

The Hermeneutics of Silence: Michaux and Mescaline

Detoxication: a slow-motion wound.

COCTEAU (*Opium*)

There is something terribly depressing about much of drug-inspired literature. The self-righteous and pious moralism of Baudelaire's *Les Paradis artificiels* which conceal only imperfectly the manifest bad faith of its author¹ is not an isolated example. Nor is Robert Desnos' last novel, *Le Vin est tiré*, a fictional tract in the guise of a didactic melodrama without even a trace of the poetic genius so apparent in his earlier poetry. As disappointing as the cautionary essays and tales of over-zealous reformers are the many sporadic attempts by adepts to transcribe the wondrous visions which they thought they perceived through clouds of opium or hashish. There is a flatness in the majority of these depictions, and whether it is Coleridge who tries to give them poetic form in *Kubla Khan*, Thomas de Quincey who includes them in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* or William Bourroughs who invokes them in *The Naked Lunch*, their terrible sameness gives the impression of pictures seen through a glass darkly. One senses behind such efforts the impotence of the dreamer vainly trying to recount what he had seen the morning after when he is no longer even sure of having dreamt. The concrete details which he dredges up or invents serve only to accentuate the void, the absence of the essential. Unlike the dreams which accompany natural sleep, drug-induced ones are impersonal and repetitive. Aldous Huxley notes that under the influence of mescaline "certain classes of perceptual experiences turn

¹ Cf. Claude Pichois and Robert Kopp, "Baudelaire et l'Opium" in *Europe* (April-May, 1967), pp. 61-79.

up again and again.”² And Henri Michaux confirms this observation and goes even further:

Dozens of subjects, questioned during or immediately after these states “without parallel,” say the same thing. Certain sentences, in the confessions of completely different people, are in every respect interchangeable. Just as there is a certain banality of the visionary world, . . . one finds in the world of sensations a certain banality within the extraordinary.³

Perhaps Desnos was right when he wrote that “life is mediocre for those who abandon themselves to opium.”⁴ Huxley would certainly not agree. Recounting his first drug experience he claims to have witnessed “what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.”⁵ And he envisioned the future of mankind as a blissful one thanks to the panacea of the perfect nontoxic and nonaddictive drug which the pharmaceutical industry would eventually produce. While not sharing this almost unbounded enthusiasm, Michaux was certainly not insensitive to the beauties which the state of intoxication had enabled him to perceive. Speaking about the imaginary landscape revealed to him by drugs, he says, “what I saw there, even when it was ludicrous, still counts, is still more real and unforgettable for me than all the countries that I have wandered through.”⁶ Unlike the works of so many of his contemporaries and predecessors, the objective observations of Michaux are devoid of either superficial moralizing or unfounded hyperbole, and thus his analyses are valuable reports on the effects of hallucinogenic agents on the imagination. Furthermore, the actual poetic and pictorial products

² Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1956), p. 14.

³ Henri Michaux, *Les Grandes Epreuves de l'esprit et les innombrables petites* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 131f. All of the translations from the original French are my own. Emphases and capitalizations in this and subsequent quotations are those of Michaux. Future references to this edition, and to all subsequent editions of Michaux's work, are incorporated in the text.

⁴ Robert Desnos, *Le Vin est tiré . . .* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 140.

⁵ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), p. 11.

⁶ Michaux, *L'Infini turbulent* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1957), p. 157.

of his experimentations are as close as anyone has ever come to an expression of the inexpressible.

