the outer world into his intellect and emotions without too great difficulty if he feels himself genuinely loved. But it sometimes happens that love is not forthcoming, and those persons around him who make up his family may loom so menacingly that he cannot relate himself to them.
in a positive way. The result is that he does not develop a feeling of belonging, but rather a profound insecurity and vague apprehensiveness. It is a feeling of anxiousness, isolation and helplessness in a world experienced as potentially hostile. Even the play activities of the child reflect his flight from this inimical universe. Michaux illustrates this fact when he says, "je formais avec de la mie de pain une petite bête, une sorte de souris. Comme j'achevais à peine sa troisième patte, voilà qu'elle se met à courir... Elle s'est enfuie à la faveur de la nuit." 5

The cramping pressure of his surroundings prevented Michaux from relating himself to others with the spontaneity of his real feelings; it forced him to search for ways to deal with his environment. Like all children placed in such a distressing situation, he had to cope with his family in ways which did not arouse or increase this intense anxiety. Some children try to cling to the most powerful person around them; others try to rebel and fight; still others may try to shut their family out of their inner life and withdraw emotionally from them. The loneliness caused by Michaux's withdrawal was lessened by a conception of happier days in the future. He says, "j'ai été la honte de mes parents, mais on verra, et puis je vais être heureux. Il y aura toujours nombreuse compagnie. Vous savez, j'étais bien seul, parfois." 6
Michaux automatically rejected the demands and appeals of the hostile world. He pushed away his family, refused to play with his brother, and spurned the food his mother offered him. Even to communicate on the verbal level seemed to him to be a concession to this unwanted environment. It was only in himself that he was able to find the answers and satisfactions that he longed for. The menacing world might assume any form, that of the wind, for example - an inimical, penetrating, persistent, ubiquitous wind against which he could find no protection. He describes this wind in these words:

\[
\text{Il souffle un vent terrible.}
\text{Ce n'est qu'un petit trou dans ma poitrine,}
\text{Mais il y souffle un vent terrible.}
\]

...\[
\text{Dans le trou il y a haine (toujours),}
\text{effroi aussi et impuissance,}
\text{Il y a impuissance et le vent en est dense,}
\text{Fort comme sont les tourbillons,}
\text{Casserait une aiguille d'acier,}
\text{Et ce n'est qu'un vent, un vide.}
\]

...\[
\]

In a sense, Michaux was and has remained a "stranger." His intense awareness of his difference and uniqueness gave him a feeling of being a foundling in society. Yet this being-apart concerned only the world of human society. Like Meursault, the hero of Albert Camus' novel \textit{L'Etranger}, Michaux maintained his rapport with the physical world. Robert Champigny speaks of
Meursault in these words: "Il ne se sent pas étranger par rapport à la réalité, par rapport à la nature. Il est, au contraire, par tempérament, remarquablement apte à se faire complice des choses. Il profite avec bonheur des valeurs sensuelles et esthétiques que ses rencontres et sa situation quotidienne lui offrent." These words might equally well apply to Michaux.

His childhood days held one great joy: the hours he devoted to reading. Rejecting the unsympathetic and unfriendly outer world, he turned within and began to read the mystics. He particularly liked the saintly Tibetan yogi, Milarepa, who lived in the twelfth century, and Blessed John Ruysbroeck, the great Flemish mystic of the 14th century. He also found much pleasure and spiritual sustenance in the works of Lao-Tse and Pascal.

It was Ernest Hello, the nineteenth century Catholic writer, who introduced him to the world of mysticism. Michaux says: "Ernest Hello m'a fait connaître Ruysbroek l'Admirable et Angèle de Foligno, traduits par lui du latin dans une langue admirable, sobre et sur moi cinglante. J'avais quinze ans... Il me galvanisait et me servait à rejeter tous les autres écrivains qu'on nous faisait étudier." The mystic fervor of the saintly men mentioned in Hello's work made a deep impression on Michaux. When he visited India, he saw many
examples of men who had embraced the ascetic life. In fact, he allowed his enthusiasm to carry him away, declaring, "Il y a quelque chose d'inégalablement splen-dide dans cet ensemble du peuple hindou qui toujours cherche le plus et non le moins, qui a le plus nié le monde visible, en est, non pas seulement en esprit, mais physiquement insouciant, le peuple de l'Absolu, le peuple radicalement religieux." For Michaux, the Hindu search for truth left the merely intellectual sphere and took on the assured aspect of a personal passion. The philosopher guesses and argues, he felt, whereas the Eastern mystic experiences and reveals; the latter speaks the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, leaving aside the neat dialectic of the schools. While the Absolute of such a metaphysician as Spinoza remains an extremely difficult ideal to attain, the Absolute of the Hindu mystic seemed obtainable here and now. Michaux expresses in these words his wonderment at the fierce joy of the holy men who manifestly were possessed by the Divine:

La joie dans la maîtrise, la prise de posses-sion, la rafle assurée dans la masse divine. Chez un d'eux, je me souviens, une sorte de cupidité, de féroce spirituelle qui crachait, victorieuse, à la figure du malheur et des démons inférieurs. Chez d'autres une béatitude définitive, bornée, classée, et qu'on ne leur reprendrait plus.

During his youth, Michaux dreamed of becoming a saint, and
even today he sometimes thinks longingly of that blessed state. In a conversation with René Bertelé, he declared: "Le saint, même si son point de départ est, comme il me semble, une erreur, achève magnifiquement l’homme." He once considered entering the Benedictine order, but could not obtain the permission of his father.

He also thought of becoming a doctor, but rejected that career for two reasons: he did not wish to devote the time required for such intensive studies, and, more important, he did not want to accept the established order of things. He rejected the society in which he found himself in these words: "Etudier, apprendre, c’est accepter, accepter d’accepter. J’en étais loin. J’ai pu m’en rendre compte depuis."

Michaux had always liked to read books of travel and exploration, and resolved that one day he would go visit those places so different from the monotonous plains of Flanders. At the age of 21, he passed through a period of confusion and indecision; he had not done well in his studies, and had not found any work he liked. Not knowing what else to do, it seems, he embarked on a long trip to South America, where he visited the mountains and volcanoes of the Andes. On a second journey, he visited India, China, Japan, and the Malay Archipelago. At the age of 22, he returned to his family
in Belgium. He felt himself to be a complete failure: his health was bad, he had no trade or profession, and he failed the competitive examinations to enter the university. Once again it seems he let chance guide him; lacking definite plans, he decided to try to write. He describes his genesis as a writer in these terms: "Quand j'ai écrit (je m'y décidai enfin), j'ai été surpris de voir que des écrivains, des vrais, considéraient mes textes sérieusement, que pour eux cela existait." The "real writers" who became interested in him were Franz Hellens and Jean Paulhan; the latter was at that time editor of La Nouvelle Revue Française, and arranged with Gallimard to have his first book published; this work bears the title Qui je fus. Other early writings appeared in the Belgian literary review, Le Disque Vert. The title of one of these pieces, Cas de folie circulaire, which appeared in 1922, gives a clue to one of Michaux's constant themes - the hallucinations and obsessions which haunt his unconscious mind.

The influence of Franz Hellens on Michaux had more of a literary nature. Speaking of Hellens' work, Mélusine, published in 1921, Gaetan Picon remarks:

Mélusine, de tous les livres de Hellens, est le plus singulier. Récit d'un rêve, livre vraiment dicté, il nous ouvre un monde où les corps volent, légers comme leurs ombres, où la parole a le son du silence, où les couleurs, les odeurs, les saveurs ont je ne sais quelle
This ability to describe phantasmagoria in sober and precise language - as if it was actually present in the external world - is also characteristic of Michaux.

Although Michaux had written and published some pieces at the age of 23, it was not until 1927, when he was 28 years old, that he began seriously to consider a career as an author. Before then, his work contained a mocking note; he described himself as "un homme qui n'aurait que son pet pour s'exprimer." He felt a malaise caused by the imperative need to express himself and the inadequacy of the language at his disposal.

In Paris, in 1925, Michaux became the friend of Jules Supervielle, who was 15 years older than him. Under his guidance and with his encouragement, Michaux felt more optimistic concerning his possibilities as a poet. At that time the Surrealist movement was in its infancy, and Michaux met many of the writers associated with it. He also made the acquaintance of several painters who were a part of the movement, such as Max Ernst, Paul Klee, André Masson and others. Surrealist art pleased him; before his contact with these artists, he had heartily disliked painting - both the finished product and the act of painting itself. He voiced his dislike in these
words: "Comme s'il n'y avait pas encore assez de réalité, de cette abominable réalité. Encore vouloir la répéter, y revenir!" Some years later, he himself began to paint in a manner which showed his familiarity with the Surrealists, yet his style is inimitably his own.

As far as his literary production is concerned, Michaux has remained outside the Surrealist movement insofar as it may be considered as a more or less clearly defined group. Yet there are occasional instances in his work of dream recitation as well as examples of self-dialogue resembling the monologue intérieur of Robert Desnos and André Breton. His poem entitled Ma Vie contains an instance of the last-named technique; in these lines Michaux seems to stand off from himself when he says:

Tu t'en vas sans moi, ma vie.
Tu roules,
Et moi j'attends encore
de faire un pas.
Tu portes ailleurs la bataille.
Tu me désertes ainsi.
Je ne t'ai jamais suivie.

The critic, Jean-José Marchand points out other resemblances to the Surrealists, and at the same time indicates a basic difference in their poetic methods:

Michaux, comme Breton, n'écrira que pressé par des phrases qui "cognent" à la vitre de la conscience. Comme lui, il attend de la poésie un rétablissement d'équilibre pour l'homme.
The Surrealists wished to formulate a new "declaration of the rights of man;" poetry was to play an important role in the elaboration of that declaration. A new social group would be created in which man would enjoy a richer and fuller life. In this connection, there is a fundamental difference in the conception of poetry of Michaux and that of the Surrealists. Michaux is concerned with the social organization of man only incidentally; his investigations are valid only for himself. He does not proselytize, and is satisfied with merely presenting for our consideration the results of his exploration of the depths of the psyche. Although the manifestations of the unconscious are important, they are not his major concern; he does not wish to discover through them a surreality. Finally, it should be observed that his poetic universe, though greatly marked by irrationality, is notwithstanding more coherent, less noncontextual than that of Breton and his followers.

At the age of 25, he discovered Lautréamont. The strange lyrical beauty and nightmarish quality of the
latter's prose fragments determined Michaux to try to give a literary form to his own, not dissimilar, inner world. In answer to a question from his biographer, Robert Bréchon, concerning the influence which Lautréamont has had on him, Michaux answered: "Quand j'ai lu les Chants de Maldoror et su qu'on pouvait écrire et publier ce qu'on avait en soi de vraiment extraordinaire, j'ai pensé qu'il y avait place pour moi." He does not deny the influence of other poets, but prefers not to mention their names, as he feels he has gone beyond them. Concerning these literary influences, he says: "On aime une pomme, mais on la digère. Un être humain aussi on l'épuise, et une oeuvre humaine; surtout on dérive petit à petit, appelé par son propre besoin, emporté par son courant à soi. Lautréamont pourtant m'a possédé. Au point que je dus me délivrer de lui. Il ne me laissait pas exister."

Although certain pieces of Michaux appeared in _La Nouvelle Revue Française_, the reaction of the readers was not encouraging. Several wrote to Jean Paulhan stating that his poems were not "literature." Michaux himself was not yet sure of his ability, and was very much inclined to agree with them. At the same time, he began to frequent the literary circles of Paris, and was disillusioned by the pettiness and vanity he found
there. He did make one close friend in that milieu, however - Alfred Gangotena, an Ecuadorian poet, whose intense lyricism resembles his own. The two of them left on an extended visit to South America, where they visited Ecuador and other countries; Michaux's experiences and impressions of that voyage are recorded in his book Ecuador. This work and the one entitled Un Barbarè en Asie are his two principal travel books.

His trip to India in 1930 made a much greater impression on him than did the one to South America and those he made to other parts of the world. The Indians seemed to him to be concerned with the essentials rather than the superfluities of life; for this reason he felt they deserved to be placed in a special category. Asia was a marvelous revelation to him; he travelled through Indonesia, China and Malaysia in a continual state of surprise and wonder. They were countries which gave him food for thought and meditation for years afterwards.

In 1937, Michaux began to spend more time drawing, as he wished to give a linear form to the poetic images within him. But he found that art did not fill his time completely, and became the editor of Hermès, a Belgian literary review devoted to philosophy and poetry. During the years of the Occupation he
lived with his wife in the south of France, where he spent much time painting. He was still a Belgian citizen at that time and, as a foreigner, he was suspect to the Vichy Government. In 1941, André Gide planned to give a lecture on his work at Nice, but was forbidden to do so by the Vichy authorities. The Pétain government was very suspicious of writers, in whom it sensed a spirit of revolt. Permission to speak was finally given to Gide, and he appeared in the lecture hall before the audience; he informed them, however, that he had decided not to give the lecture, as he feared that it might contribute further to the political divisions among Frenchmen. The contents of the speech were later published in a plaquette entitled Découvrons Henri Michaux.

A few months before the end of the war, Michaux returned with his wife to Paris. He began painting and drawing with renewed fervor, feeling he could express himself better with a brush and crayon than with a pen.

In 1948, a great personal tragedy occurred in his life: his wife was the victim of an automobile accident. After a prolonged period of suffering from burns, she died. Michaux expressed his great sorrow and sense of loss in a plaquette bearing the title Nous Deux Encore, published in the same year. After his wife's death, he wrote less and began to spend much
more time painting. In 1955, he became a French citi-
zen. In the following year, wishing to give other
dimensions to his poetic world, he began his experiments
with mescaline. He now spends his time drawing, painting
and writing - three means of artistic expression which
complement each other and are the tools he uses in his
efforts to give full measure to his inner and outer
reality and their interaction.

The voyages of Michaux are both "inner" and
"outer;" they are undertaken as a means of self-
exploration along the path of self-realization. Michaux
asks himself, "what does it mean to be a human being in
an apparently hostile universe?" His entire work is an
attempt to answer that broad, deep and complex question.
The self cannot remain passive - it must come to grips
with the world of objects in the ways at its disposal.
The self is fluid, elastic, inconstant, mutable; the
object is solid, rigid, constant, fixed. The self seeks
harmony, oneness and restraint; the world offers only
discord, disunity and chaos. The self, with its supposed
superior powers of intelligence, logic and reason,
tries to grasp and master the world of objects; the
exterior world seems to defy and resist these efforts.
Speaking of our incapacity to definitively force the
secrets of nature, Michaux says: "La nuit, contraire-
ment à ce que je croyais est plus multiple que le jour
et se trouve sous le signe des rivières souterraines."²⁵
We may suppose that nuit corresponds to the world of objects, and jour to the faculties of the conscious and unconscious mind.

Michaux does not remain inactive when confronted with the difficulties preventing a clear understanding of the human situation. Refusing to accept the opacity and chaos of the exterior world, he strikes back. His poetry is a weapon in the struggle to turn back the tide of non-being which threatens man. He believes, perhaps foolishly, that the poet - using intellect, imagination and intuition to explore both the logical and illogical planes of existence - may be able to form adequate and comprehensive ideas about the universe.

In his poetry, Michaux leaves the familiar world behind and travels to strange and uncharted countries; he wishes to look upon those lands with an unbiased mind and eyes undimmed by prejudice. The uprooting is never complete, however, for even in the strangest country there are similarities to his own, and the traveller cannot escape a human frame of reference. Michaux says: "Il traduit aussi le monde, celui qui voulait s'en échapper. Qui pourrait s'en échapper? Le vase est clos."²⁶ Reality is distorted for even the most clear-sighted among us; we are victims of the delusions of the imagination and the confused perceptions of the senses, and cannot
go beyond their limitations. And yet the thoughtful person, not wishing to give up too easily, wishes to continue his efforts to understand the riddle of existence. In order to do this more easily, Michaux would like to increase his cognitive powers. He expresses this desire in these words: "Penser! Plutôt agir sur ma machine à être (et à penser) pour me trouver en situation de pouvoir penser nouvellement, d'avoir des possibilités de pensées vraiment neuves. Dans ce sens, je voudrais avoir fait de la pensée expérimentale."  

Somewhat ruefully, he admits the impossibility of realizing this desire: "J'en ai conscience, c'est surtout un 'je voudrais'."  

In a poem entitled *Vieillesse*, he uses the concept of old age - curiously combined with the metaphor of darkness - to emphasize the futility of our efforts to fathom nature's secrets. Despite man's continual strivings through the centuries to gain the ultimate knowledge, he has not succeeded:

Soirs! Soirs! Que de soirs pour un seul matin!
Ilots épars, corps de fonte, croûtes!
On s'étend mille dans son lit, fatal dérèglement!
Vieillesse, veuilluse, souvenirs:
arènes de la mélancolie!
Inutiles agrès, lent déséchafaudage!
Ainsi, déjà, l'on nous congédie!
Poussé! Partir poussé!
Plomb de la descente, brume derrière...
Et le blème sillage de n'avoir pas pu Savoir.
Michaux is attentive to the unfamiliar immediacy of the inner and outer worlds; contemplation, intuition and a keen desire to perceive both the unity and multiplicity of the cosmos bring him near the gates opening into an orderly universe, yet these gates remain closed. The lack of order and coherence in nature causes some men to despair, and turn to the concept of a Supreme Being. Michaux himself once found comfort in the reassuring presence of God, but at present no longer believes in the reality of a transcendent power. In a short work entitled *Quatre cents hommes en croix*, he expressed as follows the intensity of that faith and the feeling of emptiness its loss caused in him: "Uni à Lui, entouré des images de Lui en croix, trouvant toute vie profonde en Lui, par Lui, avec Lui, préférablement à tout autre être au monde, mais cela il y a longtemps, c'était dans les années graves de ma vie, dans mon adolescence... A présent, quelle différence!"30

The human condition fills Michaux with anguish and concern rather than bitterness or misanthropy. His work is a continual effort to interpret human life - to see it steadily and to see it as a whole. The reader should not assume that his conception of the world is a caricature; he who scoffs or treats a serious matter in an apparently nonsensical manner nevertheless attributes a value to the object of his criticism. We soon sense that
Michaux is not creating a poetic universe in order to surprise or amuse us, but is seriously striving to deal with a many-sided problem. This problem may be stated in another way: "How can man reach full self-hood in an apparently hostile universe?"

The object of this study is, first, to examine the threatening aspects of the inner and outer worlds of Michaux, and, second, to consider his efforts to reconcile himself with those worlds, using what he terms imaginative "intervention" and "exorcism."
Notes


2 Ibid., II, 525.

3 Max Jacob, Conseils à un jeune poète (Paris, 1956), p. 44.


13 Michaux, Un Barbare en Asie, p. 32.

14 Bertelé, op. cit., p. 27.

15 Bréchon, op. cit., p. 205.


18 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 61.


24 Bertélé, *op. cit.*, p. 32.


29 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 89.

CHAPTER I

EXPLORATION OF THE INNER WORLD

Henri Michaux is little concerned with literature as an aesthetic exercise. For him, writing is a means and an instrument for the achievement of a concrete goal. He defines his conception of literature in these words: "J'écris pour me parcourir. Peindre, composer, écrire : me parcourir. Là est l'aventure d'être en vie."¹ He writes "pour questionner, pour ausculter, pour approcher le problème d'être."² The word approcher, evoking the idea of movement toward an object or goal, is worthy of note. Throughout his literary career Michaux has tried to approach the center of his being through the continual questioning of himself and the world about him. This questioning makes use of many literary forms: essays, fables, imaginative portraits, travel journals, aphorisms, and reflections on botany and zoology; these impressions and observations are presented to the reader in both poetry and prose, and often in a combination of the two forms.

Michaux presents us with a picture of both the real and imaginary worlds, each with its limitations and possibilities. Quite early in his voyage of self-inquiry,
he became aware of the imperfections of the perceiving-interpreting instrument - man himself. He points out these deficiencies in the following passage:

Nous manquons de quoi nous rendre compte. Les yeux découpent devant nous de petites tranches du monde. Or, les choses sont autour de nous et point en face. Certaines, nous les avons dans le dos. Tu regardes devant toi; sur les côtés, elles changent. Tu te tournes à gauche, elles changent derrière toi, à droite, et à la ronde. Jamais on ne vit d'un coup d'œil tout ce qui nous entoure.³

Michaux began the exploration of himself and the world through literature in 1922; in that year some short pieces appeared under his name in a number of little-known Belgian literary reviews. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to find these pieces in print today. None of them appears in the comprehensive collection of his works entitled L'Espace du Dedans, first published in 1944 and re-printed in 1966. We can only conclude that Michaux does not consider them worthy of being included among his best writings. Yet they are worth close study, as they contain the basic themes which are developed in later volumes. The title of one work, Cas de Folie Circulaire, indicates Michaux's intention to inquire into both the rational and non-rational levels of mental life; he wishes to explore the whole being, including those areas of the personality which are normally rejected, that is, those in which our
capacities for logical reasoning are impaired or inoperative. Chapter I of this work, entitled *Il se croit Maldoror*, gives evidence, at this early date, of the author's interest in the fantastic universe of Lautréamont. Another work which appeared in 1922, in the review *Écrits du Nord*, has a chapter entitled *Autonomie de développement des facultés, centres nerveux, associations d'images..., et le pot*. Other articles showing Michaux's preoccupation with the more irrational aspects of the psyche were published in *Le Disque Vert*. One article has the name *Réflexions qui ne sont pas étrangères à Freud*; another bears the title *Notes sur le Suicide*.

The phenomenon of madness is usually thought of as being the extreme point in non-rationality, as the last point on a continuum shading from the conscious, lucid, inductive use of our intellectual powers to the more or less complete inability to employ these faculties meaningfully and logically. Throughout the work of Michaux, we note his concern with the unfamiliar world of non-rationality. The inhabitants of that world unprotestingly obey decrees enacted by apparently demented legislators; even the laws of physics pertaining to the exterior world differ from those applying to our world.

In his work *Cas de Folie Circulaire*, Michaux himself imaginatively enters the world of the mad and
dwells there. His choice of the adjective *circulaire* is significant: in the sense that he uses it, the word has a poetic rather than a purely medical connotation. As a poet, he preferred to designate the condition of the unhinged mind in terms less harsh than the dry precise labels employed by official medicine. The expression *folie circulaire* indicates that the extreme irrationality characteristic of true madness cannot be done away with through conscious efforts.

The fact that it is difficult for a sane person to imagine the mental processes of a madman is unfortunate, for the spontaneous phantasies of the latter have great interest for a better understanding of the normal psyche. Although the madman dwells in another world, he is still a human being, and his behavior falls within a human frame of reference. The doctor and the artist are sometimes concerned with that world: the former in a professional capacity, and the latter from an aesthetic point of view. In the case of the artist, the journey into that world may be a feat of pure imagination, or it may be an artistic account based either on personal observation or subjective reports of persons who have lived for a time in a state of mental derangement. As an artist, Michaux enjoys the lucidity of mind and richness of imagination which enable him
to travel through, examine at leisure, and creatively portray the different realms of mental abnormality.

Michaux's power of creative phantasy allows him to call into being an imaginary world with contours so clearly outlined that it becomes vividly present for his readers. The latter share in the probing of a world whose spectacles are presented with a clarity and precision born of intuition. They see that strange universe through the poet's eyes, and puzzle with him over the significance of the sights encountered there. Michaux depicts in the passage below a scene from the disordered imagination of a person who has left the confines of rational mental life:

Une flottille de cercueils apparaît près de la jetée, cependant qu'un mort, embroché par un espadon fait un geste las, à moins que ce ne soit de miséricorde.

Un chien à la langue pourrie hésite à lécher le malade.

Une belette tremblante, le crâne ouvert, dans un cerveau ruisselant de sang laisse voir une petite roue dentée métallique.

The psychologist and art critic, Erich Neumann, describes the inundation of the unconscious by nameless forces in terms slightly different from those used by Michaux:

"When the world of security crumbles, man is inevitably devoured by nigredo, the blackness and chaos of the prima materia, and the two great archetypal figures of
the Devil and the Terrible Mother dominate the world. These figures represent shadow, evil, depression, darkening of the light, and harsh dissonance."\(^5\)

Madness is not alien to normal life; on the contrary, each person has had phantasies in early childhood as far removed from reality as those of a psychotic, and each of us re-enters that illogical world from time to time in our dreams. Even very mad people are not so far removed from the normal as they may seem at first sight; the problem is to understand why they seem to be immersed in dreams or nightmares even in their waking state. In his poem entitled \textit{Paysages}, Michaux introduces us into a world in which time is disjointed, torn from its normal progression, flows backward or proceeds at varying rhythms; the landscapes of this universe possess an eerie, almost indefinable quality which is the product of a dreamlike state giving full rein to the fantastic vistas of the demented:

\begin{quote}
Paysages paisibles ou désolés.
Paysages de la route de la vie plutôt que de la surface de la Terre.
Paysages du Temps qui coule lentement, Presque immobile et parfois comme en arrière.
Paysages des lambeaux, des nerfs lacerés, des "saudades."
Paysages pour couvrir les plaies, l'acier, l'éclat, le mal, l'époque, la corde au cou, la mobilisation.
\end{quote}
Paysages pour abolir les cris.
Paysages comme on se tire un drap sur la tête.6

As a poet, Michaux has the privilege of artistically making an alien mental world come alive, of emptying the contents of the deranged minds of its inhabitants for our contemplation. In the following lines, he describes a scene completely foreign to our everyday world:

Il n'y a dans la ville aucun souffle. Les véhicules sont garés, définitivement garés. Rien ne crie, rien ne désire. D’une statue fendue, trois morceaux s'élancent, se dé­tournant en colère les unes des autres, comme soulevés par d'impardonnables reproches. La funèbre ville n'a pas de sortie, des rues mortes se croisent et se referment sur elles­mêmes. Un liquide fangeux et noirâtre occupe des canaux à l'odeur nauséeuse et un humide hostile aux poumons et à l'os, et à la conservation de la vie humaine, vient en traître envahir la cité de large zones inamicales à l'homme.7

In this same passage, Michaux alludes to the ever-present hostility of the world, a recurring theme in his work. He is describing the feeling of aloneness and abandonment which overcomes us during certain moments of clarity; the objects surrounding us suddenly appear in their stark meaninglessness, lacking any justification for their existence, and emphasizing the insignificance of man himself. In Jean-Paul Sartre's work La Nausée, the same feeling of inimicality which physical objects seem to direct toward us is expressed
in these words:

Les choses se sont délivrées de leurs noms. Elles sont là, grotesques, têtues, géantes et ça paraît imbécile de les appeler des banquettes ou de dire quoi que ce soit sur elles : je suis au milieu des Choses, les innomnables. Seul, sans mots, sans défenses, elles m'environnent, sous moi, derrière moi, au-dessus de moi. Elles n'exigent rien, elles ne s'imposent pas, elles sont là.

Eugène Ionesco speaks of a similar sensation which overcomes him at times: the atmosphère seems to lose its transparency and lightness, the world congeals, solidifies, coagulates, and words are transformed into bits of inert matter lacking signification:

La légereté se mue en lourdeur; la transparence en épaisseur; le monde pèse; l'univers m'écrase. Un rideau, un mur infranchissable s'interpose entre moi et le monde, entre moi et moi-même, la matière remplit tout, prend toute la place, anéantit toute liberté sous son poids, l'horizon se rétrécit, le monde devient un cachot étouffant. La parole se brise, ...les mots retombent, comme des pierres, comme des cadavres; je me sens envahi par des forces pesantes contre lesquelles je mène un combat où je ne puis avoir que le dessous.

Later in his literary career, Michaux entered another non-rational plane of being - the domain of drugs. The person who enters that world possesses a power not enjoyed by the madman: that of producing and leaving it at will, at least in the initial states of drug addiction. The mind of the habitual user of drugs - as well as those of insane and primitive peoples - have great interest for him; such people perceive phenomena
in greatly distorted form, and are subject to great anxiety and distress; reactions such as these are characteristic of the beings who dwell in his own fantastic universe.

