

CONTEMPLATIVE STUDIES THE FIELD OF MY CONSCIOUSNESS¹

Henri Michaux

The French poet and painter Henri Michaux examined what he called the “dangerous interior,” the knife-edge of existence between sanity and madness. He said: “I want to lift the veil from the ‘normal,’ the unrecognized, unsuspected, incredible, enormous normal.”² To this task he brought a watchmaker’s precision and the astonishment of a child. Here is an English translation of a prose-poem that Michaux composed about the shocking interior of madness?, meditation?, hyper-lucidity of any kind? In his unique way, Michaux means to bear witness to a fundamental and chaotic movement of mind called impermanence. [Editor’s note]

In the field of my consciousness there is nothing fixed. There could not be anything fixed. Only through renewed efforts could anything be fixed. Below, above, what is mainly there is a great unconsciousness.

Responses come from far away, signs of unsuspected alliances. The thread of the relationships cannot be glimpsed. Spears of grain rise from seeds I did not sow. In the field of my consciousness, there are strange, unpredictable resonances.

Peak instants traverse soundless arrays. Upthrusts appear that are not as important as the subsidences. Fascinating centers of interest that are only shimmers. In the field of my consciousness, energy drawn from repulsed ideas forms a center among all the centers.

Through the long time that I have lived, no abode has been built in my consciousness. There is only ever and again a persistent desire for something provable, essential evidence in the midst of which I could finally find an abode. A vain wish. In the field of my consciousness there are mainly indeterminables, ceaseless irregular recurrences.

Periods come. Periods pass, periods that I had to learn to know, that it is necessary to recognize timely, because infringement of the period wounds and nullifies.

In one, stupidity is the end and error the beginning. In the other, stupidity commands and error follows and completes. In one, inspiration is the beginning. In the other, inspiration is only the continuation, overflowing of contamination, fruition and ending.

In one, I see a tree or rather the branches or rather the flowers or only some stamens bending in the basin of a corolla. In the other, I don't see the tree, nor its members, nor any of its flowers. The tree has disappeared in the forest, which is all that is present to me.

In one, I follow the roads of the earth and have no other instruction. In the other, the unicorn, who has wounded me, does not let me heal.

In one, I am fooled by the terraces, by the peaks, by the elevations, by the goals and the imbecilic numbers—distorted by zeal. In the other, the sun remains hidden for me. The world at each instant faded and gray as though seen by animals whose eyes don't perceive colors—distorted by inertia.

In one, I attack, I must, my well-being is to attack. In the other I play. Without anger, I throw stones at everything that moves.

In one, I overthrow taboos, I sleep with my sister, and the angel and the demon play simultaneously and everything is fine and the whole thing is blameless. In the other, the tomtom of shame dully sounds. I hear what I shouldn't hear. The plough doesn't manage to cut through the laughter that surrounds me.

In one, I'm working. In the other, I am the son of space. The son of space does not have the heart of a potter. Why would he work, the traitor to the white tower?

In one, I live with nothing facing me. In the other, the others' mystery penetrates me. My life no longer exists. There is only their life, which I vigilantly attempt to comprehend and feel.

Thus periods pass and pass, removing me from myself, hardly leaving me a corridor. Each one in its turn attracts me and rallies me definitively to its exclusive existence, which, however, is only a tide.

When one appears, the preceding one disappears. The one that

appears, to be overtaken thereafter by the following one, which in its turn entirely devalues it, disappears similarly effaced, and a new one appears, and then another one appears, and then still another, but the ensemble of all of them does not appear and the panorama of periods to come does not enter into my consciousness.

The laws that are the laws here, applied, not explained, hardly glimpsed, how can they be expressed? Nonetheless, everything that enters in must follow these laws, for HERE does not recognize anybody's laws but refashions everything in its own personal fashion by means of flowing grafts, by transmutations, by associations, and by peremptory ostracisms.

Complex the inside. Complex the outside, the continually renewed outside. And its apparent zones and its inapparent zones. Signs are made to me that I do not distinguish. Models are submitted to me, calls reach me that I transform in imaginations. Warnings that I take for "words," for curious images, toys to amuse me for a moment. Packagewise, the facts enter, and the one that was designated—destined for me passes unnoticed in the group that is passing through.

And other comings—ashore and other seas.

Thoughts, not for me, want to enter into consonance with me. The thoughts seek union. On the edge of my consciousness, pushing, pushed, provocative thoughts, insistant, which I only manage (just barely) to get rid of by means of multiple divorces, by incessant divorces, by lightning divorces (of which I have learned the secret).

And other comings—ashore and other seas.

Thoughts for my construction, but lined to undesirables from which I must promptly detach them.

At the door of my consciousness (Should I open up? Should I not open up?) massacres take place (should I open?), celebrations (to hell with their celebrations, I'm not opening), combats, exaltations (Do I have to open? To which ones yes? To which ones no? And how to separate them?).

Evenings loaded with territories, cataclysms, foreign problems, lively foreigners, mystifying ones....

Nonetheless, with the arrival of night, my intermediaries keep the vigil without me in order to empty the premises—repressing,

sorting, disengaging, stifling noises, disturbances, and murmurs in a growing silence.

Mornings with no problem. Ageless awakenings. We have lost count of encounters. Emotions are no longer in motion. The recent suffocating knowledge has transformed into a new peaceable ignorance. No one on the threshold. My holding tank is silent. I hear just simply the song, the song of existence, unformulated answer to unformulated questions. Far away, far away, in stretches without end...that I don't reach, that don't reach me, that I don't know about at all, that blindly, without my advice, the first barriers of my categorically selective organism keep out, however seemingly enjoying life: the consciousnesses.

Minute ones, short-lived, which only have a few seconds to grasp the elusive meaning of this world.

Immense ones, which far away, far beyond the remotest distance, enormous ones ever outside the field of my consciousness, which after thousands of centuries have still not achieved a satisfactory view of the universe, of which vainly they try to pierce the mystery of the infinitely little ones.

Distant also in another way, though quite close, who knows? Prowlers badly detached, badly attached (who are you stimulating? irritating? opposing?) beyond?, on this side?, trans me? illuminated and ludicrous, human, too human, unknown consciousnesses, larvae of transcendence. Consciousness in all ways and directions.

Oddly, without obstacles in a disobstructed space and time, in crumbs, short versions, shot through with warnings of a deadly future (nonetheless, feeble, silly, obstinate as much as enlightened), consciousnesses on a chain of other consciousnesses, drawing—by moments, as though slyly—on the Common Reservoir of Knowledge.

Hoping of myself perhaps more silence, a much, much, much, much greater silence, consciousnesses waiting at the opaque windows of my consciousness, of my truly ghastly unconsciousness...a while longer my consciousness.

NOTES

1. Michaux, Henri. *Wind and dust*. Paris: Editions Galerie Karl Flinker, 1962. (trans. Michael Kohn).
2. Michaux, Henri. *Major ordeals of the mind and countless minor ones*. Paris: Editions Galerie Karl Flinker. p. 3.