Introduction

> How can we live without the unknown in front of (*devant*) us?
>
> Men of today want the poem to be in the image of their lives, composed of such little consideration, of such little space, and burned with intolerance.
>
> Because it is no longer given to them to act supremely, in this fatal preoccupation of self-destruction at the hands of their fellowmen, because of their inert wealth holds them back and enslaves them, men of today, their instinct weakened, lose—still keeping alive—even the dust of their names.
>
> Born from the summons of becoming and from the anguish of retention, the poem, rising from its well of mud and of stars, will bear witness, almost silently, that it contained nothing which did not truly exist elsewhere, in this rebellious and solitary world of contradictions.
>
> —René Char, "Le poème pulverisé"

René Char asked, "How can we live without the unknown before us?"[1] But how to speak of the "unknown"? Not as an intellectual category opposed to the "known," opposed to and replacing the unknown with what we might call the book of knowledge, but the unknown as the summons of a night, of a void, of an infinite "becoming" and an "anguish," something that can only be named in a neutral voice, as Blanchot suggests in his essay on

1. René Char, "Le poème pulvérisé," in *Furor and Mystery & Other Writings*, trans. and eds. Mary Ann Caws and Nancy Kline (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2010), 244–45. Quoted in Maurice Blanchot, *l'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 439. Trans. by Susan Hanson as *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 298.

Char.[2] This is what is exceptional in the voices we shall hear in the pages that follow: that "the unknown" is not something "before" or "in front of" them, as though it were a future, looming possibility, something always and already ahead of us, like death, a vanishing point of intentionality. They speak not *of* the unknown but *from* the unknown. The "unknown" in this context has its best equivalents in words having no gender, no specific assignation, words that were once the currency of ancient myth and have returned to form the song of our modern myths: Night—"la jouissance de la nuit," as Bataille wrote[3]—Void, Excess, Laughter, the Impossible, what can only be "non-savoir," as Bataille phrased it. How can we live without the "Impossible" before us, the poet asks? Not the impossible as a yet to be realized possibility, but only as something ever not possible, yet included in the poem in all its unrealizable impossibility as what might be called the limit-figure of its existence. An irreducible, impossible unknown that marks the limit-experiences, the "tests," the *épreuves* undergone by these authors, Bataille, Michaux, and Klossowski. This is an irreplaceable, irremovable unknown that draws the reader into these works, a centrifugal pull experienced as we seek answers to what are not questions, really, but paradoxes, enigmas, voices telling us of strange voyages they have endured and turned back from, telling us from the limits of the possible for language what they have seen, what they have heard, what they have suffered, and where they have found joy.

Hence our title. The songs, the poems, the writings and works of art these three, Bataille, Klossowski, and Michaux, have left us do not come from the unspeakable depths directly, clearly, and unequivocally. Rather they come indirectly, obliquely, as "apparitions," as "emanations," as "pulverized" poems, as a "virulence of phantasms," not the writings and paintings of an "author" but of a "daemon," a being, a force unknown, an impossible being.[4]

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2. Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 298.

3. Georges Bataille, "Le non-savoir," in *OC* XII, 286. See also, "L'évidence de la nuit," in *Henri Michaux: Oeuvres récents* (Paris: Le Point Cardinal, 1985), unpaginated: "l'épanchement lyrique de la nuit qui recouvre le silence du ciel."

4. As Bataille wrote, "When a man or woman (*l'homme*) seeks to represent him/herself, no longer as a moment of a homogenous process . . . but as a new tear (*déchirement*) at the interior of an already torn nature (*nature déchirée*), the levelling phraseologies that stem from the understanding will be of little avail: he/she can no longer recognize him/herself in the degrading chains of logic . . . to the contrary, recognizes him/herself only in the virulence of his/her phantasms." "Dossier de l'oeil pineal (1)," in *OC* II, 22; trans. mine.