War, a peculiar form of collective madness which periodically overcomes the world, is the principal theme of *Epreuves, Exorcismes*, a collection of short works written during the Occupation. During those bloody encounters, it seems as if a demonic and elemental irrationality invades man; the stream of psychic energy breaks out of its accustomed channels and flows inward and onward, sweeping away the walls which imperfectly separate the conscious and unconscious minds. Embodying these destructive impulses in the person of a Moloch, Michaux says:

Comme un planeur en silence remonte une pente chaude dans le ciel dégagé, le Dominateur cherche une nouvelle ascension-puissance, prélude de nouveaux banissements, de nouveaux carnages. Sa machine à nouveau s'ébranle et le monde comme une étoffe gémit ou comme la femelle du hérisson couverte par le mâle au penis perforant et douloureux à supporter. Et sur les siens il s'arcboute, réclamant toujours plus de bras, plus de sueur, plus de sang.10

One of Michaux's earliest pieces, published in 1922, bore the name *Les Idées Philosophiques de "Qui Je Fus."* Although he employs a term dealing with metaphysics in the title of this work, he should not be considered as a philosopher in the proper sense of the
term. Stuart Hampshire defines the speculative thinker in these terms:

A philosopher has always been thought of as someone who tries to achieve a complete view of the universe as a whole, and of man's place in the universe; he has traditionally been expected to answer those questions about the design and purpose of the universe, and of human life, which the various special sciences do not claim to answer.11

Michaux fully realizes that strife and suffering are a necessary concomitant of the will for meaning, yet he does not speculate about them within a metaphysical frame of reference. Richard Ellmann points out that Michaux is interested in what is happening rather than in why it happens:

Michaux does not step out of his scene to reach formal conclusions about it. He diverges from Kafka by implying no general guilt; he posits no god or devil to explain what is going on in the world. Instead he clearly and clinically presents the algebra of suffering; in spare, almost antiseptic terms, he works out the equation: Man being man, here is what happens. He does not inquire whose fault it is, for his concern is with data, not without speculation.12

Quite early in life Michaux realized, as do most of us, that the question of where he was going was extremely important; but, unlike most of us, perhaps, the question of who was undertaking the journey seemed equally important. Knowledge of oneself requires courage, perseverance and patience; the person who is not relatively conscious of his inner obstacles, as well as the resources which lie in the unconscious, will
be more likely to stumble and lose heart in the voyage of self-exploration. In this admonition to himself, Michaux expresses his determination to persevere: "Ne pleure pas, il y a toujours bien un hublot ouvert sur un des quatre points cardinaux du monde." Yet the questioning of the meaning of existence is not a single-handed undertaking, and we need the help of others: "Ah! autruil le besoin d'autruil! un homme ne peut se dépecer lui-même jusqu'au bout. Pour le dernier sang il est bon qu'il ait quelqu'ami pour l'aider." In our efforts to find the ultimate answers, he warns us that it is not wise to reject the aid which is available. There is no one single path which we must travel along in the search for those answers; each path takes us only part of the way, yet all have some value. In the long run, however, each of us must draw his own conclusions: "Signes des dix mille façons d'être en équilibre dans ce monde mouvant qui se rit de l'adaptation/ Signes surtout pour retirer son être du piège des autres." Though others are seemingly more brilliant than we, they have no more to deal with than the same familiar world in which we all live. After hearing what they have to say, we would do well to make our own estimates, for they are in truth no better informed than we, their "proofs" have no more validity than ours, and their knowledge may be no more than a
mockery of real truth. Michaux voices his mistrust of them in these words: "Ces hommes rient. Ils rient./ Ils s'agitent. Au fond, ils ne dépassent pas un grand silence./ Ils disent 'là.' Ils sont toujours 'ici.'/ Pas fagotés pour arriver./ Ils parlent de Dieu, mais c'est avec leurs feuilles./ Ils ont des plaintes./ Mais c'est le vent."¹⁶ Yet Michaux is struck by the eternal quest for meaningful answers, as well as the unflagging courage which man continues to exhibit even when his questions remain unanswered: "L'homme seulement attend, il attend,/ il y a des siècles qu'il attend perdu dans des taillis de signes/ s'affairant à de nouveaux alphabets/ à des roues de toutes dimensions/ lui-même restant inchangé, inamovible."¹⁷

Michaux mistrusts the professional philosophers, feeling that their lucubrations do not really take him further along the path to the absolute. After reading their ingenious and logical explanations, he inevitably has to return to the tedium of daily existence, to the never-changing, everlasting human situation. In one of his frequent outbursts against the experts in metaphysics, he asks impatiently: "Qu'est-ce que vous m'offrez?/ Qu'est-ce que vous me donnez? Qui me paiera du froid de l'existence?/ Au poisson on donne l'hameçon./ Et à moi? Qu'est-ce que vous me donnez pour ma soif?/ Qu'est-ce que vous me préparez?"¹⁸
In their attempt to impose upon us a purely intellectual frame of reference, such thinkers as George Berkeley and Immanuel Kant have tried with much ingenuity to establish that mind or spirit is the only reality, but the ordinary person is unconvinced, and continues to live in a palpable world. Others, such as David Hume, have exercised their wits to deny the existence of the soul or self, yet most of us remain poignantly conscious of the existence of a sensitive, alive center in ourselves which is the nucleus of our spiritual life. Michaux describes the intensity of the manifestations of his soul in these words: "Je ne cravaille pas, je ne dors pas, je fais de l'insomnie, tantôt mon âme est debout sur mon corps couché, tantôt mon âme couchée sur mon corps debout, mais jamais il n'y a sommeil pour moi, ma colonne vertébrale a sa veilleuse, impossible de l'éteindre." Philosophers of a more practical bent of mind and scientists such as Albert Einstein strain their ingenuity to resolve the geographical phenomena of the earth and the stars and nebulae into atoms or electrons, and finally, by still more refined analysis, into undifferentiated Space-Time. W. Macneile Dixon points out that such brilliant reasoning has little practical effect upon our daily lives, that "despite these Herculean labors, things seem to remain much as they were, to impose upon us, to wear their
well-known faces, and to work their old effects." Michaux shows little patience with these metaphysicians: "Je vous déteste tous/ ceux qui se tapent sur le ventre entre eux disant : le premier au deuxième : tu as raison/ le deuxième au troisième : tu as raison/ et tous les autres entre eux : tu as raison." He hints that we may be better off if we reject logic and fine-spun reasoning and use only our intuitive powers, without trying to fit our observations into an unwieldy bed of Procrustes. Those who would revolutionize ordinary, commonsense ways of reasoning or attempt to release man from the responsibility of thinking for himself are the target of special vehemence: "Révolutionnaires en brigades et comités/ ou gens assis, actionnaires de la vieillesse de l'interminable et du cafard/ vous tous qui ne m'avez pas donné mon compte de viande/ haine!" Such men often speak with brilliance, charm and authority, but their words do very little to diminish our ignorance. Michaux is not content merely to dismiss them with a shrug of the shoulders, but scornfully rejects them with these indignant words:

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Haine
quoi?
rien
je suis entouré de feux qui ne brûlent pas
et puis haine!
haine!
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The last sentence reaffirms Michaux's belief that the meaning of life can better be grasped through poetic intuition of the secret recesses of the soul than in the logical constructions of the intellect.

Another reason for Michaux's lack of faith in the methods of science is that they tend to exclude the human element. Through the mouth of the "Maître de Ho," an alter ego of the poet who sometimes appears before him in the guise of an eagle-eyed prince, prophet and judge, Michaux condemns the systematic assumptions of organized knowledge: "Eloignez de moi l'homme savant, dit le Maître de Ho. Le cercueil de son savoir a limité sa raison." Many scientists would have us believe that the further we travel from ourselves, the nearer we approach the truth, that the further behind we leave our contradictory, illogical and emotional selves, the nearer we are to the ultimate. If God does exist, they say, He does not think as we do; we should therefore train ourselves to think as He does, or as we believe He does. Fundamentally, the scientific
way of thinking requires us to believe that God has placed truth in organic matter, and in the physical laws of matter which govern its behavior rather than in our own psyches and souls with their incompatible drives and feelings. The man of science seems to believe that human passions, which cannot be accurately measured, should be subordinated to Euclidean constructions of the intellect. Michaux protests against this world of artificial and forced harmony: "Pour étayer des pensées, il faut en supprimer. Abstraire. Le raisonnement est par définition une pauvreté, puisqu'on n'arrive à une conclusion qu'en faisant abstraction, en supprimant les gêneurs. De plus, pendant que tu raisonnnes, ta propre pensée originale s'est modifiée, donc tu mens." Another danger lies in wait for even the most careful thinker. Any supposedly complete and coherent world view nonetheless presents a peculiar conception of the cosmos and of human experience. He who thinks he has come into the possession of the ultimate truth is mistaken. Michaux warns that "nos sens perçoivent les surfaces des choses. Si l'on voyait l'intérieur des choses, je conteste d'ailleurs que nous serions plus instruits." Insofar as possible, he wishes to grasp the meaning of existence himself; he believes such understanding
can not come from stored knowledge or the accumulation of experiences. The apprehension of the world and of the self is from moment to moment. He is in accord with the Indian thinker, J. Krishnamurti; the latter warns those who seek to know themselves that they must not have a static concept of the self. Krishnamurti phrases his warning in these words: "If there is mere accumulation of facts concerning the self, those very facts prevent further understanding, since the accumulated knowledge and experience become the center through which thought focuses and has its being." The critic, Raymond Bellour, affirms that Michaux has set himself the task of trying to seize the essence of reality, whose manifestations necessarily take place within a temporal framework: "Il faut être un à travers l'intercession des multiples, et si l'être est multiple, laisser en soi surgir tous les visages pour mieux les découvrir et se saisir dans l'irréfutable fugacité des passages."

Michaux's remarkable ability to open his heart and mind, to offer himself completely to all aspects of life enables him to stand off and consider humanity at large from an all-encompassing point of view. In the chapter bearing the name "Ecce Homo" of his book entitled *Epreuves, Exorcismes*, he becomes its alter ego, and elevating himself to the dignity of a judge, he
looks into its collective soul and asks this essential question: "Qu'as-tu fait de ta vie?" No answer is forthcoming; rather, it is Michaux who opens a monologue with himself, answering that and other questions in a number of general observations. He indicates the many ways in which man refuses to accept full responsibility for himself. The majority refuse to accept the obligation of becoming a fully human being who stands squarely on his own feet; instead, they choose to become the disciple of another or travel a well-worn path, as for example the one offered by nationalism:

Je n'ai pas vu l'homme répandant autour de lui l'heureuse conscience de la vie. Mais j'ai vu l'homme comme un bon bimoteur de combat répandant la terreur et les maux atroces.

Il avait, quand je le connus, à peu près cent mille ans et faisait aisément le tour de la Terre. Il n'avait pas encore appris à être bon voisin.

Il courait parmi eux des vérités locales, des vérités nationales. Mais l'homme vrai je ne l'ai pas rencontré.

Under the shelter of an authority or a guide, there may temporarily be a sense of security and of well-being, but that is not the understanding of the total process of oneself and the world. Michaux wishes to break out of the circle of systems and counter systems of thought. Robert Bréchon defines as follows the specific goal that Michaux wishes to attain: "La pensée
chez Michaux ne vise pas à l'acquisition d'un savoir, mais à l'accroissement et à la mise en valeur de l'être. Liée à l'imagination, elle est un travail sur soi, l'effort d'une conscience pour rejoindre son être total. Michaux écrit pour explorer et défricher le domaine humain, son domaine.  

It is as a poet that Michaux searches for meaningful answers to the questions that life asks of him. In the following lines, he implies that his knowledge of the cosmos should come from mystic intuition rather than inductive reasoning: "Grand, j'aimerais aller vers plus grand encore, vers l'absolument grand. Je m'offre s'il existe. J'offre mon néant suspendu, ma soif jamais encore étanchée, ma soif jamais encore satisfaite."  

The use of logical premises and connected discursive argument is unsuited to his poetic temperament; his ideas appeal more to the heart than to the mind. Léon-Gabriel Gros remarks that his poetic images seem to have a physical rather than a mental origin: "La lucidité, un perpétuel état de veille et d'attente ne précèdent point chez Michaux d'une exigence intellectuelle ou morale, mais constituent une réaction instinctive et physique et de l'homme qui se sent prisonnier de soi-même et en présence des choses."  

The main concern of man is to give meaning to his life through realization of the values he believes
important. If he is able to accomplish meaningful goals, he obtains an inner equilibrium; at the same time, however, an inner tension is aroused, caused by the opposition between his efforts to realize his goals and the obstacles which the world places in his path. Michaux points out that this tension is unavoidable: "Il serait bien extraordinaire que, des milliers d'événements qui surviennent chaque année, résultât une harmonie parfaite. Toute situation est dépendance et centaines de dépendances. Il serait inoui qu'il en résultât une satisfaction sans ombre." He tells us that each person has his own specific vocation or mission which demands fulfillment: "Les choses ne trouvent leur centre qu'en vous. Accrochées, elles attendaient de pouvoir trouver en vous leur centre." Yet he realizes that life is both meaningful and nonsensical, and carefully refrains from drawing neat interferences concerning its ultimate purpose. While he is concerned about the serious aspects of life, he is at the same time not blind to the inherent humor often found in them. In the following lines, he gives voice to some simple truths in a familiar, almost breezy tone:

La vie est courte, mes petits agneaux, 
Elle est encore beaucoup trop longue, 
mes petits agneaux. 
Vous en serez embarrassés, mes très petits. 
On n'est pas tous nés pour être prophètes 
Maiis beaucoup sont nés pour être tondues.
Michaux's spontaneous humor in even the most threatening situations indicates a strong and vital sense of self, and an unconscious determination not to lose touch with the center of his being. His humor is an expression of his capacity to experience himself as a subject who is not swallowed up in an objective situation; it is a way of standing off and looking at himself with perspective. A person cannot laugh when experiencing extreme anxiety, for then he is swallowed up; he has lost the distinction between himself as subject and the objective world around him. So long as he can laugh, however, he is not completely under the domination of anxiety or fear. Sigmund Freud confirms this well-known psychological fact in these words: "Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is strong enough to assert itself in the face of adverse real circumstances." Michaux's observations are often clothed in biting humor; his depth of intuition, combined with wit, calls to mind the dictum of Mallarmé that "tout écrivain complet aboutit à un humoriste." But his humor is not merely a pure exercise
of the imagination having as its goal the amusement of the reader; it is also an important weapon in his arsenal of defense against the inimical world. Léon-Gabriel Gros underlines in these terms its practical aspect:

L'humour de Michaux est le corollaire et le correctif de l'exercice de l'imagination, il témoigne de sa volonté de n'être jamais abusé. ...Il pratique l'hygiène de l'humour tout comme il pratique l'hygiène de la création verbale. Elles doivent l'aider à se délivrer de l'irrationnel qui le menace, et il ne cultive une certaine forme d'aliénation que pour mieux parvenir à être lui-même et retrouver un univers avec lequel il puisse vivre en paix.43

The best example of his odd, perverse humor is found in the adventures of Plume, the one important fictional character which he has created. Plume's wry, pathetic attempts to come to terms with the absurd world he lives in will be discussed in Chapter IV.

In 1927, there appeared a short volume under Michaux's name entitled Qui je fus. It is composed of poems, brief narrative passages, and humorous aphorisms; under the heading of the first chapter the following quotation appears: "Je suis habité ; je parle à qui-je-fus et qui-je-fus me parlent."44 In this early work, as in the preceding ones, Michaux continues the dialogue with himself which he has carried on throughout his literary career, a period now covering forty-six years. In the three short words "je suis habité," he reveals the material with which he will work: the self in all
its many and varied aspects, its unique configuration
made up of the memories and experiences of the past,
the strivings of the present, and its aspirations
concerning the future. It is worthy of note that in
that part of the quotation which reads "et qui-je-fus me parlent," Michaux employs the third person plural form
of the verb. Yet the singularity of the subject is
indicated by the hyphens joining its three elements.
With this grammatical device, Michaux reminds us that
the self is a many-faceted, protean and highly indivi-
dualized plurality of beings, that it speaks to us
insistently, and that it is in our interest not to
ignore any of its messages. He refuses to consider any
part of himself as unworthy of interest, and is deter-
mined to explore the whole person, though the process
may be exceedingly painful. As the following lines
indicate, his self-examination sometimes gives rise to
cries of protest and exasperation, to doubts, and to
acceptance followed by rejection:

je m'affaire dans mes branchages
je me tue dans ma rage
je m'éparpille à chaque pas
je me jette dans mes pieds
je m'engloutis dans ma salive
je me damne dans mon jugement
je me pleure
je me dis : c'est bien fait!
je me hurle au secours
je me refuse l'absolution
je reprends mes supplications
je me refuse toute révision

...
Self-realization is often painful: groping through the mazes of the unconscious at times gives no other result than a feeling of pessimism bordering on despair. The twistings and turnings of that intricate structure do not lead to any opening, and the explorer remains a prisoner in the innumerable passages which make up the non-conscious level of the mind. In these lines from the poem entitled "Labyrinthe," Michaux expresses the feeling of desolation which sometimes envelops him when he meditates upon the ultimate meaning of life: "Labyrinthe, la vie, labyrinthe, la mort/ Labyrinthe sans fin, dit le Maître de Ho./ Tout enfoncé, rien ne libère/ Le suicide renait à une nouvelle souffrance."46

Michaux feels deeply the obscure, intense longing to be at one with himself, to be whole, to be reconciled with those sides of his personality which have not been taken into account, and to develop all the latent possibilities in himself. The search for wholeness requires him always to be attentive to the many voices within him which clamor for a hearing; it is his task to synthesize them so that the authentic self may speak clearly. René Bertelé, in his discussion of Qui je fus, comments in these words on Michaux's efforts to give full range to that voice: "Une voix... ou plutôt cent mille qui ont peine à se dégager d'un intense
bouillonnement interieur, d'une pensee qui a trop a dire
- pour le dire et qui se lance dans cent directions
differentes." Michaux feels drawn toward the mysteries
of the unconscious, realizing that it has as much if not
more value than the conscious for the understanding of
human conduct. A person does not give the full measure
of his being if he is unable to draw upon the wellsprings
of his psychic life. Consciousness is only the surface
manifestation of an intense mental life, and many of our
most significant actions, feelings and thoughts are
born and take effect without our quite realizing how
or why they do so. Each of these thoughts and feelings
is a part of ourselves, and it is often difficult to
know which ones are most representative of what we really
want. Michaux expresses the multiplicity of the self in
these terms: "On n'est peut-etre pas fait pour un seul
moi. On a tort de s'y tenir. Prejugé de l'unité. (La
comme ailleurs la volonté appauvrissante et sacrificia-
trice.) Dans une double, triple, quintuple vie, on
serait plus à l'aise, moins rongé et paralysé de
subconscient hostile ou conscient (hostilité des autres
moi spoliés)." Raymond Bellour draws attention to
Michaux's preoccupation with the plurality of beings
which dwell within him:

La vie dans l'être est mal ancrée, l'homme
éprouve le malheur dans son corps. ...On n'est
pas seul dans sa peau, Michaux le redit à n'en plus finir. Le corps est un observateur observe, il tient ses rôles multiples et les acteurs se devisagent. Sur le fil de la vie, le danseur de corde assure ses diverses positions d'équilibre. Le corps est la part visible de l'existence, et la première énigme.

...L'homme connaît la vie multiple, il est à lui-même une infinité d'êtres. On a toujours en soi un autre pour questionner et pour répondre. 49

The unconscious mind is more than a mere repository of everything objectionable, infantile and animal in ourselves. It is true that these things have become unconscious, yet in that chaotic and formless world— which is at the same time the matrix of consciousness—there are to be found the germs of new possibilities of life. 50

The conscious aspect of the psyche might be compared to an island rising from the sea: we see only the part above the water, but a much vaster and unknown realm spreads below that could be likened to the unconscious. Or the latter might be compared to an iceberg, a great mass of ice whose enormous bulk is for the most part concealed beneath the surface of the sea. In his poem entitled "Icebergs," Michaux makes use of this geographical phenomenon to symbolize the subterranean world of non-awareness:

Icebergs, sans garde-fou, sans ceinture, où de vieux cormorans abbatus et les âmes des matelots morts récemment viennent s'accouder aux nuits enchanteresses de l'hyperboréal.

Icebergs, Icebergs, cathédrales sans
religion de l'hiver éternel, enrobés dans la calotte glaciaire de la planète Terre.
Combien hauts, combien purs sont tes bords enfantés par le froid.

Icebergs, Icebergs, dos du Nord-Atlantique, augustes Bouddhas gelés sur des mers incontemplees, phares scintillants de la Mort sans issue, le cri éperdu du silence dure des siècles.

Icebergs, Icebergs, Solitaires sans besoin, des pays bouchés, distants, et libres de vermine. Parents des îles, parents des sources, comme je vous vois, comme vous m'êtes familiers...

The iceberg thrusts its gleaming white top from the murky, mysterious depths of the water. The unknown becomes the known: day and light are symbols of consciousness; night and darkness represent the unconscious. Carl Jung tells us that the act of becoming conscious is described in the Bible as the breaking of a taboo. The gaining of knowledge by man meant that a sacred barrier had been impiously overstepped. He states that "Genesis is surely right, as each step to a greater consciousness is a kind of Promethean guilt. ...The gods are in a certain sense robbed of their fire. ...Something belonging to the unconscious powers has been torn out of its natural connections and has been subordinated to conscious choice." God was particularly adamant concerning this interdiction, threatening Adam with death if he disobeyed it. In the Book of Genesis God declares: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good
and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day
that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." 53 The
man who deliberately enters the realm of the unconscious
does not ordinarily die; he has, however, usurped new
knowledge and gains thereby. Yet he undergoes a trans­
formation and enlargement of consciousness that sets
him apart from his fellow men. He has raised himself
above the human level of his time, and in so doing he
has alienated himself from the rest of humanity. This
solitude in which he places himself is movingly expressed
in the last lines taken from "Icebergs": "...Icebergs,
Solitaires sans besoin, des pays bouchés, distants, et
libres de vermine. Parents des îles, parents des sources,
comme je vous vois, comme vous m'êtes familiers..." 54

The memories and other material which compose
the unconscious mind are not under the control of the
will; they may appear when conscious repression weakens,
as for instance in sleep; sometimes they appear in an
apparently inexplicable manner of their own accord;
sometimes a chance association or shock will bring them
to light. 55 In a chapter headed "Notes au lieu d'actes"
in his book entitled Passages, Michaux makes the follow­
ing observation concerning the inadequacy of willpower:
"Limites de la volonté: Serait-il possible d'avoir une
pensée vraiment volontaire de vanité?" 56 He then remarks
upon his difficulty in using the will to control his mind, comparing his wandering thoughts to the aimless turning of axles: "Essieux errants. Voilà le spectacle qui après un instant seulement de surprise, me paraîtrait le plus naturel, le plus vrai, le plus attendu, le plus normal." Yet concentration of thought and a firm will are supremely necessary in the voyage of self-discovery, as the self does not deliver up its secrets easily; even with the greatest alertness and awareness, obstacles are met at every step. Our thoughts often simply stop of their own accord after a certain time, and we can do nothing to remedy the situation. Michaux describes this phenomenon in these words:

Après quelque temps, toujours le "penser" s'arrête. Ecrit, c'est ce qu'on appellera une pensée. C'est pourtant alors qu'il faudrait qu'elle soit continue, mais il n'y a plus prise. Des abîmes de nescience la bordent, la précédent, la suivent. D'insumontables incertitudes, enfin une impuissance totale. Si l'on insiste, des abîmes de rien.

In the search for self-realization, the intellect should not be developed at the cost of repression of the conscious, nor should the subterranean layers of the psyche hold unlimited sway. Conscious and unconscious contend; the former should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the latter should be given the chance of having its way too. The duality of the process of individuation may be expressed in the following
metaphor: the conscious mind is a hammer, the unconscious mind is an anvil; between them, the self, the iron, is forged into its uniqueness. There is, however, a tragic element inherent in the process of giving birth to one's individuality. Man bears within himself all human potentialities, yet the short time allotted to him between birth and death does not permit their realization, even in the most favorable conditions. Michaux expresses the inexorability of the passage of time in words betraying a note of urgency. Concretizing the concept of time, he "strikes" and "hammers" himself with it in order not to lose the awareness of its passing:

Quand rien ne vient,
il vient toujours du temps,
sans haut ni bas,
du temps,
sur moi,
avec moi,
en moi,
par moi,
passant ses arches en moi
qui me ronge et attend.

Le Temps.
Le Temps.
Je m'ausculte avec le Temps.
Je me tâte.
Je me frappe avec le Temps.
Je me séduis, je m'irrite...
Je me trame,
Je me soulève,
Je me transporte,
Je me frappe avec le Temps...

Oiseau-pic.
Oiseau-pic.
Oiseau-pic.
Ideally, the self is a perfect synthesis, with all its parts in equilibrium, and, until this synthesis is reached, it is only a crippled, mutilated version of what it might be. The combination of parts into a harmonious whole has to be accomplished through a reconciliation of the many disparate drives, thoughts and feelings which surge and eddy within us. Henrik Ibsen, in his play entitled *Peer Gynt*, describes this host of contradictory passions and impulses in these terms: "The Gyntian Self!// An army, that, of wishes, appetites, desires!// The Gyntian Self!// It is a sea of fancies, claims and aspirations;// In fact, it is all that swells within my breast// And makes it come about that I am I and live as such."60

In an unpublished poem entitled *The Thin Man*, Michaux uses the word *mandala* as a symbol of the self which constantly becomes aware of its potentialities and translates them into reality. Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning "magic circle," and is often used to refer to the concept of selfhood. The ego is conceived of as the center point of a circle; reality extends outward, its limits being a circumference enclosing both the conscious and unconscious minds. Mandalas appear in dreams and in the hallucinations of the insane. In the East, the mandala is used ritualistically in Lamaistic
and Tantric Yoga as an aid to contemplations. It includes all concentrically arranged figures, all radial or spherical arrangements, and all circles or squares with a central point. The round or square enclosures seem to act like magically protective walls, preventing a self-destroying outburst leading to a disintegration of personality; at the same time, they provide a center for a more adequate comprehension of the nature of oneself and the universe. The "thin man" is a person whose mandala is subject to constant revision, who is buffeted about while

refaisant des plans,/ des contre-plans/ des plans d'opposition/ dans l'obscur/ dans le futur/ dans l'indetermine/ pilote/ tant qu'il pourra,/ jusqu'à la fin/ pilote ou plus rien/ cible en plein vol, qui scrute/ qui trace des plans,/ des plans/ des PLANS/ Celui qui est né dans la nuit/ souvent refera son Mandala.

The Jungian analyst, Frieda Forham, points out the relation of these magic circle symbols to the power of creative phantasy: "Mandala visions may occur as the outcome of what Carl Jung calls 'active imagination,' which is a technique of intense concentration on the background of consciousness." The active and purposive use of the imagination to cope with the inner and outer worlds is characteristic of the literary art of Michaux, and will be discussed in chapter III.

Michaux very rarely refers to his religious beliefs. Such references as we do find, therefore, are
particularly worthy of attention. An exception among his works - in that it deals uniquely with a religious subject - is the one entitled *Quatre cents hommes en croix*. It is a slim volume containing drawings of the crucifixion of Christ, with an accompanying commentary. In the lines quoted below, Jesus is presented as one who wishes to be alone in order to drink to the full his cup of bitterness, knowing that his agony will soon be over, and that He will ascend into the bosom of his Father where he will receive infinite consolation. At the moment, however, He is suffering terribly from his physical wounds, as well as from being the center of attention of the bustling, gaping crowd which surrounds Him. He hesitates to ask that he be rid of the impor­tunate throng, knowing their presence is a necessary accompaniment to his sacrifice: "S'il priait Dieu, ce serait pour qu'on éloigne la foule." Michaux next underlines the essential solitude of Jesus in these words: "C'est un penseur, un retiré du monde, un être qui médite et ne s'aperçoit pas qu'il est en croix, ou qui a repoussé la tentation de croire qu'on l'a mis en croix, ou qui ne veut plus être distrait par des histoires de croix, un homme qui monte ses degrés." Michaux, too, feels himself apart from the crowd; a passage such as the one just quoted, joined to a few other similar references to God, give the reader the
impression that religion is an intensely personal matter for him, that it is a subject concerning which he shows even more reserve than is customary.

Like Lautréamont, Michaux is wanting in respect for a Supreme Being who may be unworthy of the reverence and awe that He demands. Both poets are very much aware of God, and the reader feels that their lack of respect is not based on superficial judgment, but is a feeling stemming from intense and contradictory emotions. In Canto 3 of Les Chants de Maldoror, Lautréamont depicts God as a wretched and incurable drunkard, a Being who deserves pity rather than esteem:

C'était une journée de printemps. ...Tout travaillait à sa destinée : les arbres, les planètes, les squalles. Tout, excepté le Créateur. Il était étendu sur la route, les habits déchirés. ...Engourdi par un assoupissement pesant, broyé contre les cailloux, son corps faisait des efforts inutiles pour se relever. ...Des flots of vin remplissaient les ornières, creusées par les soubresauts nerveux de ses épaules. ...Le sang coulait de ses narines : dans sa chute, sa figure avait frappé contre un poteau... Il était soul! Horriblement soul! ...Il remplissait l'écho de paroles incohérentes, que je me garderai de répéter ici; si l'ivrogne suprême ne se respecte pas, moi, je dois respecter les hommes. ...Pitié pour cette lèvre, souillée dans les coupes de l'orgie! 66

In his more abrupt style, Michaux voices his irreverence as follows: "Celui qui pisse sur son Dieu...soit...soit, mais il pourrait se repentir. Je ne le condamne pas; on peut se battre à coups de dieux, on peut vendre son
Dieu contre le panorama sacrilège d'un sexe de femme, ou contre un coquillage; mais il faut toujours avoir du divin en réserve." If God himself lacks the eternal wisdom which is ordinarily attributed to Him, how much more, then, is imperfect man subject to faulty judgment. The very highest of secular religious authorities does not escape Michaux's humorous disrespect: "Il n'y a pas de pas qui tienne/ ni de papou/ les papous seront traités comme les autres/ comme les autres ni plus ni moins/ et les papes seront traités comme traités comme un mystère."68

Nowhere along the road which he travels does God or the world provide clear-cut answers to the questions, mute or spoken, which Michaux asks; rather, there is a bewildering chaos of impressions standing out against a background of stubborn yet provocative silence. Although this situation might lead some to lose hope, Michaux is not easily discouraged in his quest for self-knowledge. He gives evidence of determination, perseverance and limitless curiosity. Though God declines to manifest His presence, Michaux retains an irreverent faith in Him; he remarks humorously: "Celui qui réfléchit dans la nuit noire de son crâne doit avoir beaucoup de patience. On reste des années à une poursuite et puis tout d'un coup... Avant hier, j'y ai coincé
The possibility of making a wrong turning does not discourage him. His determination not to become faint-hearted calls to mind the remark of Carl Jung concerning the discovery of America: Jung cites the example of Columbus, who "by using subjective assumptions, a false hypothesis, and a route abandoned by modern navigation, nevertheless discovered America."  

