HENRI MICHAUX (1899–1984) was born in Namur, Belgium, the son of a lawyer, and educated at a Jesuit school in Brussels. He contemplated entering the priesthood, turned to the study of medicine, then left school entirely, enlisting instead as a stoker in the French merchant marine. Michaux’s travels, throughout the Americas, Asia, and Africa, were to inspire his first two books, the extraordinary travelogues Ecuador and A Barbarian in Asia (later translated into Spanish by Jorge Luis Borges). Settling in Paris, Michaux began to write and paint, and his work, especially his prose poems recounting the strange and very funny misadventures of the character he called Monsieur Plume, drew the attention and praise of other writers, among them André Gide. In 1948 Michaux’s wife died after accidentally setting her nightgown on fire; devastated, Michaux devoted himself increasingly to his distinctive calligraphic drawings in ink. He also began to take mescaline at regular intervals, recording his deeply disorienting, often traumatic experiences in a series of unflinching texts beginning with Miserable Miracle. Celebrated in France and around the world for his accomplishments as a writer and artist, Michaux remained averse to publicity and public honors throughout his life, and in 1965 refused the French Grand Prix National des Lettres. For many years the only photograph of himself that he allowed to circulate showed his right hand holding a pen over a sheet of paper on a chaotic writing desk.
OCTAVIO PAZ (1914–1998) was born in Mexico City, and his extraordinarily busy and fruitful life took him from civil-war Spain to surrealist Paris, from US universities to the Mexican embassy in New Delhi, where he served for six years as ambassador before resigning in protest after his government’s suppression of student demonstrations at the 1968 Olympic Games. A great poet, Paz was also the author of many essays and a study of Mexican identity, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, as well as the founder and editor of two important journals, *Plural* and *Vuelta*. Octavio Paz received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990.
INTRODUCTION

HENRI MICHAUX published three books between 1956 and 1959 dealing with his experience with mescaline.* He also confronted us with a disturbing series of sketches—most of them in black and white, and a few in color—executed shortly after each of his experiences. His prose, his poems, and his sketches are intimately related, for each medium of expression reinforces and illuminates the others. The sketches are not simply illustrations of the texts. Michaux’s painting has never been a mere adjunct to his poetry: the two are at once autonomous and complementary worlds. In the case of the “mescaline experience,” lines and words form a whole almost impossible to break down into its component elements. Forms, ideas, and sensations intertwine as though they were a single, dizzyingly proliferating entity. In a certain sense the sketches, far from being illustrations of the written word, are a sort of commentary. The rhythm and the movement of the lines are mindful of a kind of curious musical notation, except that we are confronted not with a method of recording sounds but with vortexes, gashes, interweavings of being. Incisions in the bark of time, halfway between the ideograph and the magical sign, characters and forms “more palpable than legible,” these sketches are a criticism of

poetic and pictorial writing, that is to say, a step beyond the sign and the image, something transcending words and lines.

Painting and poetry are languages that Michaux has used to try to express something that is truly inexpressible. A poet first, he began to paint when he realized that this new medium might enable him to say what he had found it impossible to say in his poetry. But is it a question of expression? Perhaps Michaux has never tried to express anything. All his efforts have been directed at reaching that zone, by definition indescribable and incommunicable, in which meanings disappear. A center at once completely empty and completely full, a total vacuum and a total plenitude. The sign and the signified—the distance between the object and the conscience that contemplates it—melt away in the face of the overwhelming presence, the only thing that really exists. Michaux’s œuvre—his poems, his real and imaginary travels, his painting—is an expedition winding its way toward some of our infinities—the most secret, the most fearful, and at times the most derisive ones—in a never-ending search for the other infinite.