Little need, let us hope, to introduce the lives and works behind the names Bataille, Klossowski, and Michaux. They are all well-known French writers and artists. Georges Bataille was first and foremost a writer. He died in 1962, but since then there has been a renaissance of interest in his writings when Éditions Gallimard published his *Oeuvres complètes*, beginning in 1970 with volume I and finishing with volume XII in 1988. An amazing production from the hands of a man mostly famous in the popular imagination for his self-recorded dissipations in Parisian bordellos and bars.[5] In fact, he was anguished and yet joyfully driven to writing,[6] writing as a means of escaping the dark fingers of madness, perhaps, or of facing his madness in the madness of writing. Of the incendiary novels, three titles have especially attained notoriety: *Histoire de l'œil*, published in 1928 under the humorous pseudonym Lord Auch; the 1937 *Madame Edwarda*, first published in 1941 (Éditions du Solitaire), also anonymously, this time under the pseudonym Pierre Angélique; and *Le Bleu du ciel*, written in 1935, first published in 1936 in Bataille's journal *Minotaure*, then in 1943 in *L'Expérience intérieure*. Roger Laporte considers these Bataille's supreme achievements, not just for their raw, scandalous subject matter but for their savage beauty and economy of writing. Yukio Mishima strikes a similar tone in his introductory essay to the English translation of three of Bataille's novels: *My Mother*, *Madame Edwarda*, and *The Dead Man*.[7] Bataille's more philosophical works—and this is a characterization that can only be applied with considerable reservations and discussions as to what would constitute a "philosophy" in this case—*L'Expérience intérieure*, for just one example, collected under the title *La Somme athéologique*, underscore his readings of Hegel in connection with the Kojève seminars (1933–1939) and his readings of Nietzsche, especially his *Sur Nietzsche*, published by Gallimard in 1945. Likewise, his essays on eroticism seem more academic in tone. As Laporte phrases it, they only

5. See, for example, one of Bataille's many self-descriptions: "I differ from my friends in not caring a damn for any convention, taking my pleasures in the basest of things. . . . Ending up, drunk and red-faced, in a dive full of naked women." *L'Impossible*, in *OC* III, 107. Trans. by Robert Hurley as *The Impossible* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1991), 17.

6. Bataille: "Comment nous attarder à des livres auxquels, sensiblement, l'auteur s'a plus été contraint?" ("How can we linger over books to which their authors have manifestly not been *driven*?"). *Le Bleu du ciel*, in *OC* III, 381. Trans. by Harry Mathews as *The Blue of Noon* (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 153.

7. Yukio Mishima, "Georges Bataille and *Divinus Deus*," in *My Mother*, *Madame Edwarda*, *The Dead Man*, by Bataille, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 9–21.

talk about eroticism from the exterior vantage point of a book, unlike the early novels that seem afire in the sexual hells they narrate. Laporte also points to the "anthropological works" from the postwar period, especially the 1955 Skira edition on Lascaux. But as chapter 1, "Apparitions," shows, the roots of Bataille's "anthropological" interests actually date from the late 1920s, during the very years he was also writing his erotic novels, when he published several essays and photographs of "anthropological interest." "L'art primitif," for example, now published in the first volume of the *Oeuvres completes*, first appeared in Bataille's journal *Documents* in 1929, or the entry *Abattoir*, part of the *Dictionnaire critique*, was also published in 1929 in *Documents*. Chapter 1 also shows the importance of Bataille's *Le Bas materialism et la gnose* (*Documents*, 1930), for his essays on Lascaux's art.

Michel Leiris, who was a contributor to *Documents*, described *Documents* as "a war machine against received ideas."[8] "Primitivism" had become the fashion in art and was seeping into popular culture. The Josephine Baker Revue in 1927 was a sensation and became iconic for the jazz age that followed. Bataille's ethnographic studies in *Documents*, for example, were aimed against all of that, trying to free ethnography, trying to free "the primitive" from the grips of both exploitative capitalism and idealism.

Critical reception of Bataille's anthropological writings has not been kind. Michel Surya's biography of Bataille, for example, is curtly dismissive of Bataille's writings on prehistoric art from the 1950s.[9] Laporte likewise considers Bataille's anthropological essays to be the weak side of his *Oeuvre* because, as he puts it, Bataille is too much the prisoner of "une grille de concepts," such as the oppositions between play and seriousness, work and art, transgression and interdiction. The erotic works, by comparison, have a more "savage freedom."[10]

Perhaps the time has come to reread Bataille's texts on prehistoric art and religion. We shall see that Bataille's interpretation of the art at

8. [8] Michel Leiris, "De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible Documents," in *Critique* 195–96 (Aug.–Sept. 1963): 689. Also quoted by Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley, introduction to *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 11. Leiris's essay is a valuable source for firsthand insights into *Documents*.

9. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: La mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Garamont, Librairie Séguier, 1987), 406. Here he mentions *Lascaux and Les larmes d'Eros* as "livres d'un intérêt moindre." Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), 417.

10. Roger Laporte, *A l'extrême pointe: Proust, Bataille, Blanchot* (Paris: P.O.L., 1998), 52.

Lascaux—if art is what it "is"—does not merely apply preexisting oppositions and categories. Even in the essays from the late 1940s and early 1950s that preceded the Lascaux book, essays that were somewhat of a continuation of the perspectives opened by the founding of the Collège de Sociologie (1937–1939), dedicated as it was to research "the sacred" in all its manifestations, the opposition between work (utility) and play (sovereignty) was used not to buttress received metaphysical oppositions but to contest them.[11] With the exception, perhaps, of Caillois's 1950 *L'Homme et le sacré*, the usual interpretations of the "sacred" and prehistoric art had been entirely based on considerations of utility. By drawing upon such a "grid of concepts" that had been scattered throughout the nonscientific literature, Bataille proved himself to be not so much a "prisoner" of concepts as he was able to use these notions to transform the study of prehistoric art, ejecting it from the category of anthropological writings and making it something bordering on poetry. Bataille's papers on prehistoric art seek to name, to provide an account of the creative force that left its marks on the grotto walls at Lascaux, not the utilitarian interests that overshadow most scientific accounts but the creative force that emerges from within the materiality of Lascaux so as to transform that materiality into a visual poetry we still struggle today to comprehend. In chapter 1 we shall ask to what extent Bataille is indeed a prisoner of anything, let alone preestablished concepts and ways of thinking. We shall see how Bataille not only offers a way to transform the established ways prehistoric art has been viewed, questioning whether all its unknowns can be reduced to knowns, but also shows how, by looking back at the ancient past of humanity and its earliest works of large-scale art, we can also look forward, to the future of our humanity and art, to the unknown that always lies "before us." The freedom of Bataille's collected papers on Lascaux lies in its freedom of thought, its freedom from the tyranny of stereotypes or inherited ideas, and the way it was also a questioning challenge posed to the increasingly technological and hostile world of "modern men" that was the 1950s context for Bataille's writings on Lascaux. This makes us wonder if there is something of a Hölderlin-like moment in Bataille: a feeling that the times were in a bad way, "in dürftiger Zeit" as Hölderlin called it, a nullity

11. See for example, "L'amitié de l'homme et de la bête" (1947)," in *OC* XI, 167–71; "Le passage de l'animal à l'homme et la naissance de l'art"; "La guerre et la philosophie du sacré"; a review of Roger Caillois's 1950 *L'Homme et le sacré*; and "Au rendez-vous de Lascaux, l'homme civilisé se retrouve homme de désir" (1953)," in *OC* XII, 259–77, 289–92.

hollowed out by the absence of gods, and, in the Europe of the 1950s, by the domination of a secular world of practical affairs, material values, and a far-reaching technology that was taking their place. Bataille's 1960 address "Unlivable Earth?" suggests the necessity of a renewed "*rende-vous*" with a world lost to modern human beings. Yet that past still communicates with us in the grandeur of the images it left behind like a gift destined for a future it could never know. Against a backdrop of an international arms race and the very real and ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation, Bataille contrasted the evident joy and creative richness of Lascaux with the spiritual impoverishment of the modern world. How could the joy that infuses the animal images of Lascaux become the will to destruction that haunts the modern world? With little or nothing to be expected from the Surrealist Revolution, too riddled, as it was in Bataille's view, with failed idealists, the keys to an alternative world yet-to-come might lie in the past, in a world before time and writing.

Bataille's friend Pierre Klossowski was a manifold figure from the very outset. As Georges Perros says of him in his article in *L'Arc*, "This man seems to have come from distant places."[12] His family background is Eastern European, but his culture is French and German, Roman Latin, and Catholic. He was tutored by Rilke and then worked as a youthful secretary to Gide. He prospered in the intellectual and artistic circles of prewar Paris. Like Bataille, he also struggled with the power of stereotypes and other "grids" that suppress the "unknown before us" into something more manageable, more measurable, something "speakable." In a phrase recalling Bataille, he described himself as "neither a 'writer,' nor a 'thinker,' nor a 'philosopher,' or whatever else might be in any mode of expression—nothing at all before having been, before being and remaining a monomaniac."[13] This monomania shall be the "unknown" that lies before us in our reading of Klossowski.