Certain precautions and preparations are necessary for the traveller who wishes to complete successfully his voyage through the inner and outer worlds toward wholeness. Although he should not reject divine help, if such exists, it is better to rely upon himself. Michaux warns him against the danger of having too little self-confidence, of not trusting himself enough to draw his own conclusions. He implies that there must be some kind of order in this chaotic universe, but it is not easy to discern. Its discovery will require perseverance and even sacrifices: "Il faudra être équipé à la minute, être rempli aussitôt de sang frais, prendre sa besace sur la route et ne pas saigner des pieds."  

Ideally, Michaux would like to depend only upon himself: "Seul,/ Etre à soi-même son pain." Yet he has contradictory feelings concerning the Deity: there is also within him a deep longing for divine help, an intense yearning to unite with the Absolute; he expresses this desire in a poem-prayer:
Mais Toi, quand viendras-tu?
Un jour, étendant Ta main
sur le quartier où j'habite,
au moment mu où je désespère
vraiment;
dans une seconde de tonnerre,
m'arrachant avec terreur et souveraineté
de mon corps et du corps crouteux
de mes pensées-images, ridicule univers;
lâchant en moi ton épouvantable sonde,
l'effroyable fraiseuse de Ta présence,
elevant en un instant sur ma diarrhée
Ta droite et insurmontable cathédrale;
me projetant non comme un homme,
mais comme obus dans la voie verticale,
TU VIENDRAS,

Tu viendras, si tu existes...
...

He cautions against indiscriminately searching for truths in scriptures, holy men and Buddhas, against believing that truths can be understood only if one lives a prescribed good life:

Il y aura des agences de renseignements,
d'explications, de bavardages. Vous marcherez,
les oreilles bouchées sauf à votre fin qui
est d'aller et d'aller et vous ne le regre-
tterez pas - je parle pour celui qui ira le
plus loin et c'est toujours la corde raide, de
plus en plus fine, plus fine, plus fine. Qui
se retourne se casse les os et tombe dans le
passé.74

What is the fate of those who have turned to false prophets, who have not persevered alone in the search for truth, and who have turned to others to do their thinking for them? Michaux compares them to a sick person who has discovered too late that he has put himself into the hands of a charlatan: "C'était à
l'aurore d'une convalescence, la mienne sans doute, qui sait? qui sait? brouillard! brouillard! on est si exposé, on est tout ce qu'il y a de plus exposé...
Médicastres infâmes, me disais-je, vous écrasez en moi l'homme que je désaltère." He points out that certain men show an apparent humility in thinking that wisdom is something too sublime to reveal itself in the ordinary affairs of life. In reality, their supposed humility is a subtle form of pride. These proud ones feel that they must be removed from the things of this world before they can receive truth, and such is their pride that they will only deign to receive it from the lips of sages and from the pages of sacred scriptures. The Oriental poet, Hakuin, in his poem entitled *Song of Meditation*, warns such persons of the danger of looking afar for something which lies at their feet:

All beings are from the very beginning
the Buddhas;
It is like ice and water:
Apart from water no ice can exist.
Outside sentient beings, where do we seek the Buddha?
Not knowing how near Truth is,
People seek it far away...
They are like him who, in the midst of water,
Cries out in thirst so imploringly.  

Michaux, too, feels that these timorous truth-seekers take a wrong turning when they seek answers elsewhere than in themselves, but he believes they are more deserving
of pity than condemnation: "Pauvres gens, ceux qui seront arrêtés par les tournants, pauvres gens.../
Ils étaient pauvres gens en naissant, furent pauvres gens en mourant, sont à la merci d'un tournant."77 Those who are incapable of seeing the truth first-hand in the everyday incidents of life, those who do not look for it here and now cannot expect to be shown it by another and in the future. The one who follows authority - if not that of a person, then of a system, of an ideology - wants a result which will be satisfactory, which will give him security. He does not really want to understand himself or the exterior world, the impulses and reactions, the whole process of his thinking; he would rather pursue a system which assures him of a result. He wishes to follow a method, to have authorities - a guru, a teacher, or master - and Michaux does not believe that that is the way to knowledge of oneself. He refuses to heed the pronouncements of these ready-made authorities: "Pourquoi je joue du tam-tam maintenant?/
Pour mon barrage/ Pour forcer vos barrages/ Pour franchir la vague montante des nouveaux empêcheurs/ Pour m'ausculter/ Pour me tâter le pouls/ Pour me précipiter/
Pour me ralentir/ Pour cesser de me confondre avec la ville avec EUX avec le pays avec hier..."78 He rejects group thinking and group worship, finding no comfort in the presence of like-minded worshippers. The disciples
of a master usually cleave together, not because they feel Christian love, but because they desire to receive an effortless confirmation of their own convictions by creating a collective harmony. Michaux believes that the person who really believes in God does not need the presence of a group to affirm his belief. Religion is a gift which we either do or do not possess; if we feel it, we wish to surrender ourselves to a transcendent power: "Avoir de la religion n'est pas de croire à une divinité, au contraire de ceux qui n'y croient pas. C'est un DON qu'on a une envie, une envie irrésistible de faire à quelqu'un d'infiniment au-dessus de soi."  

Especially to be distrusted are the religious visionaries whom Michaux calls **illuminés**. Under the guise of religion, these men are often nothing other than fanatics or desperadoes who will stop at nothing. They inflict injuries upon others, supposedly in obedience to God's word. With all the weight of official religion, they inflict their nay-saying upon the world. Far from presenting a picture of friendliness and charity in a fierce and warring world, the holy men introduce and maintain a world of jarring sects, furious controversies and revolting persecutions. Remembering the needless suffering they often cause, Michaux refuses to follow in their path. He admonishes religious visionaries in
these words: "Quant à vous, les illuminés, représentez-vous que cela ne durera pas toujours, un illuminé n'en prend pas son saoul à chaque époque - celle-là sera la bonne - on vous adorera avec délire, on vous suivra aveuglément. Mais que cela finisse vite. Je le dis pour votre bien, un illuminé ne peut durer longtemps."\(^80\)

Nonetheless, Michaux admired the single-mindedness of purpose of the holy men he saw on his visit to India; he realized, however, that their piety is different from that encountered in the Occident, and such men would not receive here the instinctive respect accorded them in their own country. There is a fundamental difference in the conception of veneration of things holy in the East and the West. Michaux points out this difference of attitude in these words: "L'homme blanc possède une qualité qui lui a fait faire du chemin : l'irrespect. L'irrespect n'ayant rien dans les mains doit fabriquer, inventer, progresser. L'Hindou est religieux, il se sent relié à tout. L'Américain a peu de choses. Et c'est encore de trop. Le Blanc ne se laisse arrêter par rien."\(^81\)

There are a rather large number of references to religion in *Un Barbare en Asie*, most of which deal with the Hindu gods Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma and the other Eastern divinities. In his discussion of these gods and the way they are worshipped, Michaux occasionally alludes
to Christianity, comparing it with the Hindu religions. It is in these comparisons that we learn that he is not at ease in the enormous cathedrals of the Western world, amid their meditating throngs:

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine. Voilà la parole qui déclenche un sentiment chrétien fondamental, l'humilité.

Quand on entre dans la cathédrale de Cologne, sitôt là, on est au fond de l'océan, et, seulement au-dessus, bien au-dessus est la porte de vie... "De profundis," on entre, aussitôt on est perdu. On n'est plus qu'une souris. Humilité, "prier gothique."82

The religious man, whether he lives in the East or the West, wishes to arrive at a meaningful and coherent conception of the universe; he feels a deep need to believe in a being possessing the absolute perfection of the One. For him, the world is not the ultimate reality but only a phase of it - a phase in which man, a partial being, is alienated from himself and from the One. Michaux hesitates to call himself religious; it is not that he is an unbeliever, but rather that he is intimidated by God. He expresses his disarray at the thought of His greatness in these terms: "Il y a un tempérament qui veut adorer Dieu, qui ne peut adorer Dieu, que Dieu affole."83

Michaux longs to become one with himself, to become whole, and to make full and productive use of all his capacities. The whole man, with his power of reason,
is able to go beyond the surface of phenomena and grasp their essentiality; with his positive feelings he can break through the wall which separates one person from another; with his power of imagination he can visualize things not yet existing; he can plan and thus begin to create. Yet this man in full possession of his virtualities does not exist and never can; this inescapable fact lends a tragic quality to existence. Unable fully to realize himself, he is nonetheless called upon to give an account of his life. In a short prose passage entitled Ecce Homo, Michaux questions himself concerning the use he has made of his life and, at the same time, provides an implied answer:

Qu'as-tu fait de ta vie, pitance de roi?
J'ai vu l'homme.
Je n'ai pas vu l'homme comme la mouette, vague au ventre, qui file rapide sur la mer indéfinie.
J'ai vu l'homme à la torche faible, ployé, et qui cherchait. Il avait le sérieux de la puce qui saute, mais son saut était rare et réglementé.
Sa cathédrale avait la flèche molle.

No matter how much man moves forward in his self-development, he remains unsatisfied and perplexed. This dissatisfaction impels him to search for further solutions which will overcome the contradictions of his existence. On being driven from the garden of Eden, he lost his unity with nature and became the eternal wanderer, exemplified by Abraham, Oedipus and Faust.
Michaux expresses his longing to recover the original, primordial unity in these words: "Plus de craintes/Il n'y en a plus à en avoir/ Où était infection, est sang nouveau/ Où étaient les verrous est l'océan ouvert/L'océan porteur et la plénitude de toi/ Intacte, comme un œuf d'ivoire." The pronoun *toi* refers to the irrecoverable harmony which man once knew, the oneness in which the *je* of oneself and the *toi* of all that is not oneself were unknown. Having lost that oneness, man is only partial, that is, a being whose creative powers are greatly weakened. He is able to recognize things as they are, but can only to a limited degree enliven his perception from within. He sees all there is to be seen of the surface features of phenomena but is incapable of penetrating below the surface to the essential. In a certain sense he is blind; like a foetus he has potentialities, but they are unrealized; he is not yet fully born. Michaux has in mind the partial man when he presents himself to us as a foetus, an embryonic being carried in the womb, and not yet individualized. This imperfect creature, still enveloped in the primeval warmth of the mother, engages in a conversation with others like itself:

J'étais un foetus. Ma mère me réveillait quand il lui arrivait de penser à Monsieur de Riez. En même temps, parfois se trouvaient éveillées
d'autres foetus, soit de mères battues ou qui buvaient de l'alcool ou occupées au confessionnal. Nous étions ainsi, un soir, soixante-dix foetus qui causions de ventre à ventre, je ne sais trop par quel mode, et à distance. Plus tard nous ne nous sommes jamais retrouvés. 86

In another striking comparison, Michaux likens man to a stone endowed with the human attributes of brain, nerves and organs of speech. As the philosopher's stone was believed to be able to turn base metals into gold or silver, so man strives to transform the data of sense perception and the phenomena of mental life into material leading to knowledge of the absolute. In the following lines, man, the inquirer, is compared to a stone which "grinds" knowledge; in the course of his inquiry, he runs the risk of being "ground" himself by his discoveries:

Caillou courant qui va sur la route
concassant concassé
jusqu'au concassage au-delà duquel
il n'y a plus que matière à micrométrie
et marque marque
nerfs sautés
comme une couverture de barbelés
en jet dans la faconde où tout bombe
et tout bombe
marque bois et mal éteint mal poli
la finasserie d'accord avec la
bondieuserie...

... Foin de tout. 87

The expression of impatience "foin de tout" should not lead us to believe that it is Michaux's usual reaction to the mystery of existence. In a later poem
entitled *Ma Vie*, he personifies his life, and familiarly addresses himself to it in these words: "Tu t'en vas sans moi, ma vie./ Tu roules,/ Et moi j'attends encore de faire un pas..." He is fully aware that the voyage toward self-discovery is long, the turnings many, and the detours numerous; wrong roads abound, and above all the lack of signposts is distressing. Although there is no dearth of human guides, they are by no means of the same opinion, and heatedly contradict each other as to the location of the right path. As the enigma of life does not lend itself to an easy solution, patience is needed. Michaux does not make the problem any easier in presenting us with a riddle of his own. In a short prose passage bearing the name *Enigmes*, he writes:

Ceux-là savaient ce que c'est d'attendre. J'en ai connu un, et d'autres l'ont connu, qui attendait. Il s'était mis dans un trou et il attendait. Si toi-même tu cherchais un trou pour quelque usage, mieux valait, crois-moi, chercher ailleurs un autre trou, ou bien à ses côtes t'asseoir, fumant les longues pipes de la patience. Car il ne bougeait point de là. On lui jetait des pierres, et il les mangeait.

This passage is dedicated to Jules Supervielle who welcomed and encouraged him during his early years in Paris. Michaux never forgot this kind reception, and in an interview with Robert Bréchon he acknowledged his great debt to Supervielle; at the same time, he voiced his lack of enthusiasm for other French poets, whose conception of poetry is so different from his own. Speaking
of his taste in poetry, he says:

Je lis surtout ces textes archaïques de peuples étrangers où la poésie n'est pas mise à part, et où elle vient à l'improviste, on ne sait comment, alors qu'on n'était pas occupé d'elle. J'y reviens souvent. Aux dictionnaires aussi. Aux poètes français moins, et plutôt par curiosité. J'ai l'esprit de révolte, mais absolument pas l'esprit de compétition. 90

Poetry is another way of attempting to take full measure of the universe. As the world is such an infinitely complex entity, each of us has the right to use every means at his disposal to cope with it. Yet it is essential that we do not escape into an ideal world of harmony where the harsher aspects of reality are glossed over, a world where there is no conflict, no jarring asperities. Baudelaire, another poet in quest of the Absolute, evokes such a serene world in his poem entitled L'Invitation au Voyage:

Vois sur ces canaux,
Dormir ces vaisseaux
Dont l'humeur est vagabonde;
C'est pour assouvir
Ton moindre désir
Qu'ils viennent du bout du monde.
--Les soleils couchants
Revetent les champs,
Les canaux, la ville entière
D'hyacinthe et d'or;
Le monde s'endort
Dans une chaude lumière.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté. 91

The preceding lines bring to mind an ideal world in which a feeling of plenitude and peace envelop the soul. The
world evoked by Michaux is also an ideal one in the sense that in it man strives to employ to the fullest his gifts and capacities, but it is not one which lulls, soothes or reassures. He is aware that he cannot escape the pain and sorrow inherent in the human condition through a poetic idealization of it; he feels that he must come to terms with that condition as it is, without trying to soften its harsh contours. Rather than trying to escape it, he wishes to deal with it in a constructive manner. Gaëtan Picon expresses as follows Michaux's distrust of those imaginary poetic states in which the poet feels at ease in a universe of his own making:

La plupart des poésies s'efforcent de dépasser l'accusation du monde qui est à leur origine en proposant un monde que nous puissions aimer : soit qu'elles imaginent un monde tout autre, soit qu'elles découvrent dans ce monde même les raisons de l'"extase" au détriment des raisons de la "haine" - pour reprendre les termes baudelairiens. Le mouvement du poète va de la vérité de l'accusation au mythe de la réconciliation. Or, la poésie de Michaux est le singulier exemple d'une poésie sans réconciliation et sans mythe, d'une poésie qui reste d'un bout à l'autre sur le terrain de l'accusation : celui de la vérité.

Léon-Gabriel Gros emphasizes the active nature of Michaux's revolt:

Michaux se trouve si naturellement à l'aise, ou plutôt mal à l'aise, dans cet univers intérieur que tant d'autres tenaient pour un paradis que son angoisse est toujours physique. Loin d'impliquer un consentement
Michaux's earlier voyages were concerned almost entirely with his inner world. Although still in his twenties when he wrote *Cas de Folie Circulaire*, *Les Idées Philosophiques de Qui Je Fus*, and *Qui Je Fus*, he exhibited a thorough knowledge of the mental phenomena of both the conscious and unconscious minds. In these early narratives appear the principal themes which will be developed more in detail in later works: the many forms assumed by the self, the anxiety created by an inimical world from which it is difficult if not impossible to escape, and the use of the imagination to deal creatively with that hostility.

In the works entitled *Ecuador* and *Un Barbare en Asie*, which are accounts of his voyages to South America, Michaux leaves the exploration of his inner world and directs his attention outward; rather than relying almost exclusively upon the resources of his imagination, he turns to the outer world as a source of creative thought.
Notes


2. Ibid., p. 143.


6. Bertelé, *op. cit.*, p. 188.


14. Ibid., p. 49.


23. Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 70.

24. Ibid., p. 70.

25. Ibid., p. 70.


30. Ibid., pp. 15-16.


33 Michaux, *Epreuves, Exorcismes*, p. 44.


35 Bréchon, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

36 Michaux, *Face aux varrous*, pp. 221-22.


39 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 60.

40 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 17.


43 Gros, p. 89.

44 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 4.


49 Bellour, *Michaux ou Une mesure de l'être*, p. 72.

51 Michaux, *La Nuit remue*, p. 89.


54 Michaux, *La Nuit remue*, p. 89.


57 Ibid., p. 232.

58 Ibid., p. 234.

59 Ibid., pp. 119-20.


61 Carl Jung, *The Integration of the Personality* (New York, 1939), pp. 91-97 passim.


64 Michaux, *Quatre cents hommes en croix*, p. 5.

65 Ibid., p. 5.

67 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 49.


71 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 49.


73 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 97.

74 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 57.

75 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 37.


77 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 62.


80 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 59.

81 Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie*, p. 25.


84 Michaux, *Epreuves, Exorcismes*, p. 44.

85 Michaux, *Face aux varrous*, p. 35.

87 Ibid., p. 72.


89 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 19.


93 Gros, p. 84.
Chapter II

EXPLORATION OF THE OUTER WORLD

In December 1927 Michaux left Amsterdam on a Dutch ship, the Boskoop, for a yearlong visit to South America. He noted down his day-to-day impressions, which were later collected and published in the form of a book to which he gave the title Ecuador. In the preface to this work, he declared in his usual unassuming manner that "un homme qui ne sait ni voyager ni tenir un journal a composé ce journal de voyages. Mais, au moment de signer, tout à coup pris de peur, il se jette la première pierre. Voilà." After we have finished reading this entertaining account of his trip to Ecuador, we are inclined to accuse Michaux of being unnecessarily modest. This inclination is strengthened by the scanty knowledge that we have of his personal life. The few persons who know Michaux intimately have remarked that one of his most engaging characteristics is his reserved and discreet manner; he values his private life to such a degree that a photograph of him rarely appears in newspapers or magazines, and he carefully avoids appearing in literary and social circles. In the exhaustive study of his work published by the review L'Herne, we do find
one or two photographs of him. The permission to publish them was begrudgingly given by Michaux in these words:

Passant outre aux interdictions et aux protestations réitérées, des journaux, avec le sans-gêne des journaux, depuis tout un temps reproduisent et publient une ou deux photographies de moi. Que faire? Cinquante procès ne me rendraient pas un visage inconnu. Bataille perdue, qui n'a été gagnée que pendant trente ans, risible à présent, qu'il me faudrait porter en je ne sais combien de pays. Dès lors...

Despite his denial that his travels to Ecuador could be of interest, it becomes evident in the first few pages that they are intensely so. The secret of the charm of his travel journal is the constant presence of Michaux himself; he has a particular talent for offering us new and unexpected insights into objects or scenes that we might not have observed, thinking them unworthy of our notice. Michaux had not thought of transforming the day-to-day impressions which he recorded on his journey into a book. He occasionally sent a few pages to Jean Paulhan, the editor of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, who published them in that review, and it was only upon his return that this publishing house, with the permission of Michaux, decided to present them to the public in book form. The text is presented in an unusual way: it is composed of brief paragraphs, most of which are dated, written in a lively style. Hardly one of them is more than half a page long, and they might better be called
notations. Each one is self-contained and to the point; many exhibit a dry humor. From time to time, when the author is in a more lyrical mood, we find a poem placed between these paragraphs; these more unrestrained lines usually convey the emotion aroused by a beautiful spectacle in nature, or by the savage appearance of a landscape. In the following passage, the author evokes the desolate quality of a mountain range:

Je te salue quand même, pays maudit d'Equateur.
Mais tu es bien sauvage,
Région de Huygra, noire, noire, noire,
Province du Chimborazo, haute, haute, haute
Les habitants des hauts plateaux, nombreux, sévères, étranges.
"Là-bas, voyez, Quito."
Pourquoi me frappes-tu si fort, ô mon coeur?...

Robert Bréchon points out that **Ecuador** is an intimate diary rather than a travel journal written in a proper literary style:

On y trouve des réflexions, sérieuses ou ironiques, sur l'homme, les civilisations, l'art, la littérature ; quelques anecdotes ; des effusions lyriques, en prose ou en vers ; mais surtout des confidences qui éclairent la personnalité de Michaux et où apparaissent déjà les thèmes essentiels de son œuvre : la réalité décevante, l'homme "animal gâché," le désir infini qui ne peut être comblé, l'angoisse ; les satisfactions de l'imagination.  

In the very first terse notation of his journal, Michaux tells the reader that he had been looking forward
to his journey for some time before actually embarking upon it: "Voilà deux ans qu'il a commencé ce voyage. On m'avait dit : 'Je t'emmenerai.'" At the same time, these words are an example of his disconcerting habit of changing subject pronouns, although the person whom they designate remains the same. Michaux often undergoes a metamorphosis, changing the pronoun which refers to himself from the first person singular form "je" to the third person singular form "il", and from the latter to the third person indefinite form "on", depending on his feelings at the moment. In this manner, he transforms himself into an actor who plays all the roles in the action that is presented to the reader; in each case, however, he plays himself, that is, the roles are not foreign to him - he simply shows another aspect of himself. His reality is too many-sided to appear in its entirety through the consciousness of a person represented simply as "je." The critic, Raymond Bellour, declares that the use of the different grammatical persons also allows Michaux to stand off from himself, thereby becoming both the observer and the observed:

Henri Michaux se porte à sa propre rencontre, cherchant dans la diversité des apparences, l'assurance à la fois vive et toujours fugitive de sa réelle identité. ...Il se manifeste dans ses écrits une multiplicité de personnes - au sens où l'on dit de "je" que c'est la première personne du singulier. Un langage unique se fonde
en des voix diverses. 6

He had scarcely embarked on the trip when he began to have misgivings. The second entry reads: "Je n'ai écrit que ce peu qui précède et déjà je tue ce voyage. Je le croyais si grand."7 As a kind of melancholy after-thought, he adds: "Non, il fera des pages, c'est tout, son urine quotidienne."8 He later amplifies these remarks, putting his disillusionment into these words:

Les poètes voyagent, mais l'aventure du voyage ne les possède pas. La passion du voyage n'aime pas les poèmes. Elle supporte, s'il le faut, d'être romancée. Elle supporte le style moyen et le mauvais, et même s'y exalte, mais elle n'aime guère le poème. Elle se trouve mal dans les rimes.9

And it is true that Michaux never uses rhyme in his poems. The reader may wonder why he chooses, at a particular moment, to couch his thought and feeling in a literary form resembling verse rather than in prose properly speaking. There is no doubt that certain of the spectacles he encountered during his travels moved him more than others; without wishing to adopt the standard meter of verse, he must have felt that his deeper emotions could better be expressed in a lyrical form akin to verse than in the more matter-of-fact vehicle of prose.

In any case, Michaux mistrusts words, whether
they be used in prose or poetry. He believes, however, that in the latter form of expression they betray their author less. But he feels that music is the ideal vehicle of communication, for it possesses the most subtlety of expression. He devotes several pages in his work entitled *Passages* to the evocative potentialities of melody. In a chapter bearing the heading "Un certain phénomène qu'on appelle musique," he praises unreservedly its possibilities for the interchange of ideas and emotion. The following lines give the tone of the entire chapter:

Musique, art du comportement, quoique sans références au monde physique extérieur. Trajets et passages, rien de mieux pour exprimer une attitude. Une façon non d'être, mais de vivre, de se sentir vivre - quoi de plus communicable? Huit minutes de musique folklorique en disent plus sur un peuple inconnu que cent pages de notes et de relevés. Document psychologique le plus révélateur. Celui pourtant que des systèmes de psychologie célèbres, par là insuffisants et mensongers, omettent tout simplement!10

He emphasizes the fact that literature lacks the subtlety of music: "Dans la composition musicale, pas besoin de se justifier. Et on peut aller jusqu'au bout sans ridicule. Un poème aurait vendu la mèche dix fois et la prose rend tout ignoble. Mots, mots qui viennent expliquer, commenter, ravaler, rendre plausible, raisonnable, réel, mots, prose comme le chacal."11

While reading Michaux's account of his travels,
the reader should bear in mind that its interest lies in the author's reactions to the sights before him rather than in the spectacles themselves. Michaux is never the proper tourist complete with guidebook who visits the recommended sights and feels the standard reactions. The passengers with whom he comes in contact on board the Boskoop and the scenery and natives of Ecuador are rich material for his imagination, and provoke a number of original observations. He never surrenders his faculty of judgment, or tries to "understand" in the sense of accepting uncritically the unfamiliar customs he encounters.

Interspersed among the terse prose paragraphs and brief notations which make up Ecuador are occasional passages which remind us that Michaux is a poet. His ship for South America leaves from Amsterdam: while he is waiting for it to raise anchor, he records his impressions of the land seen the day before from the ship as it steamed along the French and Flemish coasts:

Et cette campagne flamande d'hier! On ne peut la regarder sans douter de tout. Ces maisons basses qui n'ont pas osé un étage vers le ciel, puis tout à coup file en l'air un haut clocher d'église, comme s'il n'y avait que ça en l'homme qui put monter, qui ait sa chance en hauteur.  

Michaux never fails to jot down picturesque details. The crew and passengers of the Boskoop are a
motley mixture of nationalities, as shown by the following bit of conversation: "-Haben sie fosforos? -No tengo, caballero, but I have un briquet." A Whitmanesque camaraderie with the elements is soon evident. During a violent storm which rocked the \textit{Boskoop}, Michaux spoke thus to the sea: "Très bien, Atlantique, tu sais secouer, et te montrer grand." But the very size of the Atlantic soon gave rise to a sensation of monotony; the sea possessed a sameness which failed to excite even the lively imagination of Michaux. With his critical eye and skeptical mind, he was not a voyager easy to please. He was continually on his guard, and refused to be charmed by the superficial or obvious. The following passage is an example of his sharp comments, which began after only a few days at sea:

\begin{quote}
Il est extraordinaire comme cette damnée planète avec ce peu de tout qu'elle possède peut être embêtante. Il y a des régions où elle est tellement bien expurgée de toute surprise qu'on se demande où est notre vraie place et de quel autre globe nous sommes la misérable banlieue.
\end{quote}

Although the authentic poet is a person with a vivid imagination and possesses a rich inner life, he depends to a certain degree on the exterior world for inspiration. Michaux was not long in discovering that he expected too much from his trip. Rhetorically he asks: "Mais où est-il donc ce voyage?" An intense and persistent boredom took possession of him before the trip
was well under way, and he began to dislike even the ship on which he was travelling. Reproach is combined with humor in this remark to his steamer: "Dire que peut-être vingt-cinq millions de poissons nous ont vu passer, Boskoop, ont vu ta quille stupide, Dieu sait avec quelles réflexions, l'ont vue, ne comptant que les adultes."¹⁷ It is soon apparent that we are learning more about the author than the countries he is visiting, and, on reading this admonition to himself, we are certain that Michaux will keep a clear head, no matter what adventure may befall him: "Toujours se mettre au-dessus de la nature, jamais dedans."¹⁸ Although the monotony of the sea was unbearable, he is not the type of person who idly dreams or searches for cosmic significance in the immensity of the water surrounding him. Speaking familiarly to the ocean, he says: "Océan, quel beau jouet on ferait de toi, si seulement ta surface était capable de soutenir un homme comme elle en a souvent l'apparence stupéfiante, son apparence de pellicule ferme."¹⁹

Michaux was forced to recognize the truth of the dictum that there is nothing really new under the sun. Out of this very lack of novelty, however, he sounds a note of optimism concerning his literary ambitions:

Dans quelque deux ou trois ans, je pourrai faire un roman. Je commence grâce à ce
And yet, though the spectacle of the ocean was often disillusioning, it had certain compensations. Seventeen years later, Michaux nostalgically recalls that the sea made a deep impression on him:

Ce que je sais, ce qui est mien, c'est la mer indefinie. A vingt et un ans, je m'évadai de la vie des villes, m'engageai, fus marin...

As a diversion on his trip to Ecuador, he would turn his attention to the motley group of fellow passengers aboard the *Boskoop*. Far from finding them quaint or interesting, he considered them an uninspiring spectacle: A moi, trois fois poison, ces alentours du phonographe, occupés par des Equatoriens, commerçants jusqu'au vomissement, recrevatés, recostumés, rebottés, quatre fois par jour, et, allant à terre, ils mettent des gants crème pour se rendre au b..."22

Like the voyage itself, his first visit to a supposedly exotic port - Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles - proved disillusioning. He voiced his disappointment in these words: "Terrible la première arrivée dans un port. Ah! vraiment c'est ça le monde? On avance
It was almost with a sense of relief that he returned to the ship and the sea.

There are many examples in his work showing that he cannot integrate into his inner world the banal spectacles which continually confront him. Ecuador itself was a disappointment: it was not until he had visited the Andes that he felt deeply stirred. The view of Lake San Pablo provoked lines of particularly moving beauty:

Légères pourtant doivent être tes eaux.  
Mais comme tu es sombre.  
Les lacs d'ordinaire pourtant sont joie,  
Portent barques et rires, s'entourent de maisonnettes.  
Mais, toi, comme tu es sombre;  
À une hauteur de 1.200 mètres,  
 Là où si roses on s'imagine que devraient être les lacs qui réussissent.  
Mais, tu es sombre, et même tu es bas.  
Il t'écrase, l'Imbabura.  
Il te domine, t'humilie.  
Part immédiatement de on bord, pour le haut, pour tellement plus haut,  
Parce qu'il est une grande montagne,  
(Sans compter qu'il est un grand volcan)  
Il te dit : "Puits !" il te dit "Orteil !"  
Il se colore au sommet, lui,  
Ne te laisse que la mesure de son ombre.  
Oh triste, oh sombre!  
Oh ! lac, couleur d'anguille!  

A desire to experience the infinite filled him, but he found only the finite; he yearned for moving spectacles which would be spiritually enriching, but few
were forthcoming. He re-discovered himself in the strange lands he visited; new sights were there but his reactions to them were the same. He vividly experienced the truth that man, the perceiving-interpreting instrument, is the meeting-point of the various stages of reality but is powerless to remold it completely to his heart's desire. Reality lacks the synthesis of perfection, and he is unable to supply it. The sphere of his possible intellectual and affective knowledge is determined by his particular endowments. On this basis, not the ends of the earth, but the external termini of his sensory nerves, the interpretative faculties of his intellect, and the richness of his imagination may suffice to bring to life a world of fancy every bit as enriching as the real one. Michaux confirms this truth when he says: "On trouve aussi bien sa vérité en regardant quarante-huit heures une quelconque tapisserie de mur."25

It is in Ecuador that he first tells us of a valuable gift he possesses. If the travels of the day have made little impression on him, and have brought nothing but fatigue, he turns within for comfort:

Une habitude très mienne. Voici les circonstances : c'est quand je suis étendu et que néanmoins le sommeil ne vient pas. Alors je me comble, Je me donne en esprit tout ce qu'il me plait d'obtenir. Partant de faits personnels toujours réels et d'une ligne si plausible, j'arrive à me faire sacrer roi de plusieurs pays, ou quelque chose de ce genre.26
Michaux does not hesitate to use colloquialisms and even slang to give added force to his observations. He sometimes finds it difficult to express in correct language his disillusionment with the sights unrolling before his eyes:

Ici comme partout, 999,999 spectacles mal foutus sur 1,000,000 et que je ne sais comment prendre. Non, je ne peux accepter. On me dit : sagesse, c'est accepter. Eh bien non, je ne veux pas être puceau. Parfois je lis attentivement tel et tel grand écrivain classique. Ils ont l'air puceau, on devine que même pour leurs contemporains c'étaient des puceaux.27

After a hectic and exhausting visit to an Ecuadorian farm named Guadalupe, Michaux affirms his disenchantment and fatigue in these lively words: "Quand j'aurai digéré un peu ce Guadalupe, il faudra que je parte ; il y a encore en moi du pucelage qui attend. Pourtant à ce moment-ci je suis à l'extrême bout de mes forces. Pendant combien de temps ma carcasse de poulet tiendra-t-elle le coup?"28 The word "pucelage," here relating to male virginity, apparently designates a tendency in Michaux to let himself be taken in by appearances, against which he is continually on guard.

The reader must not look for connected thought in the notations which fill the pages of Ecuador. Immediately following a thought-provoking observation concerning human nature, he may find a remark about the
scenery. The natural features of South America - the forests, rivers, mountains and animal life - interested Michaux more than its people and architecture. What seemed of little interest to the natives was often a source of wonderment for him. He affirms that "le quotidien fait le bourgeois. Il se fait partout; toutefois le quotidien de l'un peut désorienter jusqu'à la mort l'homme de l'autre quotidien, c'est-à-dire l'étranger, ce quotidien fût-il le plus banal, le plus gris, le plus monotone pour l'indigène." His two or three pages on the forests of Ecuador have been called admirable, and judged worthy of being included in an anthology of French literature. After describing the trees, Michaux speaks directly to them as if they were close friends:

Arbres, un peu naifs des tropiques, un peu bêtes, à grandes feuilles, mes arbres! La forêt tropicale est immense et mouvéméntée, très humaine, haute, tragique, pleine de retours vers la terre. ...Très habitée, la forêt, riche en morts et en vivants! La forêt n'enterre pas ses cadavres; quand un arbre meurt et tombe, ils sont tous autour, serrés et durs pour le soutenir, et le soutiennent jour et nuit. Les morts s'appuient ainsi jusqu'à ce qu'ils soient pourris. Alors suffit d'un perroquet qui se pose, et ils tombent avec un immense fracas, comme s'ils tenaient encore follement à la vie, avec un arrachement indescriptible.

And yet all the trees were not friendly. One of the more sinister varieties is "le Grand Roi." Michaux speaks of it thus:
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Je me soucie peu de son nom. Ici on dit Mata-
palo (tueur d'arbres). ...Le matapalo est le
grand boa de la forêt, le grand étouffeur, le
grand étrangleur, le grand embrasseur, le
grand triomphateur. ...Encore jeune il s'in-
cline contre un arbre ...et croît. Petit à
petit devient gros et entoure l'arbre ; petit à
petit l'étrangle, la broie, le tue, le fait
Matapalo.31

The Matapalo must certainly have served as a
model for some of the more terrifying trees which the
traveller encounters in Michaux's "properties." These
properties, described in La Nuit remue, constitute an
imaginary realm over which he is the sovereign ruler
and in which he possesses magical powers. They contain
a great variety of fantastic animals and plants, which
incarnate the malignant beings that haunt his universe.
He depicts three varieties of trees in these words:
"Les Karrets droits jusqu'à la hauteur de cinq ou six
mètres, là tout à coup oblient, pointent et vous
partent en espadon contre les voisins. D'autres avec
de grandes branches dansantes, souples comme tout ser-
pentines. D'autres avec de courts rameaux fermes et
tout en fourchettes."32 Another insidiously destructive
tree growing there is the Comarave, a variety which seems
to exhibit the human trait of cowardice: it unites with
others of the same species to do its deadly work:

Le tronc des Comaraves n'est pas cylindrique.
Leur forme est celle des pianos à queue, vus d'en
haut. Mais ils sont aussi élevés que des tours
et sans branches. Ils ont une telle masse de
bois, franche, qui ne se dissimule pas comme font les arbres des régions tempérées, toujours prêts à devenir feuillus; assemblés par quinze ou vingt, ils forment comme des menhirs de bois. C'est curieux ces rassemblements (presque des alignements), c'est peut-être parce qu'ils tuent autour d'eux tout ce qui vit.33

Among the numerous strange and very real creatures he encountered in South America, and which he describes somewhat in detail, was a tiny fish whose name he does not give. He pictures it vividly as follows:

Vous vous baignez, il vient à vous, et cherche à vous pénétrer. Après avoir sondé au plus sensible, avec beaucoup de délicatesse (il adore les orifices naturels) le voilà qui ne songe plus qu'à sortir. Il revient en arrière; mais reviennent en arrière aussi et se souviennent malgré lui une paire de nageoires-aiguilles. Il s'inquiète, s'agite, et tâchant de sortir ainsi en parapluie ouvert, il vous déchire en d'infinies hémorragies.34

During a trip made several years later to India, he was captivated by the aquarium at Madras. A species which made a particularly deep impression on him was Autennarius hipsidus. The description which follows of this extraordinary creature is found in Un Barbare en Asie:

(Ii a) une grosse tête bonasse, tête gigantesque de philosophe, mais où autant de savoir est entré dans le menton que dans le front, un énorme menton-sabot, pas très avancé mais fort haut. ...Il a une crête sur le nez, il est de la grandeur d'une grenouille, d'un jaune de gilet de flanelle, et avec cette même consistence, et même avec des petits points qui sortent, et on se demande comment cette volaille plumée n'est pas mangée immédiatement par les voisins.35
Upon his return to Europe, he developed and enlarged his poetic world, peopling it with marvelous imaginary creatures inspired in part by those he had seen during his travels in South America and India.

Interspersed among his observations on the physical world are short passages which may be considered personal confessions. The reader learns, for example, that Michaux does not retain visual or sensual impressions for a long time. He asks, "voulez-vous que je vous dise? Je suis une bonne pompe. Les impressions les plus fortes, les plus vitales ne tiennent pas longtemps. Je les refoule au profit des suivantes, et les oublie, et il en est ainsi des autres dans la suite, et puis encore de celles-ci pareillement."  

No doubt this is why he hastens to record immediately those impressions he considers worthwhile. The poetry critic, Alain Bosquet, points out that if the poet is sufficiently moved, even hasty notations are of value:  

La poésie comporte - dans le sens littéraire strict, et non plus dans le sens général - le recours à l'écriture. C'est une matière qui, exploitée sans délai dans une grande exaltation, peut être ou brute ou pure ; le poète n'en veut pas décider sur le moment même : il semblerait simplement que si l'acte de se mettre en mots lui est coutumier, elle a des chances d'être assez pure.

After a visit to the mountains not far from Quito, he returned to that city and noted his impressions
in unrhymed lines which, though not having the form of poetry, nonetheless leave the reader with the impression that he has before him a pure example of it. In the following passage, the concreteness and immediacy of Ecuador strike home: "L'Equateur est pauvre et pelé./ Des bosses! et la terre couleur d'ecchymoses/ Ou noire comme la truffe./ Des chemins aigus, bordés de plumeaux./ Au-dessus un ciel boueux/ Puis tout à coup en l'air le lis très pur d'un haut volcan." The simplicity of these lines is very striking. A characteristic feature of Michaux's poetry is its lack of lushness, richness and sumptuousness; words are not chosen for their jewel-like effect or rhythmic qualities as such. Yet they give the curious impression of being poignantly descriptive in their very simplicity. This quality of bareness, combined with unrhymed, nonmetrical lines give a sparse but vivid quality to his prose-poetry. Michaux expresses the essential without concern for formal aesthetic beauty; such beauty is incidental.

The conferring of precise outlines upon the phenomena of the exterior world results in a deformation. The eye sees, interprets and defines: the product of its definition is often a noun. Michaux mistrusts substantives, as they give too definitive an expression to what they represent, and risk falling short of what he wishes to evoke. He affirms that they are not to be
lightly used: "Je cherchais des noms et j'étais malheureux. Le nom: valeur d'après coup et de longue expérience. ...C'est après de murs examens détaillés, et points de vue différents qu'on arrive au nom. Un nom est un objet à détacher." The language scholar, Max Picard, in his study entitled *Man and Language*, agrees with Michaux that the noun has a solidity about it which dampens the creative ardor of the writer:

Nouns are like solid blocks: they represent security and certainty. ...Block collides with block. These blocks are so powerful that they would continue speaking of their own accord if man lost his memory of language. ...Man approaches them cautiously as if the thing described were following on behind. The substantive only really belongs to man when it is activated by means of a predicate. Only then is the substantive really inside man and inside the world. "Man" and "sea" and "house" are brought home to man: the noun is humanized.

The word defines, but also excludes; in a sense, this limiting is an impoverishment. Gabriel Bounoure, the author of a critical review dealing with Michaux's poetry, speaks of the latter's hesitation to give a definitive and circumscribed existence to objects:

Son oeil n'est pas un organe de contemplation plastique, fixant les êtres dans le contour de l'objectivité. C'est que l'espace n'est pas pour lui un milieu de tout repos, où s'arriment solidement des choses consistantes. Loin d'être une étendue inerte ou simplement neutre, il déforme, dérobe, éloigne, transforme, suprime. De tout ce qui est soumis à ce délirant et démoniaque espace, au bout de peu de temps, il n'en reste rien.
References to the disillusionment he felt in Ecuador are innumerable: "Et moi, je me suis contenté de l'Équateur! ...Déjà écrire d'imagination était médiocre, mais écrire à propos d'un spectacle extérieur!" Writing serves a need for him; those who do not feel the urgent desire to express themselves in a literary form may find it difficult to understand this necessity. He adds a touch of humor to his thoughts on this subject:

Pour ceux qui n'écrivent point, c'est qu'ils n'ont pas été touchés suffisamment. Peut-être ils sont nés pour plus grand, pour plus beau. Et peut-être qu'ils écriraient seulement, si, morts, ou devenus coqs ou lamas ou vautours, ils revenaient ensuite à la vie d'homme, ou après quelque sejour infernal ou planétaire, au retour enfin d'une grande aventure et autrement essentielle que la nôtre.  

Although the land for which Michaux is searching does not perhaps really exist, he nonetheless continues his quest. Like Rupert Brooke, he is unwilling to give up the hope that such a country can be found. Brooke's poem Mutability expresses his yearning for a world less imperfect than this one: "They say there's a high windless world and strange,/ Out of the wash of days and temporal tide,/ Where Faith and Good, Wisdom and Truth abide,/ Aeterna corpora, subject to no change..." In his prose poem entitled La Cordillera de Los Andes, Michaux transports the reader into a like world of lofty heights. Standing on the peaks of the magnificent Andes, he
describes the feeling of infinity which overcomes him as he views the immensity of that range. He seems to be suspended in a sea of clouds, a sensation that gives rise to a feeling bordering on despair. Casting his eyes downward, he sees the soil, which provides a striking contrast to the spectacle of dazzling whiteness around him:

La première impression est terrible
et proche du désespoir.
L'horizon d'abord disparaît.
Les nuages ne sont pas tous plus hauts que nous.
Infiniment et sans accidents,
ce sont, où nous sommes,
Les hauts plateaux des Andes qui s'étendent, qui s'étendent.

... Le sol est noir et sans accueil.
Un sol venu du dedans.
Il ne s'intéresse pas aux plantes.
C'est une terre volcanique.
Nu! et les maisons noires par dessus,
Lui laissent tout son nu;
Le nu noir du mauvais.45

He returned from the mountains feeling a profound distress. Although the spectacle had moved him, it had left him with a sensation of emptiness. In the poem entitled Je suis né troué, he gives utterance to the anger and despair provoked by this void: "Il souffle un vent terrible./ ...Et ce n'est qu'un vent, un vide./ Malédiction sur toute la terre, sur toute la civilisation, sur tous les êtres à la surface de toutes les planètes, à cause de ce vide!"46

Among the many personal observations having to
do with his likes and dislikes, we find several dealing with his tastes in reading. At odd moments during his travels in Ecuador he turned to reading as a pastime; it brought him little profit, and he declared: "Je lis très mal, repoussant incessamment, avec haine, refus et mauvaise foi. ...Toutes les lectures que j'entreprends me produisent toujours le même effet. Inintelligibles. C'est pourquoi je n'ai aucune mémoire. Qui donc se souviendrait de l'inintelligible?" The authors he read seemed to have done little original thinking; they had not hewn out their own paths, and had simply appropriated the thoughts of others. At the risk of being labelled an "imbécile" himself, he passed this all-encompassing judgment concerning those who are incapable of original thinking and who uncritically accept the conclusions of others:

Semblablement ceux qui sont imbéciles notoires, je me garde bien de les juger tels. Les erudits, les savants sont ceux qui ont accepté et les imbéciles et ignorants, ceux qui n'ont pas accepté. Certains se révoltent, ne veulent pas de ces à priori, de ces approximatives théories, de ces procédés, syllogismes, conclusions hâtives tirées d'apparences concordantes.

These remarks bear out an observation made to a critic of his work concerning the lack of spiritual sustenance he receives from other authors. In answer to a question from his biographer and critic, Robert Bréchon, relative to the writers whom he most admires, Michaux replied:
J'ai envie de répondre comme je répondrai à un journaliste : c'est une question qui n'a pas beaucoup de sens pour moi. Je ne cherche pas à établir des hiérarchies et je ne m'attarde pas aux écrivains que j'ai aimés. La vie est une nutrition. Il faut sans cesse consommer... et consumer. 

Michaux's rejection of those who have little to offer him in his quest for identity is not limited to authors. In Ecuador he was not overly impressed by the exotic sights he encountered, and soon saw that its local color had little real importance. The picturesqueness of the Indians provoked nothing but irritation:

"J'avais déjà dit que je détestais les Indiens. Indien! Indien! Un Indien, un homme quoi! Un homme comme tous les autres, prudent, sans départs, qui n'arrive à rien, qui ne cherche pas, l'homme 'comme ça.' ...Une fois pour toutes, voici : Les hommes qui n'aident pas à mon perfectionnement : Zéro." 

One of the most engaging features of the work Ecuador is its informal character. As has been mentioned, Michaux considered it to be a diary as well as an account of his travels. The diary form gives the volume an intimate character which allows him to dispense with the more formal connected thought of the usual literary composition. An entry concerning an author or a literary work may be followed by a remark about the weather, or a particularity of the way of life of the Ecuadorians.
For example, after a humorous page dealing with the amatory technique of dogs, he turns to a consideration of the role of cities in modern life. The city of Quito, though 6,000 miles from Europe, brings to mind some reflections on cities in the Old World and on urban life in general. Michaux realized of course that in an urban world rural beauty has inevitably to be forsaken to a large degree; what he regretted was that the human spirit was thereby deprived of great aesthetic satisfactions. Never taken in by appearances and not inclined to superficial judgments, his mode of reporting passes from the relative detachment of the impartial observer to the heated condemnation of an angry judge. He soon discovered that the unsightly and graceless aspects of urban Europe were not unique: thousands of miles away, the same hideous spectacle was to be seen again, masked only by a thin veneer of local color. He gives vent to his distaste for Quito in these words: "Pour une ville, un esprit d'une certaine dimension ne peut avoir que haine. Rien n'est plus désespérant. Les murs d'abord, et puis tout n'est qu'images acharnées d'égoïsme, de méfiance, de sottise, de rigidité. ...Villes, architectures, que je vous hais!" 51

A city is an expression of a people's cultural level, being the most imaginative, costly and substantial
demonstration of what men can do together to enrich and embellish the environment where they pass the brief years of their existence. The degree to which any society has removed itself from the primitivism of the past is reflected in the quality of its cities. Michaux rejects the monolithic steel and concrete structures which crowd the centers of modern metropolises in these terms: "Grandes surfaces de coffres-forts, coffres-forts cimentés dans la terre, coffres-forts à compartiments, avec les coffres-forts pour manger, les coffres-forts pour coucher, coffres-forts pour filles, coffres-forts aux augeots et prêts à faire feu, et tristes, et tristes..."  

Emile Verhaeren, another Belgian poet, was also distressed by the spreading blight of urbanism; in these lines from his poem Vers le futur, he expresses his concern for the disappearing countryside:

L'usine rouge éclate où seuls brillaient les champs;  
La fumée à flots noirs rase les toits d'église;  
L'esprit de l'homme avance et le soleil couchant  
N'est plus l'hostie en or divin qui fertilise.

Renaîtront-ils, les champs, un jour, exorcisés  
De leurs erreurs, de leurs affres, de leur folie;  
Jardins pour les efforts et les labeurs lasses,  
Coups de clarté vierge et de santé remplies?

Referont-ils, avec l'ancien et bon soleil,  
Avec le vent, la pluie et les bêtes serviles,  
En des heures de sursaut libre et de réveil,  
Un monde enfin sauvé de l'emprise des villes?  

One of the few modern writers whom Michaux mentions favorably is Paul Valéry. The authors for whom he
expresses a liking are few; his tribute to Valéry is therefore worthy of note. He pays him the following compliment, and at the same time informs us that he himself had already arrived at the same conclusions: "Paul Valéry a bien défini la civilisation moderne, l'européenne; je n'avais pas attendu les précisions qu'il fournit sur ses bornes pour en être dégouté." In the series of essays bearing the title Regards sur le monde actuel, Valéry expresses the feeling of revulsion which the dehumanizing and levelling tendencies of modern industrial civilization provoked in him. He depicts the large city as a seething mass of individuals, each of whom is bent upon his own interests and is indifferent to his fellow man. He draws attention to the fact that survival in the impersonal, faceless and business-oriented metropolis depends more on the use of the mind than the generous impulsions of the heart, and that we are all the worse off for it:

Toute grande ville d'Europe ou d'Amérique est cosmopolite : ... chacune de ces trop grandes et trop vivantes cités, créations de l'inquiétude, de l'avidité, de la volonté combinées avec la figure locale du sol et la situation géographique, se conserve et s'accroît en attirant à soi ce qu'il y a de plus ambitieux, et de plus remuant, de plus libre d'esprit, de plus raffiné dans les goûts, de plus vaniteux, de plus luxueux et plus lâche quant aux moeurs. On vient aux grands centres pour avancer, pour triompher, pour s'élever; pour jouir, pour s'y consumer; s'y fondre et s'y métamorphoser; et en somme pour jouer, pour se trouver à la portée du plus grand
nombre possible de chances et de proies, femmes, places, clartés, relations, facilités diverses.
...Chaque grande ville est une immense maison de jeux.55

The authentic poet, like all authentic artists, strives consciously or unconsciously to present his conception of man as a whole and integrated being. Even though the artist's presentation of a principal character may be only a negative one, the whole man is nevertheless implied or suggested by what the hero is not; the reader or spectator infers the existence of those life-affirming and life-furthering characteristics which the protagonist lacks. Poetry may therefore, as one of the arts, and in consideration of its sources of inspiration, its content, and its aims, be equated with a philosophy concerned with realizing the plenitude of being. It includes as a part of its energizing and motive force the senses, intelligence, sensitivity and mystic intuition. Nothing could be more foreign than the last two qualities to the modern business mind that almost everywhere imposes its standards and values. The mere fact of entering a city - with its multitude of men devoted to moneymaking - is enough to incense Michaux: "Quand je reviens de la campagne, du calme dont il arrive chaque fois qu'intérieurement je venais de me vanter, saute une fureur, une haine... Je retrouve mon homme, homo sapiens, le loup thésaurisant."56 The
German sociologist, Georg Simmel, indicates as follows the ways such characteristics have affected the inner life of modern man:

Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence. ...These traits color the contents of life and favor the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without. Even though sovereign types of personality, characterized by irrational impulses, are by no means impossible in the city, they are, nevertheless, opposed to typical city life. 57

The passionate hatred of men such as Rainer-Maria Rilke and Michaux for the metropolis is understandable in these terms. Their natures discovered the value of life only in an unschematized existence which cannot be defined with precision for all alike, and which allows full play for the creative faculties of the poet and artist. In certain respects, the condemnation by Rilke and Michaux of modern civilization is quite similar. Although Rilke never visited the New World, he felt a deep horror of all that it represented insofar as technical progress was concerned. A perceptive biographer of Rilke, Adrien Robinet de Clery, expresses as follows the Czech poet's distaste for the machinism reigning in the United States: "Rilke croit que la technocratie est le régime de la décrépitude. Elle favorise l'ère
des machines et la domination de la haute finance.

...L'hégémonie des fabriques des banques est, fort probablement, ce qu'on peut imaginer de plus sinistre en ce bas monde."\(^58\)

The feeling of revulsion, and the sense of emptiness and frustration caused by rampant industrialism and its effects may account in part for Michaux's decision to experiment with drugs. In any case, immediately following his condemnation of urban civilization, we find a notation that he has taken ether. At this time he was twenty-nine years old; this is his first reference to the personal use of a reality-distorting chemical agent. He affirms that, though ether radically transforms the perceptions of man, it also confers a new dimension upon them:

La nuit passée, j'ai pris de l'éther. Quelle projection! Et quelle grandeur! L'éther arrive à toute vitesse. En même temps qu'il arrive, il agrandit et démesure son homme, son homme qui est moi, et dans l'espace le prolonge et le prolonge sans avarice, sans comparaison aucune. L'éther arrive à une vitesse de train, par sa route de bonds, d'enjambements.\(^59\)

If the sense of emptiness and frustration resulting from the reign of industrialism persists and is felt deeply enough, it gives rise to a feeling of cosmic loneliness and meaninglessness. It is as if man, in payment for the benefits of technical progress, must sacrifice greater, more human values whose loss leaves
him spiritually impoverished and separated from his fellows. The Russian Christian philosopher, Nicholas Berdyaev, whose thoughts concerning the essential solitude of each human being are similar to those of Michaux, describes the poignancy of this loneliness: "C'est quand je suis seul, que je me sens seul, de façon douloureuse et aigue, que j'éprouve ma personnalité, mon originalité, ma singularité, mon irréversibilité, ma différence de qui que ce soit et de quoi que ce soit au monde."60 Berdyaev affirms, however, that this feeling of uniqueness may cause a person to lose contact with the immediate world: "À l'extrême acuité de ce sentiment de solitude, tout me semble devenir étranger et hétérogène. Je ne me sens plus chez moi, dans mon pays natal; en ce monde qui me paraît étranger, je ne suis pas dans la patrie de mon esprit."61

This shattering feeling of emptiness can never completely and definitively be driven away: it is a part of the human condition. It is the more sensitive person who feels its intensity to the greatest degree, for he does not usually resort to the many resources which lie at hand for those who wish to escape it. Michaux describes in poetic terms this void that surrounds and penetrates him: "Mon vide est ouate et silence./ Silence qui arrête tout./ Un silence d'étoiles./ Quoique
ce trou soit profond, il n'a aucune forme./ Les mots ne le trouvent pas/ Barbotent autour." The feeling of abandonment, of having no moorings, of being possessed by a profound uncertainty concerning one's identity is extraordinarily painful. He expresses this overwhelming, agonizing feeling of aloneness in the accents of an Old Testament prophet:

"Ah! comme on est mal dans ma peau. 
J'ai besoin de pleurer sur le pain de luxe, 
de la domination, et de l'amour sur le 
pain de gloire qui est dehors 
J'ai besoin de regarder par le carreau 
de la fenêtre, 
Qui est vide comme moi, qui ne prend rien du tout. 
J'ai dit pleurer : non, c'est un forage à froid, qui fore, fore inlassablement, 
Comme sur une solive de hêtre 200 générations de vers qui se sont légé cet héritage : "fore... fore." 
C'est à gauche, mais je ne dis pas que c'est le cœur. 
Je dis trou, je ne dis pas plus, c'est de la rage et je ne peux rien. 
"... 
Et c'est ma vie, ma vie par le vide." The pain referred to in the preceding passage apparently represents the values men consider the most important, but which, far from giving them a sense of fulfillment, leave them with a feeling of hollowness and dissatisfaction. In these lines Michaux also reveals his need to look out upon the exterior world through a window in order to escape the feeling of abandonment and futility which grips him. This passage calls to mind Stéphane
Mallarmé's poem entitled *Les Fénétres*, in which the poet speaks of an old man lying in a hospital on the point of death. He does not desperately cling to life as do so many in his circumstances; rather, he is weary of life - which Mallarmé terms "le triste hôpital" - and, without regret, desires to leave it. He approaches the window, through which a radiant light is pouring, and leans his head upon it; he is a symbol of those, who, bitterly disillusioned by life, long to escape their earthly confines.

Las du triste hôpital, et de l'encens fétide
Qui monte en la blancheur banale des rideaux
Vers le grand crucifix ennuyé du mur vide,
Le moribond sournois y redresse un vieux dos,

Se traîne et va, moins pour chauffer sa pourriture
Que pour voir du soleil sur les pierres, coller
Les poils blancs et les os de la maigre figure
Aux fénêtres qu'un beau rayon clair veut haler.

... (II) voit des galères d'or, belles comme des cygnes,
Sur un fleuve de pourpre et de parfums dormir
En berçant l'éclair fauve et riche de leurs lignes
Dans un grand nonchaloir chargé de souvenir!64

Like Mallarmé, Michaux is a stranger in this world. Order and harmony are lacking here; man's best efforts are continually thwarted; duties conflict not only with his wishes, but with opposing duties so that he is in doubt where his first loyalty is due, and even his best instincts and most unselfish desires often cause needless anguish and suffering both to himself and to others. In
these simple and moving words, Michaux speaks of the fundamental discord which is a part of the human condition: "Dans cet univers, il y a peu de sourires. Celui qui s'y meut fait une infinité de rencontres qui le blessent." He sometimes finds it impossible to continue his quest for self-knowledge. His stirring efforts to reach the center of his being, and his freedom to act and grow all seem to be regulated by forces beyond his control. He symbolizes these blocking forces as follows: "Courses rompues, intentions prises dans la pierre. Le solide vous a ainsi. En tessons de vous-même." He is often in doubt concerning his ultimate goal: "Moi, j'ai toujours mon regard fixe et fou,/ Cherchant je ne sais quoi de personnel,/ Je ne sais quoi à m'adoindre dans cette infinité matière invisible et compacte,/ Qui fait l'intervalle entre les corps de la matière appelée telle." Léon-Gabriel Gros speaks of Michaux's determination to live his life courageously, in spite of the obstacles he encounters in the search for meaning:

En fait, Michaux admet que le problème de la connaissance est insoluble, seule la vie est une expérience qu'il faut bien mener. Il s'efforcera donc d'utiliser les diverses méthodes de connaissance en les supposant dénuées de tout objet, car il s'agit uniquement de vivre, bien que cette perspective ne soit nullement réjouissante. Although Ecuador fell woefully short of his expectations - it being granted that he did not know
exactly what he was expecting - Michaux had moments of regret at the thought of leaving it: "Equateur, Equateur, j'ai pensé bien du mal de toi. Toutefois, quand on est près de s'en aller... Equateur, tu es tout de même un sacré pays, et puis qu'est-ce que je deviendrai moi?" The traveller learns negatively, too; that which displeases him is still a source of knowledge. Michaux's rejection of Ecuador calls to mind the remarks of another disillusioned traveller, Georges Duhamel, who, on leaving the United States, condemned it with a kind of nostalgic distaste, with harsh remarks tempered by regrets that America had failed to realize its full potentialities. On the day of his embarkation for France, he looked out upon the skyline of New York from the windows of his towering hotel, and reflected upon its significance in these words:

Le ciel s'est déchiré du côté de Jersey-city. Un fulgurant trait de soleil montre Manhattan et se promène, comme un index, sur ces édifices étranges qui semblent des jouets curieux, compliqués, déconcertants. Il fait étinceler les vitres de cent mille bureaux où sont affichés des graphiques vertigineux qui représentent des combats, autrement dit des victoires, et qui, tous, montent, montent, d'un seul élan, d'une seule haleine. ...Ah! que je reste encore un peu, que je savoure encore un peu cette amertume ineffable de n'avoir pu aimer ce que je vois.