Michaux travels via his languages: lines, words, colors, silences, rhythms. And he does not hesitate to break the back of a word, the way a horseman does not hesitate to wind his mount. In order to arrive: where? At that nowhere that is here, there, and everywhere. Language as a vehicle, but also language as a knife and a miner’s lamp. Language as cautery and as bandage, language as fog and a siren amid the fog. A pick striking rock and a spark in the blackness. Words once again become tools, prolongations of the hand, of the eye, of thought. A nonartistic language. Slashing, cutting words, reduced to their most immediate and most forthright function: clearing a path. Their utility is paradoxical, however, since they are not employed to foster communication, but rather pressed into the service of the incommunicable. The extraordinary tension of Michaux’s language stems from the fact that it is an undoubtedly effective tool, but its sole use is to bare something that is completely ineffective by its very nature: the state of non-knowledge that is beyond knowledge, the thought that no longer thinks because it has been united with itself, total transparency, a motionless whirlwind.
Misérable miracle opens with this phrase: “This book is an exploration. By means of words, signs, drawings. Mescaline, the subject explored.” When I had read the last page, I asked myself whether the result of the experiment had not been precisely the opposite: the poet Michaux explored by mescaline. An exploration or an encounter? The latter, most probably. A physical encounter with the drug, with the earthquake, with the cataclysm of being, shaken to its very foundations by its inner enemy—an enemy that is one with our own intimate being, an enemy that is indistinguishable and inseparable from ourselves. An encounter with mescaline: an encounter with our own selves, with the known-unknown. The double that wears our own face as its mask. The face that is gradually obliterated and transformed into an immense mocking grimace. The devil. The clown. This thing that I am not. This thing that I am. A martyrissible apparition. And when my own face reappears, there is nobody there. I too have left myself. Space, space, pure vibration. A great gift of the gods, mescaline is a window through which we look out upon endless distances where nothing ever meets our eye but our own gaze. There is no I: there is space, vibration, perpetual animation. Battles, terrors, elation, panic, delight: is it Michaux or mescaline? It was all already there in Michaux, in his previous books. Mescaline was a confirmation. Mescaline: a testimony. The poet saw his inner space in outer space. The shift from the inside to the outside—an outside that is interiority itself, the heart of reality. A horrible, ineffable spectacle. Michaux can say: I left my life behind to catch a glimpse of life.

It all begins with a vibration. An imperceptible movement that accelerates minute by minute. Wind, a long screeching whistle, a lashing hurricane, a torrent of faces, forms, lines. Everything falling, rushing forward, ascending, disappearing, reappearing. A dizzying evaporation and condensation. Bubbles, more bubbles, pebbles, little stones. Rocky cliffs of gas. Lines that cross, rivers meeting, endless bifurcations, meanders, deltas, deserts that walk, deserts that fly. Disintegrations, agglutinations, fragmentations, reconstitutions. Shattered words, the copulation of syllables, the fornication of meanings. Destruction of language. Mescaline reigns through silence—and it screams, screams
without a mouth, and we fall into its silence! A return to vibrations, a plunge into undulations. Repetitions: mescaline is an “infinity-machine.” Heterogeneity, a continuous eruption of fragments, particles, pieces. Furious series. Nothing is fixed. Avalanches, the kingdom of uncountable numbers, accursed proliferation. Gangrenous space, cancerous time. Is there no center? Battered by the gale of mescaline, sucked up by the abstract whirlwind, the modern Westerner finds absolutely nothing to hold on to. He has forgotten the names, God is no longer called God. The Aztec or the Tarahumara had only to pronounce the name, and immediately the presence would descend, in all its infinite manifestations. Unity and plurality for the ancients. For us who lack gods: Pullulation and Time. We have lost the names. All we have left is “causes and effects, antecedents and consequences.” Space teeming with trivialities. Heterogeneity is repetition, an amorphous mass. Miserable miracle.

Michaux’s first encounter with mescaline ends with the discovery of an “infinity-machine.” The endless production of colors, rhythms, and forms turns out in the end to be an awesome, absurd flood of cheap trinkets. We are millionaires with vast hoards of fairgrounds junk. The second series of experiments (L’infini turbulent) provoked unexpected reactions and visions. Subject to continuous physiological discharges and a pitiless psychic tension. Being split apart. The exploration of mescaline, like a great fire or an earthquake, was devastating; all that remained intact was the essential, that which, being infinitely weak, is infinitely strong. What name can we give this faculty? Is it in fact a faculty, a power, or is it an absence of power, the total helplessness of man? I am inclined to believe it is the latter. This helplessness is our strength. At the last moment, when there is nothing left in us—when self is lost, when identity is lost—a fusion takes place, a fusion with something alien to us that nonetheless is ours, the only thing that is truly ours. The empty pit, the hole that we are fills to overflowing, and becomes a wellspring once again. When the drought is most severe, water gushes forth. Perhaps there is a point where the being of man and the being of the universe meet. Apart from this, nothing positive: a hole, an abyss, a turbulent infinite. A forsakenness, alienation, but not
insanity. Madmen are imprisoned within their madness, which is an ontological error, so to speak: taking the part for the whole. Equidistant from sanity and insanity, the vision Michaux describes is total: contemplation of the demoniacal and the divine—there is no way around these words—as an indivisible reality, as the ultimate reality. Of man or of the universe? I do not know. Perhaps of the man-universe. Man penetrated, conquered by the universe.

The demoniacal stage of the experiment was above all the revelation of a transhuman eroticism—and therefore infinitely perverted. A psychic rape, an insidious opening and extending and exhibiting of the most secret parts of being. Not at all sexual. An infinitely sensual universe, from which the human body and the human face had disappeared. Not the “triumph of matter” or that of the flesh, but the vision of the reverse side of the spirit. An abstract lasciviousness: “Dissolution—an apt word that I understood instantly. Delight in deliquescence.” Temptation, in the literal sense of the word, as all the mystics (Christian, Buddhist, Arab) have reported. I nonetheless confess that I do not understand this passage at all. Perhaps the cause of Michaux’s sense of repulsion was not so much the contact with Eros as the vision of the confusion of the cosmos, that is to say, the revelation of pure chaos. The visible entrails, the reverse side of presence, chaos is the primordial stuff, the original disorder, and also the universal womb. I felt a similar sensation, though a much less intense one, in the great summer of India, during my first visit in 1952. Once I had fallen into that panting maw, the universe seemed to me to be an immense, multiple fornication. I suddenly had a glimpse of the meaning of the architecture of Konarak and erotic asceticism. The vision of chaos is a sort of ritual bath, a regeneration through immersion in the original fountain, a return to the “life before.” Primitive tribes, the early Greeks, the Chinese, Taoists, and other peoples have had no fear of this awesome contact. The Western attitude is unwholesome. It is moral. Morality, the great isolator, the great separator, divides man in half. To return to the unity of the vision is to reconcile body, soul, and the world. At the end of the experiment, Michaux recalls a fragment of a Tantric poem:
Inaccessible to impregnations,
Enjoying all joys,
Touching everything like the wind,
Everything penetrating it like ether,
The ever-pure yogi
Bathes in the ever-flowing river.
He enjoys all joys and nothing defiles him.

The divine vision—inseparable from the demoniacal vision, since both are revelations of unity—began with “the appearance of the gods.” Thousands, hundreds of thousands, one after the other, in an endless file, an infinity of august countenances, a horizon of beneficent presences. Amazement and gratitude. But before that: surges of whiteness. Whiteness everywhere, sonorous, resplendent. And light, seas of light. Afterward, the divine images disappeared though the tranquil, delightful cascade of being did not cease. Admiration: “I cling to the divine perfection of the continuation of Being through time, a continuation that is so beautiful—so beautiful that I lose consciousness—so beautiful that, as the Mahabharata says, the gods themselves grow jealous and come to admire it.” Trust, faith [in what? simply faith], the sensation of being carried along by perfection that flows ceaselessly [and yet does not flow], ever identical with itself. An instant is born, ascends, opens out, disappears, just as another instant is born and ascends. One felicity after another. An inexpressible feeling of abandon and security. The vision of the gods is followed by nonvision: we are at the very heart of time. This journey is a return: a letting go, an unlearning, a traveling homeward to birth. On reading these pages of Michaux, I remembered a pre-Columbian object that the painter Paalen showed me some years ago: a block of quartz with the image of the old and wrinkled god Tlaloc engraved on it. He went over to a window and held it up to the light:

Touched by light
The quartz is suddenly a cascade.
The infant god floats on the waters.
Nonvision: outside of actuality, history, purposes, calculations, hate, love, “beyond resolution and want of resolution, beyond preferences,” the poet journeys back to a perpetual birth and listens to “the endless poem, without rhymes, without music, without words, that the Universe ceaselessly recites.” The experience is participation in an infinite that is measure and rhythm. The words water, music, light, great open space, echoing and re-echoing, inevitably come to our lips. The self disappears, but no other self appears to occupy the empty space it has left. No god but rather the divine. No faith but rather the primordial feeling that sustains all faith, all hope. No face but rather faceless being, the being that is all faces. Peace in the crater of the volcano, the reconciliation of man—what remains of man—with total presence.

On embarking on his experiment, Michaux wrote: “I propose to explore the mediocre human condition.” The second part of this sentence—a sentence which applies, I might add, to Michaux’s entire œuvre and to that of any great artist—turned out to be strikingly false. The exploration showed that man is not a mediocre creature. A part of oneself—a part walled in, obscured from the very beginning of the beginning—is open to the infinite. The so-called human condition is a point of intersection with other forces. Perhaps our condition is not merely human.

—Octavio Paz
Translated by Helen R. Lane

INTRODUCTION xi