Drugs are mentioned already in Michaux's first published work, *Les Rêves et la jambe*: "Certain substances (Indian hemp, opium) normally induce in the body a profound sleep and provoke a delightful or disagreeable sensation in the region of the navel and the lower part of the abdomen. These regions stay awake and give birth to beautiful dreams."⁷ And all of his subsequent work has about it a visionary quality which one tends to associate with drug-induced intoxication. He composed hallucinatory poems, both in prose and verse, from *Qui je fus* to *Paix dans les brisements*, many of them written in a language which is the French equivalent of Jabberwocky. The fables contained in *La Lobe des monstres* and in *Vents et poussières* demonstrate his mastery of black humor. In *Apparitions* he is the sorcerer who later on, in *Epreuves, exorcismes . . .*, casts out the demons he had conjured up. And it is Michaux, the restless voyager of trips both real and imaginary, who provides us with the unreal descriptions of real countries (*Ecuador* and *Un Barbare en Asie*) and the realistic descriptions of unreal countries (*Au Pays de la magie*). And then he is the dreamer who noted down the oneiric vignettes of *Un Certain Plume* in which the sweet whimsey of a J. M. Barrie and the convulsive sadism of a Lautréamont are combined. And in fact the gentle smile of Peter Pan and the contorted grimace of Maldoror are present simultaneously in all of these diverse works. Yet it would be a serious error to interpret this intoxicating opus as if it were the product of intoxicants. We must take Michaux at his word when he assures us that he is basically abstemious ("a water drinker"⁸) and that his only contact with drugs prior to the age of fifty had been seven or eight experiments with ether and one dose of laudanum. It is imperative to heed the warning which serves as a conclusion to *Misérable miracle*: "Dilletantes with a unique perspective could, from now on,

⁷ Michaux, *Les Rêves et la jambe* (Antwerp: Editions "Ça Ira," 1923), p. 16.

⁸ Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres*, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 170.

succumb to the temptation of judging the ensemble of my writings as the work of an intoxicate. I am sorry."

Nonetheless, it is the totality of his opus which offers a unique opportunity to study the effects of intoxicants on the literary process. For we have an important body of writings composed without recourse to chemical stimulants, followed by a considerable number of works either directly inspired by them or by their after-effects,⁹ and finally another group of works composed after he had definitively given up drugs. We also know precisely which works fall into the various categories. Thus a close textual analysis and a comparative study of the three groups of poetic and pictorial works coupled with a careful reading of Michaux's own commentaries on his drug experiences could lead to interesting revelations. Even a cursory survey suffices to provide tentative answers to some basic questions and to bring into sharper focus the essential elements of the problematic relationship between chemical stimulants and creativity.

The block of works written under the influence of drugs and usually referred to as the "mescaline cycle"¹⁰ is composed of five works. *Misérable miracle* (1956) represents Michaux's "first knowledge as an observer" (*L'Infini turbulent*, p. 21) and consequently recounts the learning experience of a neophyte who successfully attempts to maintain an intellectual distance from the matter which he is studying. He carefully analyzes after the fact the effects of mescaline and attempts to give an approximation of the actual experience by typographical devices and by the reproduction of samples of the handwritten notes and designs which he composed in the state of intoxication. In *L'Infini turbulent* (1957) this distance is lessened; the result is a depiction of the initiatory stage in which the poet prepares himself, "like a priest," for the encounter with

⁹ According to Michaux, the altered consciousness produced by drugs can last in attenuated form for weeks and even months after their ingestion.

¹⁰ Mescaline was always Michaux's favored drug, but he also experimented with hashish, marijuana, L.S.D. and others and he incorporates the results of his experiences with all of these drugs into the works under discussion.

infinity, the "Great Whirlwind" (p. 23). These two works then are primarily discursive and descriptive. *Paix dans les brisements* (1959) is the poetic product of the preceding observations and initiation and consists of a series of drawings, followed by two poetic essays and a long poem. These four parts form a single artistic unity, a Book in the Mallarmean sense of the word, in which the writer succeeds in doing what Huxley said the mystics of the future would do:

... they may bring back enlightening reports of another, a transcendent country of the mind... they will become conduits through which some beneficent influence can flow out of that other country into a world of darkened selves, chronically dying for lack of it.¹¹

With *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1961) Michaux reverts to a depiction of experiences and dreams but does intersperse a few smaller poems, followed by his own explication of them. In *Les Grandes Epreuves de l'esprit* (1966) he limits himself, as in his first work, to analysis and description. In addition to these five works, there are the innumerable drawings, some of which have been reproduced recently in *Emergences-Resurgences* ("Sentiers de la Création," Geneva: Skira, 1972), as well as the unsuccessful film, "Images du monde visionnaire."¹² This extensive opus is the outcome of Michaux's struggle against what is the greatest menace which the artist confronted with drug-induced visions faces, the danger of succumbing to autism. The accelerated tempo of the drug-induced spectacle makes it all but untranslatable, as he notes in *Les Grandes Epreuves de l'esprit*: "...language seemed a huge machine, pretentious and awkward which falsified everything and moreover receded incessantly in an increasing distancing, leading toward indifference" (p. 28). Thus Michaux was often tempted to imprison himself in absolute mutism. What made it possible for him

¹¹ *The Doors of Perception*, p. 34.

¹² In an interview which he granted me, Michaux expressed his own disappointment with this movie. Yet he does feel that the cinema is an ideal vehicle for the communication of the drug experience and believes that the most successful attempt is to be found in certain of the psychedelic scenes of *Easy Rider*.

to achieve a victory over his ataraxia was his ability to exploit the immediate post-hallucinatory stage. Without succumbing to the temptation of "the excess of mastery, the overly great utilization of the guiding power of thought," he was able to employ his re-discovered intelligence while simultaneously maintaining contact with "the subconscious, the unknown, the mystery" (*Les Grandes Epreuves...*, p. 30).

The six years during which Michaux experimented with drugs represent a period of intensive investigation, and the scope and seriousness of his explorations surpass similar efforts by other writers. Furthermore, his sensitive reportorial imagination enabled him to record with minute accuracy and insight what he had found. But a more important distinguishing feature in his attempt may be discerned in the very nature of the relationship which he established with drugs and what he expected of them. The Romantics and certain of their twentieth century counterparts like the "beat" poets and especially Allan Ginsberg expected intoxicants to open the gates of heaven for them. Michaux is not in search of paradises, artificial or otherwise, which he curtly dismisses in *Connaissance par les gouffres* with the words: "*Drugs bore us with their paradises ... We are not a century for paradises*" (p. 9). His is a quest for knowledge, and of a very particular type. He wants to discover not the product of thought, that is to say ideas, but the very process of thought, the marvelous mechanism which makes knowledge possible:

What happens, the prodigious number of operations which in his most relaxed moment the most ordinary person carries out... routine work, whose product is all that interests him, and not his mechanisms, which nonetheless are marvelous, much more so than his ideas to which he is so attached... unworthy of the unparalleled machine which discovers and manipulates them.

(*Les Grandes Epreuves de l'esprit*, p. 9.)

Unlike the majority of experimenters with drugs, Michaux does not search for the abnormal as an end in itself, but exploits it in order to discover the normal. He adds: "I would like to reveal the

'normal', the unknown, the unsuspected, the incredible, the enormous normal. The abnormal revealed it to me." For Michaux drugs represent nothing more or less than a heuristic device, a valuable tool which in clumsy hands can be dangerous and even destroy the one who manipulates it heedlessly. He "learned" drugs just as he had learned those languages which he needed for his work. And in the same way that he always forgets languages when he no longer finds them useful, so he discarded drugs when they had served their purpose.¹³ They opened up a domain for him to explore, a marvelous country, but like all countries, limited by certain frontiers.

In the process of reconstituting his experiences with mescaline, Michaux destroys a number of myths concerning the effects of drugs. He refuses the notion that they are creative when at the most they are revelatory. He could subscribe to the analysis that

To believe that certain medically induced exaltations, among them those produced by hallucinogenic agents, give birth to a second state rich in ideas, in allusions by extravasation of the imaginary, or in unheard-of literary or artistic expression, is pure lie and illusion.¹⁴

An artist can only create with what he already possesses. A mediocre imagination, no matter how stimulated, cannot surpass its own mediocrity. There are no medications to enrich the phantasy, to raise the level of intelligence, or to transform sterility into creativity. At best pharmaceutical agents can produce an ambience favorable to artistic endeavor. This they do by "releasing the brakes" with which man constantly regulates his thoughts, with the result that there is an uncontrolled change in the rate of speed of the mental processes.¹⁵ Or, to employ another image which recurs in the work

¹³ Michaux himself used this analogy in the interview with me. He also said that he had purposely avoided those drugs, like heroin, which create a strong physiological dependence.

¹⁴ Dr. Olivier Loras, *Rencontre avec Henri Michaux au plus profond des gouffres* (Chassieu: J. and S. Bleyou, 1967), p. 78.

¹⁵ Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée, (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 164f. In the case of depressants, like nembutal, just the reverse is true: the brakes are applied and there is deceleration.

of Michaux, they “derail” man, who, like a train, normally follows a prescribed track. In brief, drugs break down the artificial categories which make it possible for man to live, but which also imprison him. But by escaping from these categories man does not find freedom. The “derailed” person is merely shunted onto another track, one not chosen by him but for him by mescaline. The evasion turns out to be illusory, as the prisoner is merely transferred from one cell to another. As Michaux says in *Misérable miracle*: “It was rather that one felt caught, prisoner in a workshop of the brain” (p. 16).

Scattered throughout Michaux’s reflections are notations which indicate his disappointment. Drugs are incapable of fulfilling man’s expectations and their effects are as often as not actually negative. The use of drugs can be deleterious; far from stimulating the imagination, they significantly diminish its powers: “Mescaline diminishes the imagination. It castrates the image, desensualises it” (*Misérable miracle*, p. 64). In addition, drugs and Eros are incompatible and Michaux notes that “halluciogenic drugs... have the effect of presiding over the dispossession of Love” (*L’Infini turbulent*, p. 234). With the impoverishment of the imagination and the banishment of love, poetry as we know it becomes impossible. This is the conclusion which Michaux reaches in *Misérable miracle*: “Thus it [mescaline] is the enemy of poetry, of meditation and especially of mystery” (p. 64).

Drugs are inimical to poetry, abolish love, destroy the imagination, and, while seeming to liberate man, enslave him. The visions they produce are nothing but a “stupid enchantment” (*Misérable miracle*, p. 15). In what seems like a total indictment, Michaux speaks of the “hallucinogenic drugs as demolishers of the spirit and of the person” (*Connaissance par les gouffres*, p. 179). Despite such serious charges, Michaux’s attitude remains ambivalent. Although confined within a drug-created cell, he was able to explore this new habitat before his release and thus to discover some astonishing landscapes within this “workshop of the brain.” Perhaps the “enchantment” only seems “stupid” because it is of a nature so different from what we

normally consider as poetic. For mescaline does create images, but of an abstract type not usually associated with poetry. They are "one hundred percent pure" and "so perfectly stripped of the comfortable fur wrapping of sensation . . . that they are the spring-board of the pure mental, of the abstract and of demonstration" (*Misérable miracle*, p. 64). In other words, although deprived of sensuality, of the poetic aura, the images produced by drugs might be capable of revealing the structures of the mental processes which Michaux seeks to discover.

In writing of the Parnassian poets, Sartre says that "the visions which drugs impose on them do not emerge from their inner depths: they do not even belong to them."¹⁶ These objective images, which are not the property of the individual within whom they are realized, are almost impossible to transcribe because the passive nature of the contemplation which they induce is opposed to the active nature inherent in the artistic act. In the words of Huxley,

Mescaline opens up the way of Mary, but shuts the door on that of Martha. It gives access to contemplation—but to a contemplation that is incompatible with action and even the will to action, the very thought of action.¹⁷

Michaux, by an incredible effort of the will, was, as we have seen, able to surmount this difficulty, but only to find himself faced with yet another impossibility. He discovered that the objective mescaline visions cannot be translated because their accelerated rhythm is incompatible with the rhythm of artistic creation. No matter how rapidly he works, the artist is always outdistanced by the visionary. The artist's efforts to keep up result in spastic motions. Thus, whatever medium he chooses, the direct transcription of these states results in failure. The drawings actually done while under the influence of a drug are a series of seismographic lines, repeated endlessly and meaninglessly. The notes which he takes at such times

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille. Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Philosophie, 1971-1972), III, 409.

¹⁷ *The Doors of Perception*, p. 32.

are graphemes attached to nothing, resembling the scrawled transcription of the babbling associated with infancy or senility. At best then it would seem that the experimenter with mescaline can describe his hallucinations only after the event, but the results then are usually both banal and false. Banal because all such descriptions resemble each other and false because the very faculties which he employs to depict the extra-sensory state are the ones whose suppression was essential for the creation of this state.