The longer Michaux remained in Ecuador, the less it appealed to him; it also brought home to him the fact
that travel itself was overrated as a means of self-enrichment: "Maintenant ma conviction est faite. Ce voyage est une gaffe. Le voyage ne rend pas tant large que mondain, 'au courant,' gobeur de l'intéressant côté, primé, avec le stupide air de faire partie d'un jury de prix de beauté." Reality was deceiving: he had travelled thousands of miles in the hope of finding spiritual sustenance, and was disillusioned by what he saw. He compares the world to a prison from which it is impossible to escape: "La prison ouvre sur une prison/ Le couloir ouvre un autre couloir:/ Celui qui croit dérouler le rouleau de sa vie/ Ne roule rien du tout./ Rien ne débouche nulle part/ Les siècles aussi vivent sous terre, dit le Maître de Ho." He became increasingly aware that it is the superficial mind that is bowled over by external appearances, the uncritical mind that does not see that the seemingly new is really the same as that which one leaves behind. The philosopher, Louis Lavelle, affirms that the world in its entirety is an external manifestation of the One, of universal being. He declares that the world and the self are identical, and expresses in these terms their coincidence:

Le monde est comme un vaste Soi auquel en droit le moi est coextensif; il contient d'incalculable richesses, mais ne sont en moi que des puissances dont la disposition m'est pour ainsi dire remise. Ces puissances ne contribuent pas seulement à me découvrir et à me faire ce que
je suis: c'est le monde tout entier qu'elles obligent à se déployer devant moi.\textsuperscript{73}

Some nine months after his arrival in Ecuador, Michaux began the trip which was to take him back to France. The first stages of the homeward journey began in eastern Ecuador, as he planned to cross the entire width of Brazil, arrive in Para on the mouth of the Amazon, and take a steamer from there. The following notation is made at the beginning of this inland trip: "Samedi 3 novembre en pirogue souffrant et sans doute avec fièvre."\textsuperscript{74} Immediately following these words, we find this fervent invocation apparently addressed to God; his entreaty contains a tragic note: even if his prayer were granted, he would still feel abandoned: "Prêtez-moi de la grandeur,/ Prêtez-moi de la grandeur,/ Prêtez-moi de la lenteur,/ Prêtez-moi de la lenteur,/ Prêtez-moi tout,/ Et prêtez-vous a moi,/ Et prêtez encore,/ Et tout de même ça ne suffira pas."\textsuperscript{75}

Curiosity and a desire to find answers to some of the questions which he asked of life led Michaux to Ecuador. He soon came to realize that to ask the meaning of life in general terms is to put the question wrongly, because such a query refers vaguely to "life," and not concretely to each person's separate existence. Rather, it is life itself that asks questions of man. The critic,
Raymond Bellour, refers to Michaux's entire literary output as a multi-faceted personal diary in which he strives to find the answers to those questions, and expresses his admiration for

cé journal intime et multiforme étendu aux dimensions d'une vie et dont chaque page témoigne d'une approche vers le problème d'être, au moment où toute oeuvre de valeur révèle un souci permanent de connaissance et critique si proche de ce qui autrefois était l'apanage naturel de la philosophie.  

The individual is not required to do the asking; rather, it is he who is questioned by life and has to respond - to be responsible to life. And yet, in the last analysis, it is an illusion to think that he does not make the essential inquiries, for he is the perceiving instrument through which the world manifests itself. Nicholas Berdyaev affirms that "man is the key to the mystery of knowledge and of existence. He is the enigmatic being which, though a part of nature, cannot be explained in terms of nature, and through which alone it is possible to penetrate into the heart of being."

Man must ask the questions and provide the answers, and he does not know if either are the "right" ones. Michaux poses this problem: "Libérez-vous du mal, il vous restera le bien. Libérez-vous du bien, que vous restera-t-il?" Jean-Paul Sartre recommends that we free ourselves of conventional ideas concerning the dichotomy good/evil. He asserts that
the concept of good is not a static one:

Dostoievsky avait écrit : "Si Dieu n'existait pas, tout serait permis." ...En effet, tout est permis si Dieu n'existe pas, et par conséquent l'homme est délaissé, parce qu'il ne trouve ni en lui, ni hors de lui une possibilité de s'accrocher. Si, en effet, l'existence précède l'essence, on ne pourra jamais expliquer par référence à une nature humaine donnée et figée; autrement dit, il n'y a pas de déterminisme, l'homme est libre, l'homme est liberté. Si... Dieu n'existe pas, nous ne trouvons pas en face de nous des valeurs ou des ordres qui légitimeront notre conduite. ...Nous sommes seuls, sans excuses.\(^79\)

In a short section bearing the title "Terrasse" in Epreuves, Exorcismes, Michaux uses a terrace as a symbol of a life which must be lived without aid from the outside. Man is alone and must find strength within himself. What is tragic is the fact that in even the most determined person that strength is frail; at any moment his resolve may weaken:

Il avait la force du lion, quand il fut pris des faiblesses de l'enfance. Elles le saisirent et grand et fort elles le bercèrent comme s'il n'avait pas d'âge.

Ainsi s'accomplissait ce qui a été dit : Tu t'élèves pour flechir. Tu avances pour tomber.\(^80\)

Yet in the course of his life man can advance, can realize certain of his goals, but there comes a point beyond which he can no longer progress, where the limits of knowledge are reached:

Terrasse ardente. Terrasse vaine. Au bout de l'homme, au pied de l'escalier, au plus
denue de la plus reculee solitude. Il aboutit là, celui qui avait tant chanté.

Et comme il y parvenait, il fut secoué d'une poigne solide et un voile de faiblesse, passant en son être, effaçà de sa vue Ce qu'il est interdit à l'homme de contempler.

The capital c which begins the word Ce in the next to last line of the preceding paragraph bestows a certain dignity upon the being designated. Michaux gives no indication of his conception of this being; no doubt it is a symbol of all that which is in man and yet which man is not, a symbol of a spiritual reality which he can strive to realize in himself, and yet can never describe or define.

If man wishes to respond adequately to existence, he must take a responsible attitude toward it. He is called upon to give concrete responses to concrete questions in life: these questions are asked everywhere to all men, and are a part of the human situation. Although these questions are asked clearly and insistently, they are, paradoxically, asked in silence. Franz Kafka, in his novel The Trial, dramatizes in the symbolic character of Joseph K. the man who must stand trial and is called upon to give an account of his actions. Joseph K.'s crime is his attempt to escape the full responsibility of the human condition, his refusal to discover for himself the answers to the questions asked by life. At
the end of the interrogation, he is not complimented upon his behavior or even condemned for it by the exterior world. The questioner remains silent: approval or condemnation must come from the accused one himself.

The following passage, from the section entitled **Au pays de la magie** of Michaux's *Ailleurs*, treats the same subject. Man is on trial: he has only one life to live; if he lives that life fully, creating his own values and relying upon himself, he is not guilty of having wasted it. If, on the contrary, he has not embraced life with all its possibilities, has not striven to discover his own moral precepts, and has not stood on his own feet, he is guilty. Michaux adds great force to the scene by his emphasis upon the impossibility of not hearing the question: the accused is literally bombarded by the sound waves created by the questioner's voice:

*Mis au centre d'arènes parfaitement vides,*
*le prévenu est questionné. Par voie occulte.*
*Dans un profond silence, mais puissamment pour lui, la question résonne.*

*Répercutée par les gradins, elle rebondit,*
*revient, retombe et se rabat sur sa tête comme une ville qui s'écroule.*

*Sous ces ondes pressantes, comparables seulement à des catastrophes successives, il perd toute résistance et confesse son crime. Il ne peut pas ne pas avouer.*

*Assourdi, devenu une loque, la tête dou-loureuse et sonnante, avec la sensation d'avoir eu affaire à dix mille accusateurs, il quitte les arènes, où ne cessa de régner le plus absolu silence.*
Michaux himself has grave doubts concerning his honesty in answering fully and conscientiously the questions asked of him:

Il se pourrait bien que jusqu'à présent ma vie ait pas mal manqué de courage.

Manqué, et peut-être le courage m'était condition d'existence, et peut-être par ce fait, je gardais toujours cette sensation d'inemploi, qu'on appelle encore disponibilité...

Manqué d'occasions adéquates surtout... Manque de la compréhension du courage, et d'estime pour cet élément.83

In order to reach the ship which was to take him back to France, Michaux had to undertake an exhausting trip across the Andes and through the forests of Brazil. On the return trip through these primitive and isolated regions, he continued to note down his observations concerning the new and curious sights that he encountered along the way. As usual, these remarks are interspersed with others of a more personal nature. He says, for example: "Je peux difficilement m'expliquer. Quoique je parle plus souvent de malheur, j'ai aussi des tas de petites jouissances."84 In a general way, he is touching upon a problem which continually preoccupies him: how to harmonize the different and conflicting aspects of his personality. By his emphasis upon his unhappiness, he underlines an insoluble dichotomy which Erich Fromm expresses in these terms:
Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the "harmony" which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature.\footnote{85}

Fromm points out further that man cannot, in imitation of other animals, live his life by repeating simply and instinctively the pattern of his species. He is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which has to be solved. He must strive everlastingly for new solutions to the problems of life. Yet every stage he reaches leaves him discontented and perplexed, and this very perplexity urges him to move toward new solutions. He can never go back to the pre-human state of harmony of nature.\footnote{86} Michaux tries, however, through his poetry to regain the lost Eden. In the following passage, the "evasion" referred to is one carried out imaginatively; applying the third person singular pronoun "il" to himself, he says:

Cependant il se demande comment il pourrait rentrer dans le paradis perdu (et qu'importe que ce soit parfois un enfer).

Il médite l'évasion, car les "mous" sont les "durs," ne se laissent ni vaincre ni convaincre et se reforment entiers et agrandis sous la botte.

Tous les moyens lui sont bons. Pas besoin d'opium. Tout est drogue à qui choisit pour y vivre l'autre côté.
C'est ainsi qu'il aura été un grand bâtisseur. Sans remuer un doigt, il aura été un grand aventurier.⁸⁷

The reference to opium in the next to last paragraph is of particular interest. Michaux states that "tous les moyens lui sont bons. Pas besoin d'opium." The word "opium" has distinctly negative associations in that it suggests the idea of escape into a state of chemically produced euphoria by a person lacking moral character. Michaux declares that neither the stimulus of opium nor any other drug is necessary for the full creative use of the imagination. Though he has taken drugs himself, he has never recommended that his experiments be imitated by others; he has done no more than describe their effects on himself.

In the second paragraph of the preceding passage, he refers to the "mous" and the "durs"; as he uses it, the word "mou" does not have the unfavorable connotation which is usually attached to it. It designates here a person who is resilient and yielding, but who at the same time is not passive. Instead of reacting rigidly and mechanically to unchangeable circumstances, he finds a way to adapt himself to them, thereby gaining a victory over them and himself. In so doing, he gives an illustration of the method employed by Descartes in similar circumstances. In the third part of Le Discours de la méthode, among the "règles de morale provisoire,"
we find this rule that Descartes adopted as a guide:

Ma troisième maxime était de tâcher toujours plutôt à me vaincre que la fortune, et à changer mes désirs que l'ordre du monde, et généralement de m'accoutumer à croire qu'il n'y a rien qui soit entièrement en notre pouvoir que nos pensées, en sorte qu'après que nous avons fait notre mieux touchant les choses extérieures, tout ce qui manque de nous réussir est au regard de nous absolument impossible.88

There were limits, however, to his resiliency and powers of adaptation; his trip was drawing to a close, with no lessening of the ordeals which had been his constant lot. Exhausted by fatigue, hunger and thirst, and cruelly treated by the elements and the mosquitoes, he finally arrived at the city of Para on the mouth of the Amazon. His notes apprise us of the curious fact that he did not actually see the Amazon itself: "Para, Para... Rien n'apparaît... Mais où est donc l'Amazone...? Je n'ai donc pas vu l'Amazone, je n'en parlerai donc pas."89 In order to explain this surprising statement, he observes: "L'Amazone a souvent 30 kms de large, mais les îles gênent la vue."90

Having finally found a ship which would accept him as a passenger, he had the time to review in detail the contents of his diary; he expresses his dissatisfaction with it in these words: "J'ai fait à ma façon mon Narcisse. Mais il y a déjà longtemps que mon journal m'embête."91 As his ship drew near Le Havre, he could not control the
intense emotion he felt at the thought of returning home: "Eh! quoi, encore tremblant?/ Ah! oui, on arrive demain./ France, France, et il est tout/ Décomposé parce qu'il y revient./ Il parle fort, il est insolent,/ Il est gros, il vomit de la joie." 92

Though his trip to South America was a disappointment, it was not a complete loss. Enigmatically he tells us: "Maintenant je sais ce qui me convient. Je ne le dirai pas, mais je le sais." 93 Now aged 29, Michaux had been away from his home for almost one year. In this entry made immediately before landing, he voices uncertainty concerning his future: "Dans l'Europe, il y a Paris./ Paris, grand bordel où l'on parle français./ On compte sur toi pour finir./ Paris.../ Paris ? et puis quoi?" 94 After his arrival in Paris, he looked back over the year spent abroad and was again struck by the little his trip had given him: "Voyant une grosse année réduite à si peu de pages, l'auteur est ému. Sûrement il s'est passé encore bien d'autres choses. Le voilà qui cherche. Mais il ne rencontre que brouillards..." 95 In another notation made soon afterward, he complained: "Je vais bientôt avoir 30 ans, et je n'ai encore rien ; naturellement je m'énerve." 96 Michaux's complaint that at his age he had accomplished little or nothing is an exaggeration. The publication of Ecuador in La Nouvelle Revue Française gained him a number of
readers; the terse notations and original observations about his travels captured and held their attention.

Michaux is a master of the art of description when he wishes to employ it, but it is rare that he does so. Description usually denotes the naming, examining and picturing of the surface aspects of an object or person. A certain passivity is implied in description, as the object under consideration imposes itself upon the describer. It presents definitive outlines and characteristics to the beholder; although he can exercise a certain amount of freedom in depicting it, it has nonetheless an independent existence. Michaux's disenchantment with the exterior world stemmed from his refusal to be easily charmed or impressed by its superficial aspects, and from a feeling that he could not cope with that world through mere verbal picturization of it. The outer world failed to fill an immense emptiness within him, and after Ecuador he turned within to a richer world, wishing to give life and form to the creatures and landscapes which lay fallow in his prodigiously fertile imagination. Michaux's universe is not a secure or comforting one. As he became more aware of himself, it seemed as if the world outside became ever more hostile. Instead of finding himself at one with it, a schism developed: the universe separated itself from him and loomed over him, casting a gigantic and
threatening shadow and giving rise to profound feelings of powerlessness and anxiety. Through the creative use of imagination, he overcomes to a certain degree his fears and comes to terms with the inimical world. Imaginary voyages supplant the real ones; the countries which come to life possess a reality of their own and are of passionate interest for the reader. In the preface to Epreuves, Exorcismes, Michaux states: "La plupart des textes qui suivent sont en quelque sorte des exorcismes par ruse. Leur raison d'être : tenir en échec les puissances environnantes du monde hostile." The same remark may be made concerning the other works which follow Ecuador: La Nuit remue, "Plume" précédé de "Loin­tain intérieur," Ailleurs, Voyage en Grande Garabagne, and Au Pays de la magie. Certain of these works will be examined in the next chapter in an effort to determine more precisely how Michaux deals with the alien world that surrounds him.
Notes

1 Michaux, Ecuador, p. 9.
3 Michaux, Ecuador, p. 33.
5 Michaux, Ecuador, p. 11.
6 Bellour, Michaux ou Une mesure de l'être, p. 84.
7 Michaux, Ecuador, p. 11.
8 Ibid., p. 11.
9 Michaux, Passages, p. 61.
10 Ibid., p. 194.
11 Ibid., p. 141.
12 Michaux, Ecuador, p. 13.
14 Ibid., p. 15.
15 Ibid., p. 16.
16 Ibid., p. 16.
17 Ibid., p. 17.
18 Ibid., p. 18.
19 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
20 Ibid., p. 51.
23 Ibid., p. 27.
24 Ibid., pp. 111-12.
25 Ibid., p. 37.
26 Ibid., p. 49.
27 Ibid., pp. 47-48.
28 Ibid., p. 48.
29 Ibid., p. 166.
30 Ibid., p. 63.
31 Ibid., pp. 64-65.
33 Ibid., pp. 159-60.
39 Ibid., p. 29.
42 Michaux, *Ecuador*, p. 76.
43 Ibid., pp. 75-76.
46 Ibid., p. 98.
47 Ibid., p. 74.
48 Ibid., p. 77.
49 Bréchon, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-08.
50 Michaux, *Ecuador*, pp. 102-03.
51 Ibid., pp. 83-84.
52 Ibid., p. 84.
54 Michaux, *Ecuador*, p. 84.
56 Michaux, *Ecuador*, p. 84.


61 Ibid., p. 98.


63 Ibid., p. 99.


65 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 119.


68 Gros, p. 87.


75 Ibid., pp. 154-55.

76 Bellour, Michaux ou Une mesure de l'être, p. 19.

77 Nicholas Berdyaev, The Destiny of Man (New York, 1960), p. 11.

78 Michaux, Passages, p. 163.


80 Michaux, Epreuves, Exorcismes, p. 28.

81 Ibid., pp. 28-29.

82 Michaux, Ailleurs, pp. 143-44.

83 Michaux, Ecuador, pp. 130-31.

84 Ibid., pp. 169-70.

85 Fromm, Man for Himself, p. 40.

86 Ibid., p. 41.

87 Michaux, Plume, p. 68.

88 René Descartes, Discours de la méthode (Paris, 1934), p. 32.

89 Michaux, Ecuador, p. 176.

90 Ibid., p. 176.

91 Ibid., p. 178.

92 Ibid., p. 179.

93 Ibid., p. 171.
94 Ibid., p. 178.
95 Ibid., p. 181.
96 Michaux, *La Nuit remue*, p. 98.
Chapter III

EXPLORATION OF THE IMAGINARY WORLD

The interest which Michaux showed at the beginning of his literary career in both the normal and abnormal manifestations of the psyche has never abated, and remains evident in his entire literary production. It was pointed out in chapter I that in the years following the first World War he published a series of articles dealing with the phenomena of the mind in the Belgian literary review, Le Disque Vert. He had always felt a kinship with the poet, Lautréamont, and made him the subject of some of these writings. In Le Cas Lautréamont, he explored the fantastic poetic universe of that poet. A chaotic outpouring of disconnected images, frightening visions, and crude fancies issued from Lautréamont's unconscious mind; this phantasmagoria is very similar in nature to that which rises to awareness in Michaux's own psyche. Like him, Michaux depicts an imperfect and inimical world; like Lautréamont's Maldoror, Michaux's strange beings - the Hacs and the Hivinizikis - embody the obsessions and fears of their creator. Michaux was particularly impressed by the role of animals in Les Chants de Maldoror. The presence of these cruel and hostile
beasts is anything but reassuring; their various aggressive appendages—tooth, claw, beak, sting, forked tongue, prickle, sucker, and tentacle—symbolize the imminence of the world. With them they wound, maim and destroy. These dangerous beasts are the precursors of the Emanglon, the Darelette, and the other grotesque animals which fill Michaux’s bestiary. He differs from Lautréamont, however, in that he determined to make constructive use of the images which rise from the unconscious instead of simply recording them in literary form. The inner world thus became an imaginative, artistic world serving a practical purpose.

The imagination is a faculty which can be used either to enrich or impoverish life, a power which may prove a blessing or a curse depending on how it is used. From the wealth of thoughts and feelings which appear in the conscious mind, a person is able to choose, to a certain degree, those upon which he wishes to dwell, those to which he wishes to attribute a lasting value, and to reject those that he feels to be destructive or harmful to his better nature. He effects these choices through exercise of the will and use of the imagination; with the latter faculty he represents to himself the consequences of certain patterns of behavior. Michaux makes a deliberate and constructive use of the imaginative
faculty, exercising a meaningful choice among the teeming primordial images which continually surge to consciousness. He does not indulge in idle whimsy or unbridled fancy. The latter implies an uncontrolled play of the mind, giving rise to a succession of unrestrained and disconnected mental images; in contrast to imagination, it is a lighter and more decorative faculty which perceives superficial resemblances. Imagination is a more serious and deeply creative faculty that perceives the basic resemblances between phenomena; its use with restraint and discipline is indispensable for the true work of art. The Christian Existentialist thinker, Louis Lavelle, warns us that we must exercise great care in dealing with the multitudinous manifestations of the unconscious, for they are possibilities which can be used wrongly, impoverishing instead of enriching our lives:

Il ne faut pas qu'une sincérité trop exigeante les éclaire d'une lumière trop vive et, en les découvrant, les fasse pénétrer en nous par surprise avant même qu'elles nous aient appartenu. On n'est pas responsable de toutes ses pensées et les pires sont quelquefois un signe de richesse : mais on est responsable de s'y complaire, de les préférer à d'autres, de chercher à les évoquer et de leur donner par le simple mouvement de l'attention un commencement de réalité.

In the works entitled *La Nuit remue, Épreuves, Exorcismes, Plume, Ailleurs, La Vie dans les plis*, and
Face aux varrous, Michaux develops his belief that the world is fundamentally hostile to man. There was never a period in his life when he felt himself in harmony with his surroundings. The voyages which he undertook during his youth to America and elsewhere confirmed his belief that the world would never be anything other than a place of suffering. On one of his journeys, he used the pseudonym "A" to question himself and other voyagers as to the meaning of their travels:


In the piece entitled Et c'est toujours, he expresses in more poetic form the seeming hostility and aggressivity which nature exhibits toward man:

Et c'est toujours le percement par la lance
l'essaim de guêpes qui fond sur l'œil
la lépre
et c'est toujours le flanc ouvert
et c'est toujours l'enseveli vivant
et c'est toujours le tabernacle brisé
le bras faible comme un cil qui lutte contre le fleuve
et c'est toujours la nuit qui revient
l'espace vide mais qui guette.3

Man understands very little of the forces of nature; his ignorance renders him weak and vulnerable, and
misfortune stands ready to seize him and cut him down:
"Quand le malheur avec ses doigts habiles de coiffeur
empoigne ses ciseaux d'une main, de l'autre le système
d'un homme, frêle échelle hésitante dans des chairs dodues,
tirant des éclairs et des spasmes et le désespoir de
cet animal de lin, épouvanté." With a poignant, lyrical
cry he continues: "oh! monde exécrable, ce n'est pas facilement qu'on tire du bien de toi!"
He later complained that people are no different from nature: "Les choses sont dures, la matière, les gens, les gens sont durs, et inamovibles."

W. Macneile Dixon describes in less lyrical terms the seeming cruelty in nature:

The human mind looks for unity, yet everywhere in nature's realm contending powers are in conflict. ...Nature counsels one species of her children to feed upon the bodies of others, providing ... the most ingenious instruments of death, that one tribe of her offspring might the better murder the members of another. ...There are animals which seem an incarnation of malice, like that dweller in darkness, the blood-sucking vampire bat. ...Nature encourages internecine strife. ...Nature has her racks and thumbscrews. You cannot instruct her in any of the torturer's or executioner's arts. ...If you complain that men are a cruel breed, you need not inquire whence they derived the propensity. It is inherited, and from the mother's side.

Albert Camus is in agreement with Michaux concerning the hostility of the world. After calling attention to its beauty, he emphasizes its essential absurdity
and inimicality: "Au fond de toute beauté git quelque chose d'inhumain et ces collines, la douceur du ciel, ces dessins d'arbres, voici qu'à la minute même, ils perdent le sens illusoire dont nous les revétions, désormais plus lointains qu'un paradis perdu." The reassuring familiarity of our surroundings may disappear at any moment, leaving us face to face with a starkly menacing universe: "L'hostilité primitive du monde, à travers les millénaires, remonte vers nous. Pour une seconde, nous ne le comprenons plus puisque pendant des siècles nous n'avons compris en lui que les figures et les dessins que préalablement nous y mettions, puisque désormais les forces nous manquent pour user de cet artifice." The ambient world reasserts its supremacy, and man is struck by its illogicality: "Le monde nous échappe puisqu'il redevient lui-même. Ces décors masqués par l'habitude redeviennent ce qu'ils sont. Ils s'éloignent de nous. ...Cette épaisseur et cette étrangéité du monde, c'est l'absurde."  

Michaux explores the sinuosities, recesses, heights and depths of the psyche's protean life in order to find symbolic beings with which to people the inimical world. With the creative power of his imagination, he frees from the mists of the subterranean mind the primordial images of the collective unconscious,
particularly those which have a frightening aspect. These images, also called archetypes, are the psychological counterpart of the instincts, and are a part of the psychic heritage of all men. They pass into consciousness and seem hauntingly familiar: on experiencing them, it seems as if we had met them in some previous life. Although reasons accounts them of little value, they contain great possibilities for a better understanding of man's nature. Carl Jung states that they are of particular interest for the artist:

The soul brings to birth images which the general rational consciousness assumes to be worthless. Such images are certainly worthless in the sense that they cannot immediately be turned to account in the objective world. The artistic is the foremost possibility for their application, insofar as such a means of expression lies in one's power.

Michaux depicts the negative and frightening archetypes. Though they are very disturbing, they have a cathartic value. After reading his descriptions of these images, we become more familiar with them, and they lose some of their power to terrify us.

The archetypes assume different forms: some present themselves in divine form as gods or goddesses; others manifest themselves in human or semi-human form as dwarfs or giants. Still others appear as real or fancied animals and plants, many examples of which are found in mythology. Michaux does not remain passive
in the presence of the threatening monsters. As they surge to consciousness, he masters his anxiety as far as possible, observes them with almost clinical detachment, and describes them with the objectivity of a naturalist or ethnograph. Making constant use of the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms, as well as corresponding imaginary realms, he gives form and substance to the phantasma which symbolize the ever-present and inescapable hostility surrounding him. He does not reject the primordial images, or simply allow them to escape consciousness after a brief appearance as does the average person. In the latter case, a person lives the myth and symbol without realizing it. On the contrary, he fixes them as far as possible in his conscious mind in order to observe and describe them. With relative dispassion he tries to represent them linearly in his paintings or depict them verbally in his writings.

The richness and depth of his creative fancy, together with a clear awareness of himself as a unique being, gives the primordial images a freshness and originality which are extraordinarily striking. He creatively explores the intrapsychic universe and brings into the bright day-world the fabulous beings of the dark night-world. The stream of visions which flow through his mind sometimes have a hallucinatory quality;
he gives them an understandable though frighteningly eerie reality by placing them within a coherent and logical frame of reference. Robert Bréchon states that the imaginary universe of Michaux possesses its own logic, and is governed by laws which are perfectly adapted to the world to which they apply:

Michaux décrit des êtres étranges - animaux, hommes ou monstres - qui composent un univers gratuit, sans référence apparente à la réalité familière, et où nous sommes totalement dépayssés. ...Ces univers affolants, pourtant sont en somme parfaitement naturels. ...Il nous met face à face avec l'innommable qui est en nous et autour de nous. Il nous montre que notre univers se prolonge en des milliers d'univers possibles, que notre condition est une des multiples conditions possibles, et qu'il pourrait exister une infinité de manières d'être.14

La Nuit remue, first published in 1935 when Michaux was thirty-six years old, is almost entirely devoted to a description of that inimical world. The work is divided into two sections: the first, entitled La Nuit remue, treats the theme of the mystery and inimicality of the night; the second, bearing the name Mes Propriétés, describes with the precision of a scientist the fantastic beings born in the poet's imagination, and the world in which they live and move about. It should be emphasized that the strange visions which Michaux relates are not dreams, although they are depicted in dreamlike language; rather, they are nightmares.
experienced in a state of wakefulness. They are imaginative artistic creations which embody the anguish and fears of their creator.

The very presence of the night is threatening, without taking account of the creatures which inhabit it; darkness blots out the known and invites the unknown. Michaux describes in these words a nightmarish fall into Stygian depths: "Sous le plafond bas de ma petite chambre est ma nuit, gouffre profond." A false step on his part hurls him into a bottomless abyss: "Précipité constamment à des milliers de mètres de profondeur, avec un abîme plusieurs fois aussi immense sous moi, je me retiens avec la plus grande difficulté aux aspérités, fourbu, machinal, sans contrôle, hésitant entre le dégoût et l'opiniâtre." The fall continues, accompanied by desperate attempts to break it by clutching at the sides of the abyss. Such efforts are vain, however, and from ledge to ledge the helpless victim continues to plummet downward until at last he loses awareness of himself as a separate being: "La gouffre, la nuit, la terreur s'unissent de plus en plus indissolublement."

There are human beings as well as animals and insects in the teeming, primeval night. In a chapter from La Nuit remue entitled "Mon Roi," Michaux personifies the ambient hostile forces in the character of a "King." The existence of this personage enables him to strike
back at a being with clearly defined contours. In the protective folds of darkness, he lashes out at his enemy: "Dans ma nuit, j'assiège mon Roi, je me lève progressivement et je lui tords le cou. Il reprend des forces, je reviens sur lui, et lui tords le cou une fois de plus. Je le secoue, et le secoue comme un vieux prunier, et sa couronne tremble sur sa tête." This royal personage is never identified; the reader is merely told that he is 'the poet's personal King: "Et pourtant, c'est mon Roi, je le sais et il le sait, et c'est bien sûr que je suis à son service. Cependant dans la nuit, la passion de mes mains l'étrangle sans répit. Point de lâcheté, pourtant, j'arrive les mains nues et je serre son cou de Roi." Although the forces against which Michaux defends himself may be overwhelmed and momentarily defeated, they are never definitively routed. He makes this complaint: "Et c'est mon Roi, que je depuis si longtemps étrangle vainement dans le secret de ma petite chambre; sa face d'abord bleue, après peu de temps redevient naturelle, et sa tête se relève, chaque nuit, chaque nuit. Mon roi est là. Il est toujours là."