Klossowski met Bataille in 1933 or 1934 while he collaborated with him on the journal *Acéphale* (1933–1939). Klossowski's 1969 book on Nietzsche, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, is the culmination of work he had begun during this collaboration three decades prior: the task of safeguarding German culture against its distorted appropriation by the Nazi propaganda machine. Sarah Wilson's important essay "Épiphanies et secrets" notes how

12. Georges Perros, "Le Moans qu'on puisse dire," in *L'Arc* 43 (Paris: Librairie Duponchelle, 1970), 45.

13. Pierre Klossowski, "L'indiscernable," in *Ressemblance* (Alpes, Côte d'Azur: Office Régional de la Culture, Éditions Ryoan-ji, 1984), 91.

Nietzsche's work in particular was important to them. In a footnote to that essay, she notes that the second number of *Acéphale*, January 1937, bore the subtitle "Réparation à Nietzsche." Georges Bataille's 1945 *Sur Nietzsche* is an extension of this task.[14] Meanwhile, Klossowski also did translations of Friedrich Sieburg on the theme of German nationalism and another on Robespierre. But, as noted with *Documents*, *Acéphale* was also "a war machine against received ideas," but this time it is the Fascistic transmogrification of Nietzsche and Fascism's more general threat to Europe that are the dangers and the signatures of the destitution of the times.

Klossowski also worked with the Collège de Sociologie, which was directed by Bataille, Caillois, and Maurice Heine. Not despite all these rich ethnographic and political connections during the 1930s, Klossowski was first of all a translator of Latin and Germanic authors: Ovid, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hölderlin, but never Freud. In fact, it was while translating Hölderlin that he discovered Sade. Writing and spirituality, that was his quest in those days. Beginning in 1939, Klossowski was a novice Dominican monk at La Lesse, near Chambrésy. But that adventure lasted only a few months until he was told his way of thinking was not very Christian.[15] In the context of the Spanish Civil War, rising Fascism, and the formation of a united front against Fascism in France, which had Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht amongst its growing numbers of *emigré* members, Klossowski was in the "orbit" of the Convent Saint-Maximin, where he studied theology, and on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution, gave a conference on Sade, which was published in the first edition of *Sade mon prochain*.

After these years of spiritual wandering, during which time he continued his studies of Sade, he returned to Paris in 1943, and soon, at the "soirée de Moré," he again met up with both Bataille and Jacques Lacan. Klossowski was already quite familiar with psychoanalytic thinking. During the 1930–1933 period he had been a secretary to the psychoanalyst René Laforgue and had published an article, "l'Éléments d'une étude psychanalytique sur le marquis de Sade," in the *Revue de psychanalyse*. Laforgue was scandalized by the essay, prompting him to fire Klossowski.[16] So Klossowski's

14. Sara Wilson, "Épiphanies et secrets," in *Pierre Klossowski: Tableaux vivants*, catalog to an exposition organized by Sara Wilson with the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and the Ludwig Museum, Cologne (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 31, 41–42, n. 20–21.

15. Alain Arnaud, *Pierre Klossowski* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 187.

16. Arnaud, 186–87. Most of the above-cited biographical material is from Arnaud's book.

links with Bataille, Lacan, and psychoanalysis do go back to the 1930s, although, as we shall see in chapter 2, "Diabolo scilicet," this alone does not allow us to apply, like a grid of concepts, psychoanalytic concepts as the key to an interpretation of Klossowski's writing and drawings. Nonetheless, between Lacan, Blanchot, Bataille, and Klossowski we have a very thought-provoking milieu situated between the Surrealists, the Communists, and the psychoanalysts that shall be important for our reading. But all three alternatives were rejected: the Surrealists, too much the idealists, too much the aesthetes; the Communists, too much the censors, the gatekeepers of prisons, and the murderers of artists and poets; and the psychoanalysts, although influential, also rejected or marginalized by all except Lacan insofar as the Freudian truth of the unconscious was rejected.

During the 1940s, Klossowski converted to Lutheranism (hence his interest in the eighteenth-century philosopher Hamann), published his book on Sade, *Sade mon prochain*, and, most importantly, married Denise Marie Roberte Morin-Sinclair, who was to become his model for his most of his drawings, photographs, and films. By the mid-1950s, his *Roberte, ce soir* and his first "graphic expressions" had been published, and in 1956, *Le bain de Diane*. These works are contemporaries of Bataille's papers on Lascaux. In both, there is a search for a sacred language, or for a mythic, almost bestial interaction between gods and humans far too extraordinary and indeed violent to be seen or heard.

But it is his *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, published to general acclaim amongst his peers G. Deleuze, M. Foucault, and many others, that was to be his last major work on a philosopher. He did publish *La Monnaie vivante* in 1970 and participate in 1972 in the famous Cerisy-la-Salle collogium on the theme "Nietzsche, aujourd'hui," with Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard, M. de Gandillac, and B. Pautrat, but it was also during this period in the early 1970s that Klossowski turned away from writing and toward drawing. It is his book on Nietzsche, coming as it does during these pivotal years, that shall be of primary importance for chapter 2. Klossowski's art is given special attention in the later sections of that chapter. How to communicate a vision of the Eternal Recurrence, Nietzsche's vision, Nietzsche's shattering experience—how to communicate this? Hence the role, so important to Klossowski, of the simulacre, of a *ressemblance* that does not do the work of resemblance or representation so much as it is a mode of exorcism of the monomania at the center of his work and life. Hence, the daemon, creator of simulacra.

Yes, Klossowski does come to us from distant places, yet he remains always before us, the unknown Klossowski.

Henri Michaux, the third author-artist in this volume, is a figure who started out in life a bit of a loner, mystic, and recluse who had dreamed of becoming a Benedictine monk but ended up a becoming a famous literary-artistic figure in Paris, with many books and art works to his credit. From 1914 to 1918, when Belgium was under German occupation, Michaux was a student interested in music and Latin and the writings of Ernest Hello, the fourteenth-century mystic John van Ruysbroeck, Angèle de Foligno, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and especially Lautrémont. Through these authors he discovered the power of words. From 1922, he was a correspondent with the renowned Belgian author Franz Hellens, director of the literary journal *Le Disque vert*. Then, in 1924, after having moved to Paris, he probably met Jean Paulhan, editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF), and the poet Jules Superville. He collaborated with Paulhan over the years, as in 1935 when they teamed up to launch the new luxury literary journal *Mesures*, directed by Henry Church. Michaux first attracted critical attention in 1927 with his poetry collection *Qui je fus* (*Who I Was*), published by Éditions de la NRF.

Michaux was first a voyager: voyages through both his interior life, "l'espace du dedans," as he called it in his 1966 title,[17] and across seas and through distant exotic cultures, voyages of "expatriation," he called them, voyages to "drive his country out of him, to shed his attachments to all kinds and whatever elements of Greek and Roman culture or Belgian habits that he had become attached to, despite himself. Whether from within (dedans) or across oceans, "He travels *against:*" Turkey, Italy, North Africa, England, Ecuador, the Orient.[18] And with these voyages he brought back travel books: *Ecuador* (1929, NRF) and *Un Barbare en Asie*, the journal of his travels in 1931–1932 to India, China, and Japan.[19]

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17. Henri Michaux, *L'Espace du dedans* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

18. "Il voyage *contre*." Henri Michaux, "Quelques renseignements sur cinquante neuf annés d'existence," in *Henri Michaux: Oeuvres completes*, vol. I, ed. Raymond Bellour (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998), cxxxiii. Trans. by David Ball as "Some Information About Fifty-Nine Years of Existence," in *Darkness Moves: Henri-Michaux Anthology 1927–1984*, trans. and ed. David Ball (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994,) xxxiii; emphasis in original.

19. *Un Barbare en Asie* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1933; repr. 1945).

