

ABSTRACT

EMILY HEILKER

Out of Bounds: India and Mysticism in the Drug Literature of Henri Michaux and René Daumal

(Under the Direction of DR. THOMAS CERBU)

During the 1950s and 60s, Belgian-born poet and painter Henri Michaux (1899-1984) performed what was probably the most controversial of his consistently-experimental works: a series of five books derived from and surrounding his use of Mescaline and other hallucinogens. Strangely, however, in 1972, the first book of the cycle, *Misérable Miracle*, also became the last book, when, it was re-issued with a four-part Addenda that completely recalibrated the significance of the drug experiments and their relationship with India and Hinduism, in particular. Yet the out-of-the-blue shift was not arbitrary: in the two years preceding the commitment of the Addenda to paper, Michaux re-visited India and worked with the editor of the journal *Hermès* on a special issue focusing on their mutual, deceased friend, the Sanskrit scholar and writer René Daumal. In this paper, I will examine how Daumal's own carbon tetrachloride experiences, recorded in the work "Une expérience fondamentale" (which I is also re-translated here along with a poem by Michaux, "Vers la complétude (Saisie et Dessaisies)"), and his interpretation of them through his Orientalism, as well as the philosophical system he developed on his own, became a focal point for Michaux—a sounding board, both harmonious and dissonant—as he negotiated his own relationship with science, religion, Orientalism, and art.

INDEX WORDS: Henri Michaux, René Daumal, Jean Paulhan, Jacques Masui, *Misérable Miracle*, Mescaline, Drugs and Writing, France and India, Ecstatic Confessions, Mysticism, Orientalism, Twentieth-Century French Poetry, Twentieth-Century Belgian Poetry, *La NRF*, *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, *Le Grand Jeu*, *Hermès*

OUT OF BOUNDS: INDIA AND MYSTICISM IN THE DRUG LITERATURE
OF HENRI MICHAUX AND RENÉ DAUMAL

by

EMILY HEILKER

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by

EMILY HEILKER

Approved:

Thomas Cerbu

Dr. Thomas Cerbu
Faculty Research Mentor

4/29/10

Date

Approved:

Richard Sieburth

Dr. Richard Sieburth
Reader

5/3/10

Date

Approved:

David S. Williams

Dr. David S. Williams,
Director, Honors Program, Foundation
Fellows and Center for Undergraduate
Research Opportunities

5/7/10

Date

Approved:

Pamela B. Kleiber

Dr. Pamela B. Kleiber
Associate Director, Honors Program
and Center for Undergraduate Research
Opportunities

5/7/10

Date

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OUT OF BOUNDS: INDIA AND MYSTICISM IN THE DRUG LITERATURE
OF HENRI MICHAUX AND RENÉ DAUMAL

On 27 August 1945, in the aftermath of the German occupation of Paris, Belgian-born poet and painter Henri Michaux wrote to writer and editor Jean Paulhan concerning the launch of the editor's new journal, *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, and a piece Paulhan intended to include by their mutual friend René Daumal: "Ne suis pressé que de relire," says Michaux, "ds ta R [dans ta revue] le chef d'œuvre, la confession de Daumal."¹ This remark seems at first to be nothing more than the excitement of a person eager to see the writing of a friend in print, yet it takes on a different import when one looks at this work of Daumal more closely, as well as at the mescaline project that Michaux would, in a decade, begin. Daumal, a writer friend of Michaux's since the early 1930s and a self-taught Sanskritist and Orientalist (primarily focusing on India), inhaled carbon tetrachloride when a teenager in 1924 and 1925.² He subsequently wrote of these experiences on two occasions, and in such a way that drew Michaux's attention and surely impacted his own experimentation with drugs. Unfortunately, however, the figure of Daumal and his relationship with Michaux have been consistently overlooked. The essay that follows will seek to amend this omission by examining Daumal, who, though Michaux's junior in years, was his senior when it came to drugs and India, and the relationship that grew between them. The discussion will be broken down into three parts: part (1) looking at Daumal, his drug experience, and his subsequent intellectual development; part (1a) looking at the relationship between

¹ OC, II, 1297, n. 2

² Hermès 5, 59

Daumal and Michaux; and part (1b) looking at lasting effects of India and Daumal on Michaux. Hopefully, in this way, a new thread will surface and the ways in which Daumal is “à la fois modèle pour Michaux et anti-modèle”³ will become clearer.