The reader is naturally curious concerning the identity of the "King." Robert Bréchon affirms that he is a composite of the life-negating forces which threaten and torment Michaux, forces which he would like to
overthrow and destroy: "Elle (la présence du roi) représente les déterminismes qui pèsent sur l'être, la complexité et le mystère d'un monde sur lequel on n'a pas de prise. Elle est obstacles, malentendus, interdits, échecs, freins, liens; dieu ou démon; toujours ressentie comme limitation, privation, aliénation, donc néantis-sation."²¹ It is certain that the King also represents in part the poet's father. The latter was by nature a gentle and retiring man, but one who was also occasionally seized by terrible fits of anger. Michaux describes him thus: "Son père avait ceci pour idéal : se retirer. ...Il était prudent, d'humeur égale et triste. Il avait aussi de ces énervements terribles, douloureux, et extrêmement rares comme en ont les éléphants lorsque, quittant une tranquillité qui leur a coûté des années de surveillance, ils s'abandonnent à la colère pour une bagatelle."²² No doubt these angry outbursts frightened his son terribly, and inspired in him a wish to retaliate.

More specific examples of the negative forces which Michaux vehemently rejects are found in the pages of Ecuador. In that work the reader becomes familiar with a characteristic trait of the poet: his tendency to become deeply angered by what he terms the "bêtise" and "sottise" of mankind. The King symbolizes these
negative traits, and is the object of a hate so vibrant that it seems to take physical form in order to strike him down. The wish to reject bodily those who exhibit these negative characteristics is indicated in the following lines from the poem entitled Je suis né trouvé: "La haine est toujours dure,/ Frappe les autres,/ Mais racle ainsi son homme à l'intérieur continuellement." 23

From a broader point of view, the King represents a nameless and pervading terror, a stifling fear which sometimes seizes the poet and threatens to paralyze him if he does not react energetically against it. Michaux characterizes that feeling as "une peur irraisonnée, injustifiée...(qui est le pressentiment)...de l'effrayant, l'innommable." 24 This feeling of fear caused by the immensity and strangeness of the chaotic world has been expressed by many other writers. Soren Kierkegaard notes in his diary that "the whole of existence frightens me, from the smallest fly to the mystery of the incarnation; everything is unintelligible to me, most of all myself." 25 A like terror is an integral part of Michaux's universe. In a paragraph from the chapter entitled "Sous le phare obsédant de la peur" of La Nuit remue, he uses the metaphor of light to describe the birth and intensification of the anxiety and agitation caused by the presence of danger. The word "obsédant" in
the title should be particularly noted, as it indicates that the feeling of dread cannot be shaken off. He describes this terrifying sensation as follows:

...Et la peur n'excepte personne...

Ce n'est encore qu'un petit halo, personne ne le voit, mais lui, il sait que de là viendra l'incendie, un incendie immense va venir, et lui, en plein coeur de ça, il faudra qu'il se débrouille, qu'il continue à vivre comme auparavant (Comment ça va-t-il? Ça va et vous-même?), ravagé par le feu conscien-
cieux et devorateur.26

Fear may manifest itself in more insidious ways: "...La Peur, au ruisseau mercuriel, envahit la pauvre personnalité d'un homme qui devient aussitôt comme un vieux sac..."27 It may assume overpowering dimensions, and its victim can find nothing within him to withstand its cruel and tenacious grip: "Écartant tout quand elle entre, en Souveraine, elle s'assied et se débraille sur les sièges culbutés de toutes les vertus. ...Quand la Peur, langouste atroce, agrippe la moelle épinière avec ses gants de métal! ...Oh, vie continuellement infecte!"28

In the primordial, all-enveloping darkness, a multitude of crawling, slithering, hovering beings lurk, ready to spring upon an unsuspecting prey in order to seize, rend, and incorporate it into themselves. Their enmity is fundamental and ineradicable. Nowhere does Michaux feel safe from the threatening grasp of these
nameless creatures, not even in his own familiar room. These amorphous beings sometimes take the shape of repellent animals: "Toute la longue nuit, je pousse une brouette...lourde, lourde. Et sur cette brouette se pose un très gros crapaud, pesant...pesant, et sa masse augmente avec la nuit, atteignant pour finir l'encombrement d'un porc." Sometimes the appendages of a gigantic animal or insect mysteriously appear in his bedroom, but the animal in its entirety is not perceived. In the following passage, Michaux relates the appearance of parts of an insect on the walls of his room; although it is night, he conserves the magical ability to see clearly and even distinguish color:

De gigantesques élytres, et quelques énormes pattes d'insectes entrecroisées d'un vert éclatant, apparurent sur le mur de ma chambre, étrange panoplie. Ces verts rutilants, segments, morceaux et membres divers ne se lièrent pas en forme de corps. Ils restèrent comme les dépouilles respectées d'un noble insecte qui succomba au nombre.

In Michaux's frightening and dangerous universe, the reader is often not quite sure of the significance of an event. An incident may take place quite suddenly without his knowing the precipitating circumstances. The poet will relate a grisly fact without explanatory comments, leaving him to interpret it as best he can. The following lines give an example of this practice: "Tout
à coup, le carreau dans la chambre paisible montre une
tache. L'édredon à ce moment a un cri, un cri et un
sursaut; ensuite le sang coule. Les draps s'humectent,
tout se mouille. L'armoire s'ouvre violemment; un
mort en sort et s'abat. Certes, cela n'est pas réjou-
issant."

On first consideration, the drama seems
unintelligible, but careful reflection shows that these
events without apparent signification - which take place
within the four walls of a small room - reflect the
meaninglessness of the world outside. The universe
loses its familiar appearance; the physical laws of
nature are no longer operative: the reader must adapt
himself to another plane of being. No hint is given
concerning the location of the room or the identity of
the person who lives in it; we assume him to be Michaux
himself. The reader is told that the door of the wardrobe
suddenly swings open - apparently of its own volition -
and an unidentified corpse crashes to the floor. To
add to the uncanny atmosphere, an inanimate object - the
eiderdown - utters a cry and gives a start. Michaux
recounts the end of the scene in these words: "La porte
de l'armoire s'est refermée. On s'enfuit alors, on est
des milliers à s'enfuir. De tous côtés, à la nage; on
étaient donc si nombreux!..."

The reader is puzzled by
the mystery of a door which can close itself. Above all,
he would like to know who or what the creatures are who are designated by the subject pronoun *on*. He is told that they flee by swimming, and gathers they are aquatic creatures; yet the action takes place in a room, not in a body of water. It is in vain that he searches for clues which help him dispel the mystery. Michaux does not limit himself to the commonly accepted definition of the word *on* as a "pronom indéfini (qui) désigne d'une manière vague une ou plusieurs personnes." The reader can, therefore, do no more than assume that the noun replaced by the word designates "beings" or "creatures." Raymond Bellour, in his analysis of Michaux's use of personal pronouns, states that the pronoun "on" designates a creature without precise identity who remains in a state of anonymity until the author confers upon it a more or less definite personality:

Le je, le il, les personnages sont les modes par lesquels l'être vient à l'existence. On en trouve un encore, qui est à la fois une personne et n'en est pas une puisqu'il affecte toutes les autres. Le on signifie les moments où, dépossédé, l'être se perd en un autre que soi, proche encore et en qui cependant il se reconnaît mal, ces moments où il n'accède pas à la vie nommable de la personne et flotte dans la vacuité de l'indétermination. Le on cohabite dans l'être, on ne peut pourtant l'appeler double, ou il faudrait alors le considérer comme le double de tous les doubles, l'un des deux termes d'une dialectique qui toujours oscille entre le nommable et l'innommable.34

In order to exemplify the savagery rampant in the
night, Michaux ordinarily depicts the instinctive hostility of animals and insects towards each other. Yet humans can be as implacably cruel as any creature who reacts instinctually. In "L'Age héroïque," he presents the reader to Barabo and Poumapi, two giants who are also brothers. The entire passage is devoted to a description of the merciless combat in which they are engaged. In their efforts to destroy each other, they are as impervious to the finer feelings as any member of the lower orders. By using giants, Michaux transposes onto a larger scale and emphasizes the cruelty of man toward man, of brother toward brother. He depicts in these words the grisly, interminable struggle:

Le Géant Barabo, en jouant, arracha l'oreille de son frère Poumapi.

Poumapi ne dit rien, mais comme par distraction il serra le nez de Barabo et le nez fut emporté.

Barabo en réponse se baissa, rompit les orteils de Poumapi et après avoir d'abord feint de vouloir jongler avec, les fit disparaître pres-tement derrière son dos.

Poumapi fut surpris. Mais il était trop fin joueur pour en rien marquer. Il fit au contraire celui que quelques orteils de moins ne privent pas.  

The combat is not without a sardonic humor:

Cependant, par esprit de riposte, (Poumapi) faucha une fesse de Barabo.

Barabo, on peut le croire, tenait à ses fesses, à l'une comme à l'autre. Cependant il dissimula son sentiment et reprenant tout de suite la
lutte, arracha avec une grande cruauté unie à une grande force la mâchoire inférieure de Poumapi. 36

The savage battle ends with Poumapi losing both arms and legs, and Barabo having an enormous hole torn in his abdomen. The reader may at times be tempted to believe that the account of this combat was written merely to amuse him, but such was not the author's intention. This is apparent in the following lines, which betray an element of tragedy:

Couchés corps à corps, pareillement exténués, et accablés de souffrance, Poumapi et Barabo essayaient vainement de s'étrangler.

Le pouce de Poumapi était bien appliqué au cou, mais les forces pour serrer efficacement lui manquaient.

Les mains de Barabo étaient encore assez nerveuses, mais la prise était mauvaise, il serrait inutilement le cou de Poumapi.

Devant ce comble de circonstances adverses le coeur des deux frères faillit, ils se regardèrent quelques instants avec une grandissante indifférence puis, se retournant chacun de leur côté, s'évanouirent.

La lutte était terminée, du moins pour aujourd'hui. 37

In the last line of the preceding passage, the reader learns that, despite the lamentable condition of the two opponents, the battle is not definitively over. There is the implication that it will begin again the next day, and again and again, with renewed ferocity. Though Poumapi and Barabo are brothers, there is an unbridgeable
chasm between them; they are côté à côté mais séparés par le précipice de ce qui n'est pas soi." The combat symbolizes the hypocrisy of the man who gives lip service to the idea of brotherhood, but who is profoundly alienated from his fellows, who feels only mistrust, antipathy and thinly disguised hostility for them. Such a man is concerned with others for negative, selfish reasons; he uses them as a refuge from his own empty self, as a source of gratification for his own egotistical needs without regard for theirs. In his study of Michaux, Robert Bréchon draws attention to this depersonalization of human relationships and the consequent hostility it provokes: "Dans l'œuvre de Michaux la relation avec autrui est toujours une relation de sujet à objet, donc, comme chacun se veut sujet, une tension, un affrontement... Les relations humaines sont décrites comme des rapports de force : guerre, lutte, supplice, jugement, esclavage; presque à chaque page y apparaît la peur des autres." Because of his fear, each "brother" builds a protective wall around himself in order to resist the encroachments of others; each one looks over the wall in a pathetic attempt to communicate, but refuses to come out from behind it. Each is isolated, suspicious and fearful. At the first attempt to communicate on a deep level, the latent animosity breaks out. The struggle between Barabo
and Poumapi symbolizes this hostility when it becomes open and is expressed in physical terms.

It would be difficult for a person to live constantly in such a nightmarish world and retain his sanity; he must find some means of coming to terms with it. As has been mentioned, Michaux makes use of both painting and writing to depict his strange universe. The latter activity is of particular importance for him in his efforts to cope with his surroundings. His poetry is telic, purposeful, "practical." He writes in order to free himself from an intolerable tension caused by the presence of hostile powers around him, to overcome a feeling of painful abandonment, of utter defencelessness. His writing is a way of making his presence felt, of trying to set things right, of introducing more harmony into the world. Robert Bréchon points out the important role which imagination plays in Michaux's writing:

La fonction de l'imagination, chez Michaux, est complexe. Elle est d'abord un moyen d'évasion, un équivalent plus efficace du voyage; elle est aussi un instrument de défense contre la réalité. Elle est un moyen de compléter la création : elle fait de l'homme un démiurge. Elle est encore un moyen d'investigation de l'univers.40

Without his creative literary talent, Michaux would feel completely disarmed and at the mercy of the unfriendly
beings which symbolize the inimicality of his universe. For him, literature possesses a mysterious healing virtue; with it, he "intervenes" and "exorcises" in order to place himself in a more favorable situation. "Intervention" is a term which the reader often meets while reading Michaux's work; it is a concept closely related to exorcism, but should be carefully distinguished from it. Intervention is the use of the mind to remodel the world imaginatively: the natural order of things is disturbed, and unsatisfactory situations are transformed in such a way that they are presented in a more favorable light, with the possibility of a more desirable outcome. Intervention may be used in threatening circumstances to attack, assure an ultimate victory, and punish the enemy. It is sometimes employed to endow an aesthetically displeasing landscape or person with more beauty. It differs from exorcism in that invented language, which plays an important role in the latter activity, is not used to arrive at the desired result.

Exorcism is a more elaborate procedure than intervention, as the language used is a very important factor in its effectiveness. A successful exorcism also provokes a greater degree of exaltation in the person who practices it. In the preface to Epreuves, Exorcismes,
Michaux defines exorcism and indicates the benefits he derives from its use in literary form:

L'exorcisme, réaction en force, en attaque de bélier, est le véritable poème du prisonnier.

Dans le lieu même de la souffrance et de l'idée fixe, on introduit une exaltation telle, une si magnifique violence, unies au martèlement des mots, que le mal progressivement dissous est remplacé par une boule aérienne et démoniaque - état merveilleux!

Cette montée verticale ex explosive est un des grands moments de l'existence. On ne saurait assez en conseiller l'exercice à ceux qui vivent malgré eux en dépendance malheureuse. Mais la mise en marche du moteur est difficile, le presque-désespoir seul y arrive.

...Pour qui l'a compris, les poèmes du début de ce livre ne sont point précisément faits en haine de ceci, ou de cela, mais pour se délivrer d'emprises.41

In order to exorcise, he invents painful situations to absorb the shocks of real life, and creates fictitious characters who receive the blows of fate intended for himself. The universe thus imagined is a space that separates him from reality, and delivers him from situations which directly threaten him. He relates in these words the purpose such a universe serves for him: "Mes pays imaginaires : pour moi des sortes d'Etats-tampons, afin de ne pas souffrir de la réalité."42

Intervention will be discussed before exorcism, as it is an older technique. Michaux first speaks of intervention in La Nuit rámue, a work which appeared
in 1935. Exorcism was not fully developed as a literary procedure until 1945; in that year appeared *Epreuves, Exorcismes*, a short work in which he discusses literature as a means of holding the hostile world at bay.

In a chapter of *La Nuit remue* entitled "Interventions," he makes this ringing declaration: "Autrefois, j'avais trop le respect de la nature. Je me mettais devant les choses et les paysages et je les laissais faire. Fini, maintenant, j'interviendrai." His interventions began when he was quite young. In the chapter entitled "La Séance de sac" in *La Vie dans les plis*, he declares: "Cela commença quand j'étais enfant. Il y avait un grand adulte encombrant. Comment me venger de lui ? Je le mis dans un sac. Là je pouvais le battre à mon aise. Il criait, mais je ne l'écoute pas." The ways that grown persons intervene are unsatisfactory: "Cette habitude de mon enfance, je l'ai sagement gardée. Les possibilités d'intervention qu'on acquiert en devenant adulte, outre qu'elles ne vont pas loin, je m'en méfiais. ...Sans ce petit art à moi, comment aurais-je passé ma vie décourageante, pauvre souvent, toujours dans les coudes des autres ?"

It is a technique which can be used against all kinds of importunate people: "...(Cette) habitude libératrice me sauvait. De justesse il est vrai, et je résistai au
Michaux has a curious arsenal of defensive weapons for use against his enemies. Among them is the slingshot that projects men instead of rocks: "J'ai aussi ma fronde à hommes. On peut les lancer loin, très loin. Il faut savoir les prendre." With his typical quiet humor he declares that the situation is not remedied so easily however: "Cependant on les lance difficilement assez loin. Pour dire vrai on ne les lance jamais assez loin. Ils vous reviennent des quarante ans après parfois, quand on se croyait enfin tranquille tandis que c'est eux qui le sont, revenant du pas égal de celui qui ne se presse pas." Other annoying people are impaled upon a spit:

Perhaps the most curious punitive apparatus is the "machine gun" which administers slaps instead of spitting bullets. The machine gun proves to be his own...
hand making a series of staccato movements:

C'est dans la vie de famille, comme il fallait s'y attendre, que je réalisai la mitrailleuse à gifles. Je la réalisai, sans l'avoir méditée. Ma colère tout à coup se projeta hors ma main, comme un gant de vent qui en serait sorti, comme deux, trois, quatre, dix gants, des gants d'effluves qui, spasmodiquement, et terriblement vite se précipitèrent de mes extrémités manuelles, filant vers le but, vers la tête odieuse qu'elles atteignirent sans tarder.

Ce dégorgement répété de la main était étonnant. Ce n'était vraiment plus une gifle, ni deux. ...Véritable éjaculation de gifles, éjaculation en cascade et à soubresauts, ma main restant rigoureusement immobile.

Ce jour-là, je touchai la magie.

Michaux reserves a different fate for loud presumptuous persons: they are imprisoned in a suit of plaster. Using the racy language so often characteristic of him, he describes their punishment as follows:

Gueulard qui ne gueulait plus, le sergent, je le foutais dans le plâtre. Gueule qui allait rejoindre le cimetière de gueu-gueules que laisse derrière moi, dans le cimetière de plâtre où ils ont "pris" en pleine invective, en pleine scène les femmes, en pleine malédiction les parents, en pleine reprimande les pions et la race des préposés à la discipline.

En ai-je immobilisé des empêcheurs agités, des assoiffés de commandement, des coqs de village ou d'assemblée ou de parti ou même de salon...

Michaux's energetic self-assertion in the form of intervention gave him a feeling of inner unity which he had lacked before. The inclination to attack became so deeply ingrained that it was an instinctive reaction. He
declares that "la rage n'a pas fait le monde/ mais la rage y doit vivre." Humor is by no means absent from his description of his bellicosity however. He relates as follows his bull-like behavior when he is subject to a fit of rage: "J'adore me lancer de plein fouet sur l'armoire à glace. Je frappe, je frappe, je frappe, j'éventre, j'ai des satisfactions surhumaines, je dépasse sans effort la rage et l'élan des grands carnivores et des oiseaux de proie, j'ai un emportement au-delà des comparaisons." In the poem entitled Mes Occupations, he confesses his tendency to give free rein to his aggression: "Je peux rarement voir quelqu'un sans le battre. D'autres préfèrent le monologue intérieur. Moi, non, j'aime mieux battre." In the remainder of the poem, his hostility is presented in fanciful form. A man seated at a table in a restaurant becomes the target of his animosity. Like Alice in Wonderland, the customer shrinks to diminutive proportions, thus enabling the aggressor to do what he wishes with him. Michaux describes the opening scene in these words: "Il y a des gens qui s'assoient en face de moi au restaurant et ne disent rien, ils restent un certain temps, car ils ont décidé de manger./ En voici un./ Je te l'agrippe, toc./ Je te le ragrippe, toc." The colloquial use of the personal pronoun "te" as an indirect
object in the last two lines indicates that the author is particularly desirous of awakening the reader's interest; it is also a way of having him participate in the action denoted by the verbs. The onomatopoeic interjection "toc" signifying a precise, rhythmic and repeated action draws attention to the systematic manner in which Michaux humiliates the object of his ill-feeling. A series of punitive actions follows: "Je le pends au porte-manteau./ Je le décroche./ Je le repends./ Je le redécroche./ Je le mets sur la table, je le tasse et l'étouffe./ Je le salis, je l'inonde./ Il revit."56

The construction of the sentences, their conciseness and abrupt rhythm, the prominence of the verbs - all emphasize in a vivid manner the antagonistic nature of the action. As a final humiliation, the enemy is reduced to shapelessness and disdainfully cast away:

Je le rince, et je l'étire (je commence à m'énerver, il faut en finir), je le masse, je le serre, je le résume et l'introduis dans mon verre, et jette ostensiblement le contenu par terre, et dis au garçon : "mettez-moi donc un verre plus propre."

Mais je me sens mal, je règle promptement l'addition et je m'en vais.57

The verbs "étirer," "masser," and "serrer" of the next to last paragraph of the above passage are particularly worthy of attention. In his desire to weaken the objects of his hostility and render them less
threatening, Michaux alters their form. There are a number of similar verbs expressing the action of grinding, kneading and crushing in a passage entitled *La Cave aux saucissons*. In his sausage cellar, Michaux reduces his enemies to shapeless lumps, thereby rendering harmless their limbs which would otherwise lash out and wound him. He confesses that this way of dealing with his enemies also gives him a lively pleasure:

J'adore malaxer.

Je t'empoigne un maréchal et te le triture si bien qu'il y perd la moitié de ses sens, qu'il y perd son nez où il se croyait du flair et jusqu'à sa main qu'il ne pourra plus porter à son képi même si un corps d'armée entier venait à le saluer.

Oui, par triturations successives, je le réduis, je le réduis, saucisson désormais incapable d'intervention.58

His aggressivity sometimes passes all bounds, causing him to cast prudence aside and strike out at everything around him. While taking a walk, he meets a policeman and does not hesitate to wrench off his arm. He begins this passage in a jocular tone, addressing his readers with the familiar term of affection "mes petites poulettes." The use of the colloquialism "s'embêter" adds an even more familiar note to his declarations. He relates his adventures in these words:

Mes petites poulettes, vous pouvez dire tout ce que vous voulez, ce n'est pas moi qui m'embête. Hier encore, j'arrachai un bras à

The poem continues with an abrupt change of scene to his bedroom. Even during the night he has no rest: the aggressive actions continue almost of their own volition. While in bed, his arms begin working like pistons, penetrating with violence into the bodies of unidentified creatures in the darkness around him. The helpless victims do not react, but await passively the probing, grasping arms which tear open their bodies:

Mes draps jamais pour ainsi dire ne sont blancs. Heureusement que le sang sèche vite. Comment dormirais-je sinon?

Mes bras égarés plongent de tous côtés dans des ventres, dans des poitrines; dans les organes qu'on dit secrets (secrets pour quelques-uns!)

Mes bras rapportent toujours, mes bons bras ivres.

Je ne sais pas toujours quoi, un morceau de foie, des pièces de poumons, je confonds tout, pourvu que ce soit chaud, humide et plein de sang.

After reading such a grisly account, the reader is tempted to ask if there is not a sadistic element in Michaux's character. He wonders if the sight of blood and martyrized flesh does not give the poet a morbid satisfaction. The allusion to "mes bons bras ivres" in the preceding paragraph seems to indicate a pleasure so intense that it causes the poet to lose his senses.
Sigmund Freud states that "it can often be recognized that masochism is nothing but a continuation of sadism directed against one's own person." Masochism implies suffering, and, as the following lines indicate, the latter condition plays an important role in Michaux's life:

Quand je ne souffre pas, me trouvant entre deux périodes de souffrance, je vis comme si je ne vivais pas. Loin d'être un individu chargé d'os, de muscles, de chair, d'organes, de mémoire, de desseins, je me croirais volontiers, tant mon sentiment de la vie est faible et indéterminé, un unicellulaire microscopique, pendu à un fil et voguant à la dérive entre ciel et terre, dans un espace incircconfait, poussé par des vents, et encore, pas nettement.62

The critic, Léon-Gabriel Gros, declares that Michaux cannot react normally to the thinly-veiled and ever-present animosity of daily life, and responds to it in an unhealthy way:

Il ne se satisfait pas de la plus élémentaire solution, celle que propose l'exercice normal de la sensibilité. Il ne faut pas chercher d'autre explication à la volonté de négation que reflétent la plupart de ses poèmes, à sa violence, à sa cruauté. Les visions de combats, de massacres, l'acharnement sadique que l'on relève dans les textes les plus fameux de Michaux, et dont les seuls précédents analogues ne se retrouvent que dans les Chants de Mal- doror, procèdent d'un refus exaspéré de la vie quotidienne.63

When his work is viewed as a whole, however, it does not appear that he wishes to inflict pain upon others for morbid reasons; rather, he feels that his aggressive
behavior is a legitimate form of self-defense.

Women are as subject to aggressive action as anyone else. Among Michaux's magical powers is one which he particularly values: that of choosing any woman he wishes to be the object of his attentions without her offering any resistance. He explains in these words his unorthodox method: "Ce qui a manqué surtout à ma vie jusqu'à présent, c'est la simplicité. Je commence à changer petit à petit. Par exemple, maintenant, je sors toujours avec mon lit, and quand une femme me plaît, je la prends et couche avec aussitôt." If it should turn out that she has ugly features, he does not hesitate to intervene aesthetically: "Si ses oreilles sont laides et grandes ou son nez, je les lui enlève avec ses vêtements et les mets sous le lit, qu'elle retrouve en partant; je ne garde que ce qui me plaît. Si ses dessous gagneraient à être changés, je les change aussitôt. Ce sera mon cadeau." But she must never think that she has acquired a right to his fidelity: "Si cependant je vois une autre femme plus plaisante qui passe, je m'excuse auprès de la première et la fais disparaître immédiatement." Such interventions are not infrequent: "Ce qui me fatigue, ce sont mes interventions continuelles. J'ai déjà dit que dans la rue je me battais avec tout le monde; je gifle l'un, je prends les seins aux femmes, et me servant de mon pied comme
d'un tentacule, je mets la panique dans les voitures du Métropolitain.⁶⁷

Intervention at times saves him from boredom. During his trip to Ecuador, he had often found its cities and landscapes of little interest. He noted in the diary he kept during his travels: "Aucune contrée ne me plaît : voilà le voyageur que je suis. On construit bien de petites choses. Mais les grandes ! Jamais je n'ai vu une ville bien construite, rarement une colline. Jamais un panorama parfait ! Si je pouvais donner du relief à une province..."⁶⁸ At that time, however, he had not yet developed his capacity to intervene. Some years later while travelling in Normandy he was again overcome by tedium, but this time he was able to deal satisfactorily with the situation. He relates in these terms the manner in which he enlivened the city of Honfleur:

J'étais..., à Honfleur et je m'y ennuyais. Alors résolument j'y mis du chameau. Cela ne paraît pas fort indiqué. N'importe, c'était mon idée. D'ailleurs, je le mis à execution avec la plus grande prudence. Je les introduisis d'abord les jours de la grande affluence, le samedi sur la place du Marché. L'encombrement devint indescriptible et les touristes disaient : "Ah ! ce que ça pue ! Sont-ils sales les gens d'ici !" L'odeur gagna le port et se mit à terrasser celle de la crevette. On sortait de la foule plein de poussières et de poils d'on ne savait quoi.⁶⁹

As if this were not enough for the startled townsmen, he
materializes a train that is able to travel on water: "J'avais lancé également un train de voyageurs. Il partait à toute allure de la Grand'Place, et résolument s'avancait sur la mer sans s'inquiéter de la lourdeur du matériel; il filait en avant, sauvé par la foi." He comments with dry humor on the effect of his interventions: "Dommage que j'aie dû m'en aller, mais je doute fort que le calme renaisse tout de suite en cette petite ville de pécheurs de crevettes et de moules." 

Prolonged illness is a cause for boredom for most people. At one time Michaux suffered from a disease the name of which he withholds from the reader. Unlike other sufferers, however, he did not have to passively endure his ennui: his own body furnished him with a means of diversion. What might be a distressing sight for an onlooker was an enchanting spectacle for him:

La maladie que j'ai me condamne à l'immobilité absolue au lit. Quand mon ennui prend des proportions excessives et qui vont me déséquilibrer si l'on n'intervient pas, voici ce que je fais :

J'écrase mon crâne et l'étale devant moi aussi loin que possible et quand c'est bien plat, je sors ma cavalerie. Les sabots tapent clair sur ce sol ferme et jaunâtre. Les escadrons prennent immédiatement le trot, et ça piaffe et ça rue. Et ce bruit, ce rythme net et multiple, cette ardeur qui respire le combat et la Victoire, enchantent l'âme de celui qui est cloué au lit et ne peut faire un mouvement."
It may be useful at this point to state once again the purpose of these many magical actions. It would be wrong to believe that they are carried out simply to amuse the poet or startle the reader. Instead, they serve a practical purpose: such imaginary actions enable Michaux to remain master of even the most difficult situations. Rene Bertele indicates a few of the benefits that Michaux receives from the purposive use of his imagination. As Michaux occasionally does himself, Bertele uses the word "cinéma" as a synonym for "intervention imaginaire":

Ce cinéma est "pour la santé"; comme toute aventure imaginaire, il est purgation, il est "catharsis." Il donne de l’exercice à des tendances, à des facultés singulièrement assoupies et contraintes chez l’homme civilisé; il lui réapprend le jeu, avec son mécanisme libérateur de chances et de risques et l’entraîne dans un climat exaltant où tout est possible. Ce cinéma est à l’esprit ce que le sport est aux muscles : l’occasion d’une activité que n’offrent pas les seules nécessités quotidiennes - le quotidien, "sa défaite," et le bonheur de découvrir des pouvoirs qu’il ignorait.73

Yet the negative side of the balance must be taken into account too. Michaux’s constant hope that his aggressive interventions will bring him definitive peace of mind proves to be illusory. He says: "Je pensais, n’est-ce pas, que quand j’aurai tout détruit, j’aurais de l’équilibre. Possible. Mais cela tarde, cela tarde bien."74 He is poignantly aware of his irremediable
separation from his fellows, and his interventions are, paradoxically, an attempt to establish contact with the world around him. But his endeavors to do so largely come to naught: he is unable to go beyond a mere surface contact. The literary critic, Pierre Dumayet, compares the poet's reaching out toward others to the desire of a child to play with a forbidden toy:

C'est par ces interventions continuelles et seulement par elles qu'il lui est permis de se rapporter à une réalité intacte, pleine ; on devine la solitude qui est sienne de ne pouvoir connaitre les êtres vrais que par leur contact. Battre, prendre les seins aux femmes sont des actes sans portée pratique qui ne dépassent guère l'action de toucher. Comme un enfant touche un jouet avec lequel, il le sait, il ne pourra jamais jouer, il le touche quand même. Ce jouet l'attire tant, il le "tripote." Ainsi de Michaux. Mais toucher n'est pas jouer. "Tripoter" la réalité n'est pas la posséder.75

His incapacity to establish contact, to relate himself intimately and meaningfully to others through imaginative intervention left him with an extremely painful feeling of emptiness and sterility. His dissatisfaction with this method also left him with a deep-seated and impotent anger of a dual nature: anger with the outer world for forcing him constantly to intervene, and anger with himself for not being able to realize his ultimate project: harmony within himself and with the world. He sought another way to assert himself, to effectively make known his presence, to strike back
at the hostile world in the most constructive manner possible. As has been mentioned, exorcism was the second weapon he developed to deal with exterior reality. To produce the most effective results, the exorcist must find the words, expressions, and phrases which will do the greatest harm to the object of his displeasure. Such words become magic weapons; with them he is able to deliver a series of deadly blows. Michaux speaks of their concentrated power in these words: "Concentration est force et n'a les attributs que des forces. Pour la magie de malédiction, elle est, avant tout, martèlement, martèlement, martèlement." Exorcism is not only an other-directed force, a method of striking back at the enemy through words; it also deals with the poet's relationship to himself. If he can discover or invent words capable of expressing his anguish and disillusionment, these very words are a deliverance for him. They are a means of casting out negative forces, of doing away with the obstacles which prevent him from fully grasping the essence of life.

Michaux early discovered that the anxiety, exasperation and rage which the menacing world provoked in him could not be expressed in ordinary words, as they seemed too worn, flabby and lifeless; for him, there was need of something more than these mere husks or bits of inert matter lacking in truculence and vigor. Syntax too was
inadequate: its surface logic and carefully arranged train of thought dampened his creative ardor and betrayed his thought. Raymond Bellour speaks of the "lyrical esperanto" which Michaux was forced to invent to express himself adequately. This artificial language contains many invented words and has its own particular style. Bellour points out that "l'esperanto lyrique emporte à l'autre extrême du langage. Le cri ruine la syntaxe, bouleverse l'ordre des mots; il entraîne l'expression vers l'opacité et marque une sorte de revanche sur la transparence de la prose."  

Michaux has need of a brawny, sinewy vocabulary and an unhampered style in order to burst the confines of conventional expression. Rene Bertelé affirms that Michaux's rejection of ordinary language and forging of a new one have a dual purpose: "A travers la destruction du langage, réduit à n'être plus qu'oripeaux sonores et dérisoires, se consomme une autre destruction: celle des choses qu'il représente, de leur réalité prétentieuse et exorbitante. Michaux also expresses his aggressivity in his paintings. His pictorial art complements his literary production, throwing light on it and giving it an added dimension. With form and color he attempts to grasp the reality which words are incapable of expressing. The album of drawings entitled
Mouvements is accompanied by a commentary in the form of poems. One piece in particular admirably expresses the quality of his invented words; although the description refers to the "gestes" depicted in the drawings, they could equally well apply to the impetuous and brutal words which he forges and hurls at the hostile world:

"Gestes/ gestes de la vie ignorée/ de la vie impulsive/ et heureuse à se dilapidier/ de la vie saccadée, spasmodique, érectile/ de la vie à la diable, de la vie n'importe comment/ de la vie/ gestes du défi et de la riposte/ et de l'évasion hors des goulots d'étranglement."^79

Michaux believes that ordinary language is incapable of expressing the essence of reality; that his belief is correct is proven by the concept of the "inexpressible." He disdains, therefore, the usual method of expression, casting it aside as an ineffectual instrument of communication. The literary critic, A. Patri, draws attention to the derisive attitude which Michaux so often adopts in regard to language:

On sait qu'Henri Michaux considère le langage comme un instrument et comme un instrument médiocre, qu'il est nécessaire de briser pour l'obliger à "rendre" à toute force ce qu'il se refuse à transmettre. Si Michaux invente des "mots," c'est en quelque sorte par dérision et pour faire honte à ceux qu'il trouve tout faits. Plus profondément encore l'ambition de cet étrange "poète" n'est pas de "faire," mais plutôt de défaire, de détruire plutôt que de créer. Il ne s'agit pas pour lui d'éléver
un univers de langage au-dessus de celui qui est donné par les sens, mais de briser cet univers dans lequel il se sent mal à l'aise.

In his experiments with language, Michaux has some noteworthy predecessors. The Dadaists, in their fervor to overthrow the bourgeois world which they despised, also created a new language; with it they wished to destroy what they considered a sterile and hypocrical society. They emphasized the importance of spontaneous expression, independent of control of the intelligence. Words could have a purely fortuitous signification, that is, they could mean anything or nothing. Not content with these "reforms," however, they soon set their goals higher; a proclamation was issued declaring that the ruin of society could best be accomplished by abolishing language altogether. Alain Bosquet states their objective in these words:

Dès l'instant, pensaient-ils, où tout est malentendu et échec dans les relations entre les hommes, l'emploi des signes conventionnels que sont les mots ne peut être que nocif : il perpétue une aventure sans noblesse. En tuant le langage, on enlève à l'homme une bonne partie de sa raison d'être, et c'est tant mieux!

In 1916, Hugo Ball, a German poet and one of the leading Dadaists, wrote these lines which he considered to be an example of the poetry which would best express the spirit of his group: "Gadji beri bimba/ glandridi lauli lonni cadori/ gadjama bim beri glassala/ Glandradi
The goals of the Dadaists were negative, however; although they protested violently against the existing order, they had no positive program to replace it. At the same time, the movement contained within it the seeds of its own destruction. Its members did not take themselves seriously and paid the price therefor. Their verbal fireworks were interesting and amusing, but led to no constructive action. Bosquet remarks as follows on the sterility of their efforts: "Ce chaos voulu, ostentatoire, insolent - de syllabes, de consonnes téléscopées, de voyelles agglutinées, de diphthongues infinies, signifie autant d'impasses, de pièges, de traquenards, où la poésie doit s'abîmer sans retour." 83

The experiments of the Surrealists with the actual structure of the language were less bold. Although they refused to accept the traditional opposition between truth and error, dream and reality, reason and madness, they did not create new and bizarre words to express their rejection. They disdained the orderly and coherent presentation of thought and sensation; they felt that reality could best be presented by directly noting down the spontaneous manifestations of the unconscious. They continued, however, to express themselves
within the traditional framework of the language, and retained the long-established vocabulary.

Lettrism, a literary movement founded by Isidore Isou in 1946, resembled Dadaism but had much greater ambitions. The Lettrists, in spite of their proclamations and manifestations, did not seem to know exactly what they were rebelling against and had no coherent doctrine. Like the Dadaists, however, they agreed that language was inadequate and should be re-cast in a new form. They believed that the alphabet should be "dissected" and phonemes substituted for letters; it was of little importance if the words so formed had an intelligible meaning. The following expressions are examples of words formed with the new alphabet; their meaning is related to the number of times and the manner in which they are pronounced: "Leitaimimme (bis) ... (vivace)/ Mîîcôôpâ ... (lento)/ Raitécinne ... (vivace)/ Micopa ... (hachê)/ Mnaîpémimme (bis) ... (vivace)/ GRAAMM ... GRAMXOBRE ... (choeur)/ Ninnôôpååtemninaino ... (vivacissimo)/ GRAMXOBRE (ter) ... (choeur)/ Chitixssjvåâff (ter)/ Xiîss ... Siwss ... Jvåâff ... (lento)."^84

In spite of the ridiculous aspect of this revolt, it served to reaffirm a truth: objects and beings have no need of man and his words to mark their existence. Alain Bosquet calls attention in these words to the superfluity of man in the world:
Le lettrisme a marqué, de manière frappante sinon puérile, son soupçon à l'endroit du mot, et de ce qui désigne la chose, le sentiment, la sensation. Accepter que "cheval," sans se renouveler et de la façon la plus tyrannique, continue d'évoquer un animal qui, lui, n'a pas besoin de ce mot pour être ce qu'il est, devient intolérable à la longue : le lettrisme, s'il n'avait que ce mérite, nous rappelle sans cesse combien l'expression est une tragédie inéluctable.85

Another writer who has experimented with language is the poet, Raymond Queneau. Language is more than just a means of expression for him; it is the very subject of his work. Fantasy, irony, and impertinence are the qualities which best characterize his poetry; his work has been called "un vaste jeu de mots."86 Queneau's way of coming to grips with language is to distort it until it is almost unrecognizable. In the following passage, he joins alliteration and quasi-meaninglessness of content in order to bring out the fundamental absurdity and inadequacy of language as a means of communication among men:

Un lourjingue vers lidimège sur la lateforme-pliç arrière d'un lobustotem, je gaffe un lypetinge avec un long loukëm et un lapeau-chard entouré d'un lalongif au lieu de luban-rogue. Soudain il se met à leuléguer contre son loisinvé parce qu'il lui larchemait sur les miépouilles. Mais sans lagarreboum il se lrissa vers une lacepème lidévéé.87

Michaux's innovations with vocabulary resemble neither the meaningless babble of the Dadaists nor the verbal eccentricities of the Lettrists. Alain Bosquet
points out that Michaux retains both the familiarity and flavor of authentic language:

Michaux ne tient guère à s'affranchir du mot, ni à lui donner une apparence tout à fait trompeuse. Il en garde juste ce qu'il faut pour suggérer qu'il pourrait être tel mot connu, tel autre mot aux éléments intervertis, telle mascarade dont le lecteur est d'avance complice. Il en prend deux vocables, les télescope et en recoud les restes ; il emprunte une consonne ici, une voyelle là et, par jeu comme par mystification, il les replace où elles ne conviennent point.

One of the best examples of Michaux's use of invented language is found in the poem entitled "Le Grand Combat." Using the third person singular subject pronoun "il" to represent himself, he depicts a bloody struggle from which he emerges the victor. His adversary is thrown to the ground and literally torn apart. In his rage, Michaux destroys his enemy's sexual organs, and brutally penetrates the various orifices of his body. The effectiveness of Michaux's personal and original language is quite evident in this poem:

Il l'emplaçouille et l'endosque contre terre;  
Il le rague et le roupète jusqu'à son drôle;  
Il le pratèle et le libucque et lui barufle les ouillais;  
Il le tocarde et le marmine,  
Le mange rape à ri et ripe à ra.  
Enfin il l'ecorcobalisse.  

L'autre hésite, s'espudrine, se défaissa,  
se torse et se ruine.  
C'en sera bientôt fini de lui;  
Il se reprise et s'emmmargine...mais en vain  
Le cerceau tombe qui a tant roulé.
Abrah! Abrah! Abrah!
Le pied a failli!
Le bras a cassé!
Le sang a coulé!

15 Fouille, fouille, fouille,
Dans la marmite de son ventre est un
grand secret
Mégères alentour qui pleurez dans vos
mouchoirs;
On s'étonne, on s'étonne, on s'étonne
Et on vous regarde

On cherche aussi, nous autres,
le Grand Secret.

The verbs "hésite," "s'espudrine," "se défaîsse," "se torse," "se ruine," "se reprise," and "s'emwardine" in lines 7 and 9 indicate that the enemy cannot withstand Michaux's assault in spite of determined efforts. After the cry of victory "Abrah! Abrah! Abrah!" in line 11, Michaux describes the injuries inflicted upon the fallen enemy. In line 15, using the imperative form of the verb "fouiller," Michaux exhorts himself to "dig" into the belly of the defeated enemy, for it is there that lies the key to one of the riddles of existence. The last line of the poem reveals that the ultimate answer to the mystery of life has not yet been found.

Richard Ellmann, the editor of an anthology of Michaux's works in English entitled The Selected Writings of Henri Michaux, has translated this piece, conserving all the aggressive flavor of the verbs. The first nine lines read as follows:

He embowerates and enbacks him on the ground.
He raggs him and rumpets him up to his drale; He praggles him and libucks him and berifles his testeries; He tricards him and morones him; He grobels him rasp by rip and risp by rap. Finally he enscorchorizes him.

The other hesitates, espudates himself, unbrines himself, twisses and ruins himself. He'll soon be done for; He mends and immarginates himself...but in vain.90

It is worthy of note that the enemy is never specifically identified. That he is a formidable one cannot be doubted, however: both the force needed to overcome him and his remarkable recuperative powers indicate that he is not one who will easily give up the struggle. After emphasizing the bellicose note which runs through Michaux's work, Alain Bosquet states that the enemy is a composite of all that Michaux detests in himself and in the world around him:

Inextricablement il se bat - toute son oeuvre est un pugilat, une boxe, un corps-à-corps, un corps-à-âme, un âme-à-corps, prodiges, précisément, en nouvelles notions nées sur les cordes vocales, comme ça, par gloutonnerie - contre tout ce que la nature met en sa présence, y compris les aspects de lui-même qui le dégoutent : tous, sans exception. Le principe d'hostilité est, dans ces conditions, une promesse d'éveil.91

It is rare that a passage or poem is made up entirely of invented words; such expressions are usually interspersed among meaningful units of language. In the passage entitled Encore des changements, Michaux begins
expressing his anger with such recognizable words as "taciturnes" and "écornifleurs": "Parfois, il arrive que je renaissie avec colère... 'Hein ? Quoi ? Qu'est-ce qui veut se faire casser en deux par ici ? Tas de taciturnes ! Ecornifleurs !" But his exasperation soon reaches such an intensity that he has to forge words to voice it: "'Roufflards ! Guenuches ! Coucou-gnasses !"  

In Articulations from La Nuit remue, his anger reaches such a pitch that the resources of his native tongue are inadequate to full express his vexation. In the first line he turns to English for a verb to urge himself on; the verb "to go" as it is used here, has the resonance of a war cry. In the lines following, he resorts to invented words to express his towering rage: "Et go to go and go/ Et garce !/ Sarcospèle sur Saricot,/ Bourbourane a talico,/ Ou to boudourra le bodogo,/ Bodogi./ Croupe, croupe a la Chinon./ Et bourrecul a la misère." In a poem such as Rubililieuse, his fury seems to be of such intensity that he can do nothing but voice a series of incoherent syllables: "Rubililieuse et sans dormantes,/ Vint cent Elles, Elle, Elle,/ Rubililieuse ma bargerie,/ Noue contre, noue, noue,/ Ru vaignoire ma bargerie."  

Humor is not absent from his poems containing
Invented language. Even as far back as *Qui je fus* (1927), he had experimented with words. In a poem from that work entitled "Traduction," he joins self-exploration with whimsy. The reader may sometimes be at a loss to determine exactly the degree of humor and of seriousness in a passage; he should remember in such cases that Michaux very often expresses his most serious thoughts in droll language. The happy juxtaposition of real and invented words is worthy of note: "Je me blague et me siroute/ Dans le fond je me déruse/ Rien ne tient bon; j'ai beau regarder/ Ça s'éruffle et se range/ Clermont sonne et Ferrand répond." Having made little progress in his self-exploration, being hindered perhaps by the narrow-mindedness of his fellow-townsmen, he rejects his surroundings and follows his inclinations: "Sottes rues satisfaites, ça promet/ Mais, que s'isolent les envieux et les torbus itou/ Laisse donc perousser les aigres maigres/ Pour moi je retourne à l'eau de l'océan. Adieu./ J'ai entendu le clacquerin des paquebots, j'embarque."96

In *Mariage*, another poem from the above-mentioned collection, he exhibits his talents for broad, lively and nonsensical humor. Alliteration and invented words give a comical effect; the rhythm is similar to that of a drinking song:
Cochenilles, doaesse, doderies
doberies, odournes, doterons
et dots à venir
La fille à marier n'a pas sitôt
dit OUI qu'on la pousse dans
le lit.
au lit, ohi, au lit ohi.
la pondéra son petit humi
la sentira son petit hihi
la pleurera la victima ah, ah
ah ! ah ! ah ! ah !

A particularly telling device that Michaux
occasionally uses to express his rebellion, rage and
hate is a succession of quite short, truculent sentences,
some containing only a subject and a verb in the present
tense. By dint of these verbal hammer blows, he tries
to pulverize the resistance which the world opposes to
his projects for self-realization. To avoid monotony,
he inserts from time to time a longer sentence among
the shorter ones. The following lines from "Epervier de
ta faiblesse, domine!" illustrate the effectiveness of
these concise statements:

L'être qui inspire m'a dit :
Je suis celui qui tremble.
Je suis celui qui rompt,
Qui glisse, qui rampe.

... Eh bien! et toi?
Et toi pareil, pourquoi
te meconnais-tu?

Je m'assieds en juge,
Je m'accroupis en vache,
Je pénètre en père,
J'enfante en mere.
Et toi, qu'attends-tu?

... Je romps
Je plie
Je coule
Je m'appuie sur les coups
que l'on me porte
Je gratte
J'obstrue
J'obnubile

...
Et toi
Par ta soif, du moins, tu es
soleil,
Epervier de ta faiblesse, domine!
...

Je fais tournoyer la femme
Je lynche le vieillard
...
Je n'ai pas de nom
Mon nom est de gaspiller les noms
Je suis le vent dans le vent.
...

Je ruine
Je démets
Je disloque
M'écoutant, le fils arrache
les testicules du Père
Je dégrade
Je renverse
Je renverse
La tête dans ses tarots mes chiens
dévorent la cartomancienne.

The being who inspires Michaux identifies himself with these words: "Je n'ai pas de nom/ Mon nom est de gaspiller les noms/ Je suis le vent dans le vent." There is little doubt as to his real identity, however: he is the personification of determined aggressive action. Michaux's desire to pattern himself on this being is indicated by the impatient questions and admonitions that are addressed to him, and which seem to demand an energetic
and decisive affirmative answer. The following are examples of such questions: "Eh bien! et toi/ Et toi pareil, pourquoi te méconnais-tu?"/ "Et toi, qu'attends-tu?"/ "Et toi/ par ta soif, du moins, tu es soleil,/ Epervier de ta faiblesse, domine!" The truculency of such expressions as "je romps," "je plie," "j'obstrue," "je démets," "je disloque," and "je renverse" - the last flung defiantly twice - indicates a desire to react violently against the incursions of the hostile world. The expression "je lynche" implies defiance of convention and rejection of established laws; the capital P of the word "Père" suggests that Michaux is challenging God Himself by indirectly striking Him in the very seat of His procreative powers.

"Malheur à ceux qui se contentent de peu!" 100 Michaux cried in Ecuador. With that conviction in mind, he himself has continually endeavored to embrace the world in its entirety, to realize plenitude of being through imaginative intervention and exorcism. Using the technique of intervention, he changed the order of events, rearranging them in a more harmonious sequence so that reality could be approached in a more effective way. Using language as a means of exorcism, he delivered himself from the negative, hostile forces which assailed him on every side. At the moment of exorcism, he felt a
release, a sensation of freedom, a creative joy and deliverance, a respite from the gnawing feeling of impotence which so often overcame him. His victories were only short-lived, however, his satisfactions only momentary and his triumphs illusory. Reality could be transformed through the imagination, but only partially and temporarily. The world remained elusive and indomitable, despite the poet's best efforts to creatively deal with it. In *Plume*, he expresses in these words the discouragement caused by the failure of his imaginative techniques: "Toute science crée une nouvelle ignorance./ Tout conscient, un nouvel inconscient./ Tout apport nouveau crée un nouveau néant." \(^{101}\)

Man's efforts to dispel the mysteries of nature are not always fruitless, however; in a sense, even partial knowledge of the world is a victory over it. Michaux points out that "l'homme sait d'abord, ensuite il comprend, tertio il voit ou croit voir et brode. De même le vrai poète crée, puis comprend...parfois." \(^{102}\)

The true poet has aesthetic satisfactions: he can express in lyrical terms his disenchantment with the world, his poignant feeling of inadequacy to grapple with the enigma of the universe. Michaux does this not only with poignancy but also with wit. The qualities of lyricism and humor in his poetry will be discussed in chapter IV.
Notes


3. Michaux, La Vie dans les plis, pp. 120-21.


5. Ibid., p. 130.

6. Ibid., p. 112.


9. Ibid., p. 29.

10. Ibid., p. 29.


13. Ibid., p. 39.


15. Michaux, La Nuit remue, p. 10.

16. Ibid., p. 10.

17. Ibid., p. 10.


23. Michaux, _Ecuador_, pp. 100-01.


28. Ibid., p. 133.


31. Ibid., p. 9.

32. Ibid., p. 9.


35. Michaux, _La Nuit remue_, p. 61.

36. Ibid., p. 61.

37. Ibid., pp. 62-63.

39 Brechon, *op. cit.*, p. 49.


52 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 100.


61 Sigmund Freud, *op. cit.*, p. 94.


63 Gros, p. 86.


68 Michaux, *Ecuador*, p. 43.


70 *Ibid.*, p. 44.


73 Bertélé, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

74 Michaux, *La Nuit remue*, p. 103.


77 Bellour, *Michaux ou Une Mesure de l'être*, p. 147.
78 Bertelé, *op. cit.*, p. 22.


86 Picon, *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française*, p. 121.


96 Michaux, *Qui je fus*, p. 78.
97 Ibid., p. 78.
98 Ibid., p. 79.
99 Michaux, Épreuves, Éxorcismes, pp. 18-20.
100 Michaux, Écuador, p. 76.
101 Michaux, Plume, p. 216.
102 Michaux, Misérable miracle, p. 41.
Michaux's rejection of the world is not always expressed in violent tones. The intensity and depth of his disillusionment are often voiced in gentler, more subdued accents. Although his poems usually lack meter, there are some which contain a very real musicality coming from the choice and arrangement of the words. *Tahavi* is one of his lyrical compositions having a distinctly rhythmic character. The reason for his choice of the proper name "Tahavi" is difficult to establish; it may have been chosen simply because of its musical quality. In any case, there is no doubt that it is a pseudonym of Michaux himself, for the childhood of Tahavi bears a striking resemblance to that of the poet. Tahavi feels an immense emptiness, caused by his inability to relate himself to any person or thing about him: "Tahavi va au Vide./ Tahavi déteste le Vide./ C'est l'horreur de Tahavi que le Vide./ Mais le Vide est venu à Tahavi./ Le Voile Enorme." As the next lines indicate, his unpleasant childhood is never far from his thoughts: "A dix ans, il avait soixante ans./ Ses parents lui parurent des enfants./ À cinq ans il se perdait dans la nuit des
His reaction to his joyless boyhood was to take refuge in imaginative flight: "Il s'est oublié dans une fourmi. Il s'est oublié dans une feuille. Il s'est oublié dans l'ensevelissement de l'enfance." The concluding lines of the poem contain a more decisive tone:

Tahavi n'a pas trouvé son pain. Tahavi n'a pas trouvé son père. Tahavi ne trouve pas son père dans les larmes des hommes.

N'a pas accepté, Tahavi. Ayant reçu, n'a pas gardé. Par la porte, par la fenêtre, Tahavi a rejeté.

Par la volonté appuyée sur le souffle, par la pensée sans souffle, par ses démons, Tahavi a rejeté.

The vigorous and forceful quality of the plosive consonant in these lines is worthy of note. The sound is first met in the adverbial particle of negation "pas" - a word employed five times, and afterwards in the words "pain," "père," "accepté," "porte," "par" - employed five times, "appuyé," and "pensée"; the repeated use of this sound indicates the resolute manner in which Michaux reacts to the negative forces of his childhood.

Sometimes an incantatory quality is heard in his poems. A monotonous repetition of syllables, a regular intonation, and a singsong mode of recitation all join to compose a rhythmic chant which the poet hopes will calm his fury and tame the surging aggressivity of his feelings. In the piece entitled "Dans l'attente," the regular
recurrence of the verb être near the beginning of each line strikingly illustrates this plainsong effect: "Un être fou,/ un être phare,/ un être mille fois biffé,/ un être exilé du fond de l'horizon, un être boudant au fond de l'horizon." The lines which follow call attention to the fragility of the "being" who is crying out, and emphasize his intense desire to fully realize himself: "un être maigre,/ un être intégré,/ un être fier,/ un être qui voudrait être,/ un être dans le barattement de deux époques qui s'entrechoquent,/ un être dans les gaz délétères des consciences qui succombent,/ un être comme au premier jour,/ un être..." Rolland de Renéville, a literary critic and long-standing friend of Michaux, affirms that the latter tries by such rhythmic repetition to force words to reveal their essence, as children do who murmur the same word over and over again.

Réduite parfois à l'énonciation d'un mot, indéfiniment répété, repris et recrée, la Parole apparaît dans les poèmes de Michaux comme un centre rayonnant d'où les membres du poème poussent à la manière de branchages imprévisibles. Sa méthode incantatoire s'apparente à celle dont les enfants usent spontanément lorsqu'ils se repètent indéfiniment le même mot pendant des heures comme pour en forcer le secret.

In the beautiful and very moving poem entitled "Iniji," Michaux joins invented words and incantation. Like the word "Tahavi," the origin of the name "Iniji"
is unknown. The reader of the poem is at once sensible to the musicality of the syllables terminating in i. Iniji symbolizes the poet who never abandons the quest for oneness, but who sometimes reaches a point of extreme lassitude and discouragement: "Ne peut plus, Iniji/ Sphinx, sphères, faux signes/ obstacles sur la route d'Iniji./ Rives reculent/ Socles s'enfoncent/ Monde. Plus de monde/ seulement l'amalgame/ Les Pierres ne savent plus être pierres./ Parmi tous les lits sur terre/ où est le lit d'Iniji?" Iniji feels only annoyance with his earthly ties: "Un corps a trop le souvenir d'un autre corps/ un corps n'a plus d'imagination/ n'a plus de patience avec aucun corps." The last lines are marked by a murmuring, invocative quality, as if Iniji might be able to alleviate his distress by a series of melodic sounds: "Ananian Iniji/ Annan Animha Iniji/ Ornanian Iniji/ Et Iniji n'est plus animée..." The concluding line informs the reader that Iniji has been defeated in the struggle with the unsympathetic world. The poet is often subject to such a fate: he may be overcome by superior strength and succumb; at other times he is not entirely defeated but may be so weakened that he no longer possesses a real existence. The following brief notation from "La Ralentie" indicates the degree of insubstantiality to which he is sometimes
Perhaps the best known of Michaux's poetic compositions containing an incantatory quality is the one entitled "Dans la nuit." This piece is found in "Plume" précédé de "Lointain intérieur", a work published in 1938. Like Ecuador, La Nuit remue, and Epreuves, Exorcismes, Plume is a collection of short prose passages interspersed with prose poems. It is evident that Dans la nuit belongs in the latter category: although the piece is not metrical, a distinct impression of verse is created by short lines succeeding each other, made up of words containing an almost equal number of syllables. The poetic element is found just as much in each individual line as in their aggregate.

The manner in which the night can be an inimical force was discussed in chapter III; in Dans la nuit, the reader learns that it can also be well-disposed toward those whom it envelops in its protective folds. In this piece Michaux evokes the night in its limitlessness, its readiness to receive all those who draw near and wish to become a part of it:

Dans la nuit
Dans la nuit
Je me suis uni à la nuit
À la nuit sans limites
À la nuit.
Mienne, belle, mienne.
Nuit
Nuit de naissance
Qui m'emplis de mon cri
10 De mes épis
Toi qui m'envahis
Qui fais houle houle
Qui fais houle tout autour
Et fumes, es fort dense
15 Et mugis
Às la nuit,
Nuit qui git, Nuit implacable.
Et sa fanfare, et sa plage
Sa plage en haut, sa plage
partout,
20 Sa plage boit, son poids est roi,
et tout ploie sous lui
Sous lui, sous plus tenu qu'un
fil
Sous la nuit
La Nuit.12

In ll. 3-5 ("Je me suis uni à la nuit/ À la nuit sans limites/ À la nuit"), Michaux declares that he has surrendered himself to the night and become an integral part of it. The definitiveness of the union is made evident by the use of the present perfect form of the verb, a tense denoting an action which has been entirely completed. The fact that this tense is used only once throughout the entire poem increases its effect; (all other tenses are in the present form). In l. 6 ("Mienne, belle, mienne"), he speaks tenderly to the night, as he might to a loved one, complimenting her on her beauty and revealing his contentment in possessing her. The musical quality of the first six lines is striking: the semi-vowels produced by the coming together of the vowels u and i in the word "nuit" (employed five times) and in the verb "suis," and the sound of the close vowel i in
"uni" and "limites" give an impression of gentleness, quiet and peace, as if the poet had found a haven. This impression of calm is strengthened by the clear vowel sound of the open e in l. 6. The open e sound is found alone in "belle," and in conjunction with the semi-vowel sound i in the possessive pronoun "mienne" preceding and following that word.