In January 1933, *Un barbare en Asia* appeared to general critical acclaim. By the early 1940s, as Europe descended into another catastrophic war, his metamorphosis was complete: the man born in Belgium as Henry Michaux, the solitary seeker and wanderer through far Eastern ports and exotic locales, had become Henri Michaux, Parisian poet, painter, and assimilated personality, a subject of literary discussions and critical inspection.[20] André Gide tried to launch a conference on Michaux in 1941, which was supposed to have convened in Nice in May of that year, but had to be canceled due to the war. Gide's essay for the conference was published under the title *Découvrons Henri Michaux*, in July 1941. It was yet another boost for Michaux's growing notoriety.[21]

Meanwhile, the first book Michaux illustrated with his own drawings was *Entre centre et absence*, published by Éditions Henri Matarasso in 1936. Although his interest in painting began in the mid-1920s with the discovery of Max Ernst, de Chirico, and most importantly Paul Klee, it was not until June 1937, after years of intense artistic activity, that the first exhibition of his own gouaches opened at the Galerie Paul Magné Ancienne, Paris. As he wrote in a letter to Superville that year, "I am in full fever of painting, I work at it for seven hours a day and am intending to have an exposition at the start of the school year, and this time there will no more 'drafts' (brouillons). You will be astonished at my progress." In November of 1938, Michaux had another exposition at the Galerie Pierre, Paris, *Peintures Nouvelles de Henri Michaux*. On the invitation card, a text: "UN POÈTE SE CHANGE EN PEINTRE. Always himself, the bizarre Michaux and his perpetual transforming invention."[22]

Apart from meeting him during World War II and at several casual social encounters,[23] Michaux had little apparent contact with Bataille, but

20. On the change in Michaux's life from being "Henry," a name he always detested as though it were a stamp of inferiority, to "Henri," the pen name he adopted, see Bernard Noël, "La ligne du pli," in *La Place de l'autre*, *Oeuvres III* (Paris: P.O.L., 2013), 525–32.

21. See Raymond Bellour and Yse Tran, "Chronologie," *OC* I (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998), cvxi.

22. Bellour and Tran, "Chronologie," *OC* I, lxxxviii, xcvii, cvii, cxvi, and cx.

23. See Jean-Pierre Martin, *Henri Michaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), which notes Michaux's participation, along with a host of writers and painters including Matta, Miró, Masson, Picasso, Ernst, Tanguy, Bazin, and many others, in a charity event helping Bataille to acquire an apartment on Saint-Sulpice in 1961, just a year before his death in 1962, and a letter Michaux wrote to Bataille in April 1961 praising Bataille's "unique" and "capital" pages on ecstasy and laughter; "merci," as he wrote to Bataille (587).

he did acknowledge in 1940 having read an article, *L'Amitié*, destined for publication in *Mesures*, which was "the best thing I've read by him," he wrote to Paulhan.[24] Again, in 1961, there is another note praising what Bataille had said about ecstasy. Although he had a long literary and artistic career, he was never identified with any group. Critics sometimes like to link him with the Surrealists, but he was not amongst them. Nor was he associated with any of the groups or journals that Bataille and Klossowski were associated with, such as *Documents* or the Collège de Sociologie. Fiercely independent, often thought of as a mystic or a trailblazer in the world of hallucinogenic drugs like mescaline, he did attract the attention in the 1960s of the American poets Allen Ginsberg and John Ashbery, who described him as "hardly a painter, hardly even a writer, but a conscience—the most sensitive substance yet discovered for registering the fluctuating anguish of day-to-day, minute-to-minute living."[25]

Who was Henri Michaux, in his own words? In "Quelques renseignements sur cinquante neuf annés d'existence"[26] he writes of himself as though he were writing of someone else, always in the third person. From 1900 to 1906, "he avoids life, games, amusements, and variation. Food disgusts him. Odors, contacts. His marrow does not make blood. His blood isn't wild with oxygen." Self-disgust seems to be a primary experience. "Secretive, withdrawn. Ashamed . . . of everything that surrounds him . . . ashamed of himself and for everything he has known up to now." The laconic "information" ends with two dates: "1956: First experiments with mescaline" and 1957: art shows in three countries, a broken right elbow, and discovery of the "left-handed man" ("l'homme gauche," or the clumsy man). "Despite so many efforts in so many directions all through his life to change himself, his bones, without paying any attention to him, blindly follow their familial, racial, Nordic evolutions."[27]

Whether or not he overcame those despondent feelings of his youth, Michaux's life and work prospered. Mainly through writing and painting about himself, his travels, his visions, his experiences, he seeks what makes him no longer belong to himself, all that loosens the grip of the "Je" (the "I"). Always a voyager to points beyond, he is summoned in writings and

24. Bellour and Tran, "Chronologie," cxv; and Martin, *Henri Michaux*, 331.

25. John Ashbery, quoted in *Darkness Moves*, ix.

26. Michaux, *OC* I, cxxxviv. Trans. by Ball as "Some Information About Fifty-Nine Years of Existence," in *Darkness Moves*, xxiv.

27. *OC* I, cxxxiv–v (*Darkness Moves*, xxx).

drawings by his memories and dreams, which arise like images from a world that comes before or beneath the "Je pense" ("I think"), emanations rising from a bottomless night. He learns to "prefer one reality to another." An early discovery in life that helped his turnaround was the discovery, around 1914, of the dictionary, where he noticed many words "that do not yet belong to phrases, to phrasemakers, masses of words, words he can use himself in his own way." Then the discovery of Latin, a language he loved and that set him "apart from others, transplants him: his first departure." This was his departure not only to the limits of both writing and painting but to the limits of himself, his own "clumsy self." What does it mean to say he was a "conscience" if not to say he was always on a voyage away from himself as an "ego" as a "true Self," which also implies he was a voyager within, "dedans," an explorer of the limits and the possibilities of himself as a conscience? And those limits are with his body. Indeed, his body is a constant presence in his writings. The body as a theater of pains and physical weaknesses—he had a congenital heart condition—but also the body as the sensitive "substance," as Ashbery calls it, a theater of visions, registering the "fluctuating anguish of day-to-day living."[28] The body as that substance not of the flesh Merleau-Ponty speaks of, but something darker, something from "the night," the "implacable night," the "night without limits"[29] where inside and outside have their folding point, their threshold, opening onto one another. He sought a "cure." He had wanted at one time in his youth to be a doctor but resisted the necessity of education because it always meant "accepting, accepting." Later in life, he pursued a science of the body by way of hallucinogenic drugs, mescaline, hoping to leave something from his experiences to science. But what could science know or say in the end?

Thus, we see how Raymond Bellour is right when he says that two words are essential for any introduction to Michaux's experience of writing: *guérir* and *savoir*. The force of these words, Bellour writes, are felt throughout Michaux's life as what frees him from any belief that his works would be accepted as "works," that his experiences would accept becoming a "work," a book, an autonomous thing, his life's completion and its "truth."[30] Alas, both guérir and savoir are impossible for Michaux: the body is finally healed only in death, and savoir ends in what Bataille might have called "non-savoir." Writing is always traversed by the "writing of the disaster," the point where

28. Ashbery, quoted in *Darkness Moves*, ix.

29. Michaux, "Dans la nuit," in *OC* I, 600.

30. Bellour, introduction to *OC* I, xvii–xix.

writing crumbles, changes form, becomes an animal—"animaux fantastiques," in Michaux's words—or an insect, not a "signifier," no longer a work but a thing, a substance of some sort crawling across the page. Could a universal language emerge from this cocoon?

He suffered, yet he lived on, a long life. Are his poems an "image of his life," which, as René Char writes, is what modern men—"les hommes d'aujourd'hui"—want? Is Michaux, such a "man of today"? Possibly, but as a poet of great consideration, coming from boundless spaces and tolerant of all that comes his way, he is the reverse of the sort of modern man Char evokes. Yet he too has written his own *poème pulverisé*, which, likewise, is the image of *une vie pulvérisée*, a pulverized life. "Dans la nuit," the space inside and outside, not where the light fails but where it begins, an emanation. How could he not have lived without always having "the unknown" before, *devans*, him, something without, *devans*, as much as it is within, *dedans, dans la nuit*? "Plunge into the unknown that cuts furrows. Make a point of spiraling," as Char writes.[31]

Three writers and painters from mid-twentieth-century French culture, each fiercely independent, belonging to no school, academy, or political persuasion: What do they have in common? While the three chapters in this volume do not initially set out to establish comparisons between these three writers, common ground emerges: each in their own "combat against culture" and in their conceptions of art and writing, pointing the way toward a nonrepresentational experience of art, one linked to ritual, to exorcism, and to healing.

31. René Char, *Feuillets d'Hypnos (1943–1944)*, in *Furor and Mystery*, 204. "The Leaves of Hypnos," in *Furor and Mystery*, 204–5. French original: "Enfonce-toi dans l'inconnu qui creuse. Oblige-toi à tournoyer."