1.

René Daumal was born in Reims, in the Ardennes region of France near the Belgian border, in 1908. Around the age of fifteen or sixteen, he began to engage in the inhalation of various drugs, among them carbon tetrachloride, with a group of friends who called themselves the Simplistes. The exact motivation for this drug-taking is somewhat fuzzy. In his relatively short life (Daumal died in 1944 from tuberculosis, probably precipitated by the damage the carbon tetrachloride had done to his lungs), Daumal wrote explicitly about these experiences on two occasions. The first version, which at various points and in various drafts went by “L’Asphyxie et l’évidence absurde,” “L’inénarrable expérience,” “L’Asphyxie et l’expérience de l’absurde,” “L’Asphyxie ou l’expérience de l’absurde,” and “L’intuition de l’absurde comme expérience métaphysique,” was written in 1930 for the fourth and never published edition of the *Grand Jeu*,⁴ the journal founded in 1927 by Daumal and some of the same friends with whom he had first taken drugs, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte and Roger Vailland, as well as others like literary critic André Rolland de Renéville, shortly after the arrival of the Reims-crowd in Paris for university.⁵

³ de Lussy, 57

⁴ Powrie, 33

⁵ Rosenblatt, 43

In this first version of the experience, Daumal, still in his early twenties, attributes the action to his desire “pour voir ce qui arriverait.”⁶ He sees taking carbon tetrachloride and writing about it as an act of revolt rather than one of independent exploration or creation. The second version, dubbed “Une Expérience fondamentale,” was written shortly before Daumal’s death in 1944, over a decade after the earlier one. It was published posthumously in 1946 in the first issue of *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, Jean Paulhan’s first post-war journal and the one that filled the gap between his running of the *Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF)* and the *Nouvelle NRF*. Written by an older, less naïve Daumal (if one exhibiting more affected naïveté), he readily names a specific and internally willed motivation: he inhaled carbon tetrachloride in order to “affronter le problème de la mort elle-même.”⁷ Here, Daumal refines his drug explorations beyond mental flâneurie into quest.

The distance between these two alleged reasons, or at least between the terms in which Daumal couches his reasons, encapsulates a massive shift in Daumal’s activities and thinking above and beyond the tempering that comes with life (and not just drug) experience. In late 1930,

Le Grand Jeu became known for its “métaphysique expérimentale” and as the little brother of the Surrealists. Indeed, sharing with the Surrealists mutual roots in the likes of Alfred Jarry and in techniques like automatic writing (Rosenblatt, 48-9), the Surrealists and the Simplistes / *Grand Jeu* ran on parallel tracks during the mid to late 1920s. By 1929, however, mounting tensions had developed into sibling rivalry. On 11 March 1929 at the Bar du Château, things came to a head when Breton called a meeting in order to “faire le procès du *Grand Jeu*” (Random, 197), particularly concerning their “emploi du mot ‘Dieu’” (Random, 199) and the accompanying mysticism, which went directly counter to the Marxist materialism espoused by the Surrealists. Although the “trial” in some sense serves merely as an extreme example of Breton’s desire to dominate the avant-garde literary scene, the fallout from the encounter also demonstrates that which became essential to Daumal. Although he positioned himself clearly in alliance with the bands of would-be-revolutionaries and would-not-be-writers like the Surrealists, he still stood counter to them, refusing to conform to mainstream or alternative culture because of his desire to focus on the spiritual and mystical and his unwillingness to sacrifice it to pseudo-scientific or political ends. As will become clearer below, it is this fact that makes him both marginalized within the general retrospective of twentieth-century French literature and also important to some of its constituents.