In l. 7-8 ("Nuit/ Nuit de naissance"), he speaks directly to the all-encompassing night, describing the effect of his union with it. He affirms that it was only when he had become one with the night that he felt he had really been born and gained an identity of his own. The words "Qui m'emplis de mon cri" (l. 9) represent the cry of the newly-born, a cry of joy announcing his presence in a world more to his liking. The expression "De mes épis" (l. 10) brings to mind an ear of corn or wheat, the ear being that part of these plants which bears the grain-bearing, life-giving spike. His union with the night is the beginning of a new life, one rich with possibilities of a different and better existence. "Toi qui m'envahis" (l. 11) emphasizes the intimacy between himself and the night personified. Michaux addresses it directly with the second person disjunctive pronoun "toi," the form used in familiar and intimate address. Ll. 12-13 ("Qui fais houle houle/ Qui
fais houle tout autour") lay stress upon the way in which the night makes its presence unceasingly known: like the sea, it seems to swell and surge, lifting and letting fall the being to which it is now indissolubly united; it is as if it wished to remind the poet of the agitation which was his lot before their present union. The sonorous vowel sound given by the letters ou in the word "houle" - a word employed three times in the lines under consideration - and found also in the adverbial expression of place "tout autour" - gives an impression of regularly repeated and rhythmic movement.

Continuing his figure of speech, Michaux compares the enveloping night to smoke: "(Toi) qui fumes, es fort dense." (l. 14). In order to give vividness to the concept of the encompassing darkness, he likens it to thick smoke which rises, incorporating into itself the person or thing which it surrounds. The consonant continuant f, occurring twice in this line, gives an impression of a slow, languorous enveloping action. The verb of l. 15 ("Et mugis") is somewhat surprising if it is taken in its literal sense; it is less so if we recall its figurative meaning of "to roar," "moan," or "boom." Abandoning the metaphor of smoke and adopting once again that of the sea, the aptness of the verb immediately becomes evident. The sea in its swelling and surging often
produces a dull, muffled, roaring sound that drums upon the ear of the listener from all sides. After the comparison to sea and smoke, the simple affirmation "(Tu) es la nuit" (1. 6) reminds the reader that the subject of the poem is the night. In 1. 17 ("Nuit qui git, nuit implacable"), there is no principal verb: merely a clause followed by a noun and an adjective in apposition. It seems likely that the poet is once again speaking directly to the night personified; the nouns would be therefore in the vocative case. Beginning with the following line ("Et sa fanfare, et sa plage") and continuing to the end of the poem, the metaphor of the sea is more fully and logically developed: the sea comes to rest on the far-flung beaches which stretch along its edges. Michaux is absorbed into its bosom, recognizing fully its sovereignty and royal character. The fanfare (1. 18) is apparently one sounded in its honor. Ll. 19-20 ("Sa plage est haut, sa plage partout, / Sa plage boit, son poids est roi, et tout ploie sous lui") call attention once again to the immensity of the domain of the night and the supremacy of its rule. The plosive consonants p, b and t found in the words "plage," "poids," "ploie," "boit," and "tout" are particularly telling in their suggestion of force, and strengthen the impression of inherent power, authority and dominion which
Michaux attributes to the night. The ringing sound produced by the union of the vowels o and i heard in the words "boit," "poids," "roi," and "ploie" gives a tone of authority befitting the affirmation of one's sovereignty. It is noteworthy that this line is the longest one of the poem; the poet, wishing to give more force to the thought contained within it, has disposed its elements horizontally rather than vertically.

In the last three lines ("Sous lui, sous plus tenu qu'un fil/ Sous la nuit/ La Nuit"), the register of the voice is lowered and a more discreet resonance is heard: the sovereignty of the night has been definitively established. The semi-vowel sound in the words "lui" and "nuit" - the latter employed twice - suggests the gentleness of a being who is sure of its strength, and can express without reserve the tenderness which is a corollary of that strength.

The desire to unite with a power outside himself which calms, reposes and soothes is often expressed in Michaux's work. The titles of several other compositions and prose passages give evidence of this wish: "Vers la séréneté (a name given to two poems), "Emportez-moi," "Repos dans le malheur," "Comme pierre dans le puits," "Comme la mer," and "Ailleurs" (a title given to an entire book). In the poem entitled "Comme pierre dans le puits,"
Michaux echoes the cry of the self which seeks completeness: through a synthesis of its separate parts, it will be able to overcome the polarity of being: "Je cherche un être à envahir/ Montagne de fluide, paquet divin,/ Où es-tu mon autre pôle? Étrennes toujours remises,/ Où es-tu marée montante?/ Refouler en toi le bain brisant de mon intolérable tension!/ Te pirater."  

It is only through exploration of the self that the divine particle can be discovered: "Présence de soi : outil fou./ On pèse sur soi/ On pèse sur sa solitude/ On pèse sur les alentours/ On pèse sur le vide/ On drague."  

Michaux characterizes those who are unwilling or unable to strike out along the unexplored paths of the self as "médiocres": "Monde couture d'absences/ Millions de maillons de tabous/ Passé de cancer/ Barrages des génufléchisseurs et des embretellés;/ Oh! Heureux médiocres/ Tettez le vieux et la couenne des siècles/ et la civilisation des désirs à bon marché/ Allez, c'est pour vous tout ça."  

Sometimes it seems that happiness, wholeness, and plenitude cannot be obtained by any means. The best one can hope for is a temporary cessation of the struggle, a respite from one's labors. As if to give more familiarity to the forces with which he battles and render their presence less threatening, Michaux personifies them in the form of "malheur," and invites them to rest
for a time; then he too will be able to enjoy a few moments of peace: "Le Malheur, mon grand laboureur,/ Le Malheur, asseois-toi,/ Repose-toi,/ Reposons-nous un peu toi et moi,/ Repose,/ Tu me trouves, tu m'éprouves, tu me le prouves./ Je suis ta ruine."\(^{16}\) In soothing, lulling tones he speaks to "malheur," welcoming it as an inescapable and essential part of his existence. The incantatory quality of these lines is striking: the poet tries with gentle and musical words to establish a more harmonious relationship with the very forces which bring discord into his life: "Mon grand théâtre, mon havre, mon âtre,/ Ma cave d'or,/ Mon avenir, ma vraie mère, mon horizon./ Dans ta lumière, dans ton ampleur, dans mon horreur,/ Je m'abandonne."\(^{17}\)

The eternal desire of the poet to leave the confines of the here and now, to be transported "ailleurs" is voiced in "Emportez-moi"; he does not yearn for a clearly defined and fixed refuge but merely expresses a wish to be transported far away: "Emportez-moi dans une caravelle,/ Dans une vieille et douce caravelle,/ Dans l'étrave, ou si l'on veut, dans l'écume,/ Et perdez-moi, au loin, au loin."\(^{18}\) He wishes the voyage to take place in time as well as in space, and by all possible means, no matter how unusual they may seem: "Dans l'attelage d'un autre âge./ Dans le velours trompeur
The fragility and vulnerability of the individual can be overcome to a certain extent through fraternal union with others: "Emportez-moi sans me briser, dans les baisers;/ Dans les poitrines qui se soulevent et respirent,/ Sur les tapis des paumes et leur sourire,/ Dans les corridors des os longs, et des articulations." The poem ends with the repetition of his desire to accede to another plane of being, but this desire is followed by an apparent mood of discouragement in which he expresses a wish to withdraw completely from life: "Emportez-moi, ou plutôt enfouissez-moi." It is noteworthy that he describes the means by which he wishes to escape from his situation rather than an idealized retreat. Michaux never pictures such a haven, even imaginatively. The title of a prose passage "Vers la sérénité" might lead the reader to expect the portrayal of an idealized place of refuge, but such is not the case. The passage bears the subtitle "Le Royaume de Cendre": the inhabitants of the kingdom are merely witnesses of the joys of others, and are themselves destined to a life of sorrow:

Au-dessus des joies, comme au-dessus des affres, au-dessus des désirs et des épanchements, gît une étendue immense de cendre.
De ce pays de cendre, vous apercevez le long cortège des amants qui recherchent les amantes et le long cortège des amantes qui recherchent les amants, et un désir, une telle prescience de joies uniques se lie en eux qu'on voit qu'ils ont raison, que c'est évident, que c'est parmi eux qu'il faut vivre.

Mais qui se trouve au royaume de cendre plus de chemin ne trouve. Il voit, il entend. Plus de chemin ne trouve que le chemin de l'éternel regret.22

Michaux's dissatisfaction with the world is also expressed in humorous terms. The adventures of his diminutive hero, Plume, provide welcome relief from the seriousness of his continual self-questioning and self-exploration. Plume first appeared as a main character in 1930 in five stories published under the title Un Certain Plume. He appeared again in 1938 in a volume containing additional chapters entitled "Plume" précédé de "Lointain intérieur." The later additions were made in order to develop further the hero's character through a series of amusing incidents. The chapters are quite short: the longest one contains no more than six pages, and most contain only one or two. The titles of some of the chapters suggest that Plume's existence is similar to that of other men: "Plume au restaurant," "Plume voyage," and "Plume avait mal au doigt"; in reality, his life is quite extraordinary. Although he lives in a recognizable world, it is an upside down one.

Like Baudelaire's Samuel Cramer and Valery's
Monsieur Teste, Plume is a figure at once real and imaginary, personal and universal. He is the one definite character which Michaux has invented with a name and personality clearly his own. In a sense, he is the alter ego of the poet, a part of himself whose existence he is somewhat reluctant to admit. Plume has been compared to Charlie Chaplin, as there are many points of resemblance between these two figures. Michaux has never definitely stated that he patterned his fictitious character upon Chaplin, but it seems likely that he did. He was a great admirer of early Chaplin films, and in 1924 contributed an article entitled "Notre frère Charlie" to a special number of Le Disque Vert devoted to that actor. Like Chaplin, Plume is the eternal victim, the gentle, meek man who wants to go his way without bothering anyone, asking nothing better than to be accommodating to those who do cross his path. He wants only to be left in peace, but no one could have more extraordinary adventures. He is a kind of anti-hero, the extremely vulnerable "little man" who lives in an inimical, egocentric and absurd world. Michaux usually shows the absurdity of life indirectly, in incidents which take place in a weird, imaginary universe; in Plume, he shows the incongruity of existence in a more direct and realistic manner. The
absurdity of the world which has molded the personality of the mild-mannered Plume is vividly described in these words by the sociologist, Erich Fromm:

> Vastness of cities in which the individual is lost, buildings that are as high as mountains, constant acoustic bombardment by the radio, big headlines changing three times a day and leaving one no choice to decide what is important, shows in which one hundred girls demonstrate their ability with clocklike precision to eliminate the individual and act like a powerful though smooth machine, the beating rhythm of jazz - these and many other details are expressions of a constellation in which the individual is confronted by uncontrollable dimensions in comparison with which he is a small particle. All he can do is to fall in step like a marching soldier or a worker on an endless belt. He can act; but the sense of independence, significance, has gone.23

His difficulties begin in the opening story, which bears the title "Un Homme paisible"; no better adjective could be found to describe Plume's character. In these pages, the reader learns that nothing is able to surprise Plume or shake him out of his imperturbability; he shows a supreme indifference to events, even to those which have the most baneful consequences for him:

> "Etendant les mains hors du lit, Plume fut étonné de ne pas rencontrer le mur. 'Tiens, pensa-t-il, les fourmis l'auront mangé...' et il se rendormit."24 The most extraordinary events take place around him while he sleeps: "Peu après, sa femme l'attrapa et le secoua :

> 'Regarde, dit-elle, fainéant ! Pendant que tu étais occupé
à dormir, on nous a volé notre maison.' En effet, un ciel intact s'étendait de tous côtés. 'Bah, la chose est faite,' pensa-t-il."  

While still in a waking state, he and his wife are witnesses of an astonishing spectacle: "Peu après, un bruit se fit entendre. C'était un train qui arrivait sur eux à toute allure. 'De l'air pressé qu'il a, pensa-t-il, il arrivera sûrement avant nous' et il se rendormit." Plume then undergoes an experience which would leave most men somewhat shaken; yet once again he remains unruffled and complete master of himself:

"Ensuite, le froid le réveilla. Il était tout trempé de sang. Quelques morceaux de sa femme gisaient près de lui. 'Avec le sang, pensa-t-il surgissent toujours quantité de désagréments ; si ce train pouvait n'être pas passé, j'en serais fort heureux. Mais puisqu'il est déjà passé...' et il se rendormit."

Without transition, the reader learns that Plume has been brought to justice for a crime which he did not commit:

"Voyons, disait le juge, comment expliquez-vous que votre femme se soit blessée au point qu'on l'ait trouvée partagée en huit morceaux, sans que vous, qui étiez à côté, ayez pu faire un geste pour l'en empêcher, sans même vous en être aperçu. Voilà le mystère. Toute l'affaire est là-dedans."  

Plume's reaction to the judge's reproaches mark him as a man who keeps his own counsel: "'Sur ce chemin je ne peux l'aider, pensa Plume, et il se rendormit.'"
He is rudely awakened, however, by these words from the judge: "L'exécution aura lieu demain. Avez-vous quelque chose à ajouter?" Even his own condemnation to death leaves him indifferent: "'Excusez-moi, dit-il, je n'ai pas suivi l'affaire.' Et il se rendormit."

Passivity is a reaction characteristic of Plume. At bottom, he is not a comic personage, but rather the underdog, the weak and defenceless person who is unable to cope with the stronger persons, the bullies and aggressors who surround him. He is continually frightened by other men, fearing possible violence from them and seeing them as unsympathetic judges, as persons who have a right to condemn him without indulgence and punish him without mercy. Robert Bréchon points out that in such circumstances, there is only one solution for Plume: "...se retirer, éviter d'être accroché, ne pas engager une lutte inégale." In "Un Homme paisible," Plume is capable of only one reaction after each disaster: "il se rendormit." This expression is a kind of refrain indicating his withdrawal from a situation whose outcome will most likely be unfavorable if not catastrophic for him. The literary critic, C. A. Hackett, sees Plume not only as the embodiment of resignation, but also of protestation against a world inherently alien to him: "Like Rimbaud
in *Une Saison en Enfer*, or Meursault before his judges in *L'Etranger*, Plume shuts his eyes to our 'light' and refuses to accept our 'justice.' He contemptuously ignores the death sentence because, whoever may condemn him, he has resolved - despite his obvious inadaptability - to live."

Although Plume is determined to live, the world in which he moves about is incomprehensible to him. He has great difficulty in adapting himself to it, and the humor and interest of his adventures arise from situations and incidents rather than from his character, which does not develop or change. He is emotionally unsuited for life in society, and is continually at odds with his fellows, reacting in a manner they can neither understand nor accept. Whatever he does, whatever prudence he exercises, he is continually at fault, constantly in difficulty, forever apologizing. His efforts to please provoke exactly the opposite reaction from the one he wishes, and cause him to be treated with a singular lack of consideration. In *Plume voyage*, the reader learns of some of Plume's misadventures while travelling: "Plume ne peut pas dire qu'on ait excessive-ment d'égards pour lui en voyage. Les uns lui passent dessus sans crier gare, les autres s'essuient tranquillement les mains à son veston. Il a fini par s'habituer."
Il aime mieux voyager avec modération. Tant que ce sera possible, il le fera.\textsuperscript{34} Plume never complains, since expressing his dissatisfaction might bring misfortune upon him: "Si on lui sert, hargneux, une racine dans son assiette, une grosse racine: 'Allons, mangez. Qu'est-ce que vous attendez?' 'Oh bien, tout de suite, voilà.' Il ne veut pas s'attirer des histoires inutilement."\textsuperscript{35} His shyness, lack of aggressivity and inoffensiveness are so marked that they are considered as acts of provocation, causing others to react negatively toward him. An event insignificant in itself sometimes has tragi-comic consequences. In "Plume avait mal au doigt," Michaux relates how a slight pain in one of Plume's fingers brings down upon him the wrath of his wife: "Plume avait un peu mal au doigt. 'Il vaudrait peut-être mieux consulter un médecin, lui dit sa femme. Il suffit souvent d'une pommade...' Et Plume y alla.\textsuperscript{36} In a light-hearted manner, the surgeon tries to convince him that the amputation of a finger is quickly done and of no consequence. Plume feels himself to be at fault even in these circumstances: "Plume regarda melancholiquement son doigt et s'excusa. 'Docteur, c'est l'index, vous savez, un doigt bien utile. Justement, je devais écrire à ma mère. Je me sens toujours de l'index pour écrire. Ma mère serait inquiète si je tardais davantage
à lui écrire, je reviendrai dans quelques jours." He is authoritatively over-ruled by the surgeon, however, and a flood of excuses does nothing except worsen the situation. The finger is amputated, and Plume is sent home where he is immediately attacked by his wife who reproaches him for not consulting her: "'Tu aurais quand même pu me demander mon avis, dit la femme de Plume à son mari. ...Un homme avec des moignons, je n'aime pas beaucoup ça. Dès que ta main sera un peu trop dégarnie, ne compte plus sur moi.'" Plume, ever conciliatory, does not lose his temper, and thinks only of soothing her: "'Ecoute, dit Plume, ne te tracasse pas pour l'avenir. J'ai encore neuf doigts et puis ton caractère peut changer.'"

Plume is a prisoner in a world dominated by misunderstanding and ruthless force, both of which give rise to endless suffering. In "Plume et les culs-de-jatte," his last words are "Fatigue! Fatigue! On ne nous lâchera donc jamais!" Yet he never succumbs completely in adverse circumstances. Like Michaux, his sense of humor and perseverance enable him to survive in a topsy-turvy world. He relates his travels in a number of imaginary countries in "Les Équilibres singuliers." His reaction to one strange spectacle shows that his limitless curiosity can be a source of strength: "A
une cascade se retient un jeune homme. 'Oh symétrie! me disais-je, te voici en ce couple vraiment appliquée! et j'errais intéressé dans ce monde singulier, oubliant les tenailles de mon mal tenace.'

Plume's naivety, kindness and inherent gallantry are amusingly demonstrated in "Une Mère de neuf enfants." Plume, the indefatigable traveller, has just gotten off the train in Berlin when he is approached by a prostitute who offers herself to him in these words: "Ne partez pas, je vous en supplie. Je suis mère de neuf enfants." Seeing that Plume hesitates to accept her offer, she begins shouting and collects a riotous crowd of other prostitutes. The uproar brings a policeman to the scene who, after hearing the story, gives this surprising advice to Plume: "Ne soyez pas si dur, ...une mère de neuf enfants!" Five of the women drag him into a lice-ridden hotel where they rob him. Plume's reaction is scarcely believable: "Tiens, ...ceci s'appelle être volé, c'est la première fois que cela m'arrive. Voilà ce que c'est que d'écouter les agents de police." Putting on his coat, he starts to leave, but is prevented from doing so by the five angry women who are now determined to force their favors upon him. They disrobe, exhibiting bodies covered by boils. This sight, which would disgust most men, provides Plume with
an opportunity to show his really surprising character; he deals with the situation with his usually good manners: "Pas exactement mon genre, ces femmes-là, mais comment le leur faire comprendre sans les froisser? Et il réfléchissait." While he is considering what to do, the women act: "De force, elles le prirent, l'une après l'autre. Il essaya de se lever, mais la mère de neuf enfants: 'Non, ne sois pas si pressé, mon petit. Tant qu'il n'y a pas eu de sang, il n'y a pas eu de véritable satisfaction.' Et elles recommencèrent." As a final humiliation, he is dragged from the bed and thrown down the stairs. Bemusedly Plume says to himself: "...Tiens, ça fera un fameux souvenir de voyage plus tard." Plume gives proof in this adventure of his determination to meet the situation without doing violence to his personality. He remains calm throughout the whole proceedings, showing both stoicism and courage. Unlike Kafka's universe, Michaux's world is not completely hopeless and tragic; much of what he has written is in the service of a positive goal: "...pour en sortir, pour rebondir, pour chercher, pour plus loin, pour autre chose." Fortunately he has a resilient nature; his determination to take full advantage of each day's possibilities is voiced in this lyrical cry from Passages: "Le matin, au réveil, le monde est lavé. Les
coussins de la santé me soulèvent. J'ai de nouveaux reins."

It is clear that, at the time of his creation, Plume represented many aspects of his creator's character, particularly his inability to be, or even seem to be, like others, to live like "sensible people," to conform. Today, however, Plume belongs to the past. If the reader reviews the reasons that Michaux has given for writing - to keep at bay the hostile forces of the world, to exorcize, to intervene, to attack, to defend, to question, to answer, to enlarge and lengthen the paths leading into the depths of being - he will realize that anything as fragile and limiting as a literary "character" could not long satisfy the poet. Too, the invention of a character is a literary exercise, and belongs to the domain of the professional writer. Michaux has always declared that he is not concerned with literature as an art, and has refused to consider himself an author. Notwithstanding the fact that he is a capable and conscientious craftsman, he insists that he is only an amateur in the writing profession. He wishes his writing to be spontaneous, never a conscious and deliberate literary creation. In "Mes Propriétés," he comments as follows upon the character of his writing: "Rien de l'imagination volontaire des professionels. Ni
thèmes, ni développements, ni construction, ni méthode. Au contraire la seule imagination de l'impuissance à se conformer.\textsuperscript{51} His individualism is manifest in his style; much of his work consists of terse notations suitable for a diary: "Les morceaux, sans liens pré-conçus, y furent faits paresseusement au jour le jour, suivant mes besoins, comme ça venait, sans 'pousser,' en suivant la vague, au pressé toujours, dans un léger vacillement de la vérité, jamais pour construire, simplement pour préserver."\textsuperscript{52}

There are other reasons for his rejection of Plume. When he created his mild-mannered hero, he was in an expansive mood and wished to express his disquietude and dissatisfaction with the world in a more indirect and light-hearted manner. He invented a literary character upon whom he could project his emotions and with whom he could amuse himself. But Michaux was unable to give full measure of himself in this half-real, half-imaginary figure; he could neither completely escape nor completely fulfil himself in Plume. The latter now belongs to the past of a protean and ever-changing author who indicated in the title of one of his first books, \textit{Qui je fus}, his readiness to leave behind him those elements of his personality which he had outgrown.
Notes


2Ibid., p. 114.

3Ibid., p. 115.

4Ibid., p. 115.

5Ibid., p. 88.

6Ibid., p. 89.


8Bertelé, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

9Ibid., p. 112.

10Ibid., pp. 112-13.

11Michaux, *Plume*, p. 49.

12Bertelé, *op. cit.*, p. 163.


14Ibid., p. 99.

15Ibid., pp. 99-100.

16Michaux, *Plume*, p. 83.

17Ibid., p. 83.
18 Michaux, La Nuit ramue, p. 171.

19 Ibid., p. 171.

20 Ibid., p. 171.

21 Ibid., p. 171.

22 Ibid., p. 50.


24 Michaux, Plume, p. 137.

25 Ibid., p. 137.

26 Ibid., p. 137.

27 Ibid., p. 137.

28 Ibid., p. 138.

29 Ibid., p. 138.

30 Ibid., p. 138.

31 Ibid., p. 138.

32 Bréchon, op. cit., p. 50.


34 Michaux, Plume, p. 143.


36 Ibid., p. 159.
37 Ibid., pp. 159-60.
38 Ibid., p. 161.
39 Ibid., p. 161.
40 Ibid., p. 176.
41 Michaux, *Épreuves, Êxorcismes*, p. 22.
42 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 166.
43 Ibid., p. 166.
44 Ibid., p. 166.
46 Ibid., p. 167.
49 Michaux, *Plume*, p. 220.
50 Michaux, *Passages*, p. 112.
52 Ibid., p. 194.
CONCLUSION

It is not easy to define the essential quality of Henri Michaux's poetry. The critics and readers who have studied and read his work over the years are in unanimous agreement concerning this fact. René Bertelé, one of the earliest commentators on Michaux's literary production, begins his short but exhaustive study of the poet with these words:

Il n'est guère commode de parler d'Henri Michaux. Peu de prise sur l'homme et sur l'œuvre. Et ni l'un ni l'autre ne font rien pour. Au contraire : ils se défendent bien. On parle de Michaux, on le dit "turieux", "singulier", "déconcertant".
...Plus encore qu'il déconcerte, Michaux intimide son lecteur, comme tout compagnonnage à vif de l'âme...

He differs from other major contemporary poets, as well as from those who have preceded him; the two latter categories of writers have been attributed a fixed place in the history of letters; they have been assigned to a definite literary school or movement, such as Surrealism, Futurism, Dadaism or Symbolism. "Catalogued" in this manner, they fit neatly and comfortably into the different chapters of literary histories. Very often the critic has studied them with
a view to determining what they have in common with each other instead of examining their work to discover their unique or exceptional qualities, if any. In the case of Michaux, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to adopt the former viewpoint. It is true that at times the reader will remark similarities in the form and content of his work to those of other poets, or an affinity with a given literary movement. But, if he is in a mood to compare and seeks like currents of thought, he will be wise not to carry his analogy too far: the resemblances which he discovers will be superficial. If he should imagine that he has confined Michaux within a category, he will be mistaken. Robert Bréchon, in a conversation with the poet, remarked that he was struck by the number of critics who were intimidated by the latter's work, and asked if he could give a reason for their somewhat fearful respect. His reply well characterizes the protean, elusive character of his personality:

Vous m'en demandez trop. Comment saurais-je? Serait-ce qu'ils sentent que nous sommes et ne sommes pas sur le même bateau? Enfermés dans la littérature, hommes d'une seule foi, ils doivent flairer l'hérétique en moi; ils doivent sentir celui qui, quoique exigeant en littérature à l'extrême, tend, dans le moment même où l'on examine son livre, à se diriger ailleurs.²

Michaux refuses to be bound, circumscribed or
defined; on the contrary, he proclaims the limitlessness of his self: its horizons are only imperfectly glimpsed, its depths only partially explored. Speaking of both his writing and painting, he declares: "Comme j'écris pour trouver, je peins pour trouver, pour retrouver, pour recevoir en cadeau mon propre bien que je possédais sans le savoir, pour étendre les moyens de m'envahir, de m'éveiller, pour, entre des images, éveiller des échos."^3

His poetry is dynamic, and marked by a sense of urgency. He believes that the writing of poetry is not in itself a goal, but a point of departure toward the unknown. With it, he drives ahead, coming to grips with the stuff of reality. It is a means of coping with the real in all its manifestations, both pleasant and harsh: "L'intelligence pour comprendre doit se salir. Avant tout, avant même de se salir, il faut qu'elle soit blessée."^4 Life and thought are one; reality beckons, challenges, demands, and Michaux responds to it with every fiber of his being: "Penser, vivre, mer peu distincte;/ Moi - ça - tremble,/ l'Infini incessamment qui tressaille./ (Pensées), ombres de mondes infimes,/ ombre d'ombres,/ cendres d'ailes."^5 Elsewhere he speaks of the beating rhythm of his bloodstream, a counterpart of the pulsating tempo of life itself: "Le bouillon de
mon sang dans lequel je patauge/ est mon chanteur, ma
laine, mes femmes./ Il est sans croûte./ Il s'enchante,
il s'épand./ Il m'emplit de vitres, de granits, de
tessons./ Il me déchire. Je vis dans les éclats."6 His
work is a series of questions and an attempt to find
the answers to them. In order to be valid, however, a
question does not necessarily have to be the result of
a ratiocinative sequence of thoughts, nor does an idea,
in order to be fruitful, have to be inserted within a
series of logical premises: "Une idée de plus n'est pas
une addition. Non, c'est un désordre ivre, une perte de
sang-froid, une fusée, ensuite une ascension générale."7
His inspiration comes in flashes; ideas are born brus­
quely and without transition. Michaux has described
at length the occurrence of this phenomenon while he is
under the influence of drugs,8 but it also takes place
in his normal state of mind. Ideas do not slowly germi­
nate, but are immediately brought to fruition: "Atten­
tion au bourgeonnement! Écrire plutôt pour court­
circuiter."9 André Gide describes in these terms the
essential character of Michaux's inspiration:

Tres singulier tour d'esprit qui, par sin­
cérité, précipite sans cesse Michaux hors de
l'ornière des conventions, de l'appris par cœur.
Sensation ou pensée, il la suit, sans souci qu'elle
paraisse étrange, bizarre ou même saugrenue.
Il la prolonge et, comme l'araignée, s'y sus­
pend à un fil de sole, laissant le souffle
poétique l'emporter, il ne sait lui-même où,
avec un abandon de tout son être...

Like other modern writers, beginning with Kierkegaard and continuing with Sartre and Camus, he depicts the absurdity of the world we live in. His rebellion, like theirs, is a metaphysical one; like them, he believes that this absurdity is an integral component of being and is ineradicable. It is felt by the heart, and is inescapable to the intellect which seriously reflects on the human condition. Although the awareness of absurdity is personal and basically incommunicable, that is precisely what Michaux strives to do. His poetry is a search for a means to deal with it, and to overcome it, if possible. In order to be equal to such a demanding task, a person must utilize to the fullest his every capacity. Michaux denounces man's tendency to live half-heartedly, to make only partial use of his abilities: "Toute faculté non employée entènèbre les autres facultés. Toute activité qu'on s'est refusée, tout acte qu'on pouvait commettre, empêtre la conduite entière.""}

Like the Existentialist thinkers, he believes that the values which modern man has inherited from the past are wanting, and he rebels against a world molded upon those values. He has not found different ideals which he feels should be binding for all men, nor has he tried. His means of dealing with the anguish stemming
from an absurd world - "intervention," "exorcism,"
and his particular, inimitable kind of humor - are valid
only for himself. Each line that he writes is an
effort to breach the mystery of the self as it is mani-
ifested in his self; each stroke of his brush is a step
further in the voyage of self-exploration; each thought
or image is an attempt to arrive at a deeper and more
constructive self-awareness. His work is the itinerary
which he has followed in his search for meaning, and
an effort to live the human condition authentically.
Notes


3. Ibid., p. 200.


6. Ibid., p. 84.

7. Ibid., p. 114.


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