Michaux resolved this dilemma by admitting the impossibility of reconstructing the moment of "gratuitous grace"¹⁸ and turning his attention instead to another phase of the drug experience, the one which Cocteau had described as "the unique moment of a detoxication when the hallucinatory faculty still functions a little and coincides, by accident, with the return of the ability to communicate."¹⁹ As Michaux relates in *Les Grandes Epreuves de l'esprit*, this moment of intense suffering and joy contains a wondrous sequence of experiences which reveals "the *unique nature* of thought, its sudden birth" (p. 21). After the disintegration and chaos of hallucination, it is the ecstasy of rediscovered unity: "Refound unicity, what a godsend!" (p. 17). Michaux transforms this moment into the work *Paix dans les brisements*, which is at the same time a poetic reconstruction of the post-drug period, a depiction of thought coming into being and a mystic hymn. The concrete details of the text describe the psycho-physical symptoms of drug withdrawal, which, taken together, present an almost clinical depiction of the detoxication syndrome. There is the distortion of temporal and spatial perception, the shattering and reintegration of internal structures, the inhuman chill of the body, and in general a sense of instability. Simultaneously, the same details recount the steps of the *via negativa* which leads to a vision of the transcendent:

while an extreme chill
takes hold of the members of my deserted body
my soul disburdened of the burden of the self

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁹ Jean Cocteau, *Opium. Journal d'une désintoxication* (Paris: Librairie Stock, 1930), pp. 151f.

follows within an infinite which animates it without defining itself
 the incline towards the high
 the ever higher²⁰

These verses convey the physical sensation of coldness and the feeling of dispossession which are familiar signs of the incipient convalescence of the body deprived of the chemical stimulants on which it had come to depend. They also communicate the process of destruction of the inessential, of the self, symbolized by the vacating of the body, which is a prerequisite for the encounter with the void and the eventual discovery of nirvana. It is around this revelation that the upward spiral of the poem turns. But at the core of the vortex there is always a vacuum, the stillness in the eye of the whirlwind. And at the very center of the poem is silence, at the very center of the drawings emptiness: "in the region of the primordial the recitalist falls silent" (*Paix dans les brisements*, p. 40). This is not the impotent autism of an anesthetized will, nor the sterile blankness of Mallarmé's unviolated page. It is the result of a conscious decision: "at that moment I found the inward knowledge that I must not, and especially *why* I must not speak any more" (*L'Infini turbulent*, p. 23). Thus the absence of words, "absence which I have firmly decided to maintain,"²¹ becomes a positive quality, the only explication possible. The unspoken and unspeakable word attains the same realm of the ideal in which is found the flower absent from all bouquets.

In one of his earliest writings, Michaux expressed his aspirations:

Will man in his entirety understand the fragments of man?
 INEVITABLY, IF NOT TODAY, TOMORROW.
 MODERN STUDIES BEAR ON UNHEARD-OF PHENOMENA.

(*Les Rêves et la jambe*, p. 26)

The problems posed by fragmentation, the desire for unicity, the importance of extraordinary phenomena, all of these elements are

²⁰ Michaux, *Paix dans les brisements* (Paris: Flinker, 1959), p. 47.

²¹ Michaux, *Façons d'endormi. Façons d'éveillé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 237.

already present thirty years before Michaux ingested mescaline for the first time. So his basic project was not transformed, but rather reinforced, by his experiments with drugs. Years after Michaux had renounced drugs, he wrote some words of advice which help explain what mescaline did for him:

The enemy which is your structure, force it to reveal itself. If you have been unable to modify your destiny, you will have been nothing but a rented apartment.²²

With the help of drugs Michaux had succeeded in modifying his own internal architecture to such an extent that he could express a vision present in seminal form from the very start. This modification did not cease with the termination of the drug experiments, and its effects can be seen in all of his subsequent works for "the man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out."²³

²² Michaux, *Poteaux d'angle* (Paris: L'Herne, 1971), p. 12.

²³ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, p. 63. The "Door in the Wall" is H. G. Wells's phrase for what gives access to the world beyond.