⁶ Essais et Notes, v.1, 53

⁷ UEF, 166

Daumal found “une porte ouverte”⁸ when he met Alexandre de Salzmann at the Café Figon on the Boulevard Saint-Germain,⁹ who would introduce him to the teachings of the Armenian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff. Prior to this encounter, Daumal’s life had been built around the literary-intellectual complex of the *Grand Jeu*, his own personal studies of Sanskrit and Hinduism (he had started teaching himself the language while still in Reims and eventually wrote a Sanskrit grammar and studied and translated its poetry), and his coursework at the Sorbonne in psychology, sociology, philosophy, and ethics.¹⁰ It is only right to note, however, that this shift did have, from the perspective of literary studies, negative consequences—though, of course, Daumal would not have seen it this way. The aforementioned Renéville describes how, before Daumal studied with Gurdjieff, “l’ensemble de...qualités réunies chez Daumal me faisait augurer qu’il deviendrait le meilleur poète de sa génération.”¹¹ Renéville equally acknowledges that this did not come to pass. He points to the hardships in Daumal’s life due to his ill-health and poverty, as well as the fact that “la direction que prit sa pensée ... l’eût ... éloigné de plus en plus de l’activité littéraire proprement dite.”¹² Similarly, Leon S. Roudiez summarizes his feelings about Daumal’s later work in his 1960 NY Times Review of *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing*, the novel Daumal left unfinished at his death: “[a]s a work of art...the book has quite a few shortcomings; indeed, the mature reader will be more intrigued by the mind of the author than impressed by his literary

⁸ *Ibid.*, 173

⁹ Rosenblatt, 127

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

¹¹ Perpétuel incandescent, 195

¹² *Ibid.*

accomplishment.”¹³ Daumal became, for the most part, a mystic and philosopher rather than a writer, focusing on his metaphysical beliefs rather than on their expression.

Still, the break was not totalizing. Daumal continued to write—essays more than poetry—and certainly did not discard his ideas wholesale. In particular, three threads continued to re-surface in his work: the *Grand Jeu*’s “métaphysique expérimentale,” Daumal’s Sanskrit and Orientalism, and finally the teachings of Gurdjieff. Although the second of these points will be focused on as it was the bridge between Daumal and Michaux, the other two are often inseparable from it. From time to time, the revolution-obsessed early Daumal or the increasingly bodily-aware later Daumal seeped into the Indologist, creating odd syntheses out of the various parts.

The second rendering of the experience, “Une Expérience fondamentale,” was triggered by both an individual event and a general urge to re-state, in newly-adopted Gurdjieffian terms, the carbon tetrachloride experience. In 1940, Daumal met another India-fanatic, Jacques Masui, who was at the time looking for a collaborator for a special issue on India for *Cahiers du Sud*,¹⁴ the Marseille-based review of Jean Ballard. The two became fast friends and regular communicants, and it is thanks to Masui that the new version of the experience came into existence. Masui describes the lead up to its writing in 1967 in *Hermès 5*, a special issue focusing on Daumal:

Lors de mes premiers entretiens avec Daumal il ne fut jamais question de ses expériences-limites. D’ailleurs, nous ne commençâmes à nous ouvrir sur les réalités de la vie intérieure qu’après plusieurs échanges de lettres. Le choc fut déclenché par Milosz. ...Le récit que Milosz fait de sa grande expérience, clef des fameuses *Arcanes*, me remua profondément, mais j’en retins surtout que Daumal m’avoua, en me l’envoyant, avoir fait une expérience semblable vers 1924 ou 1925. Ainsi que je l’ai déjà raconté, il se faisait

¹³ Roudiez

¹⁴ Perpétuel incandescent, 205

qu'à cette époque, je recueillais avec Marcel Lecomte, des « souvenirs déterminants » qui intéressaient Jean Paulhan, désireux de les réunir en volume. J'insistais auprès de Daumal pour qu'il relate son propre souvenir déterminant.¹⁵

Daumal jumped at the chance. In a letter from Daumal to Masui dated 31 July 1942, in which Daumal either forgets or, more likely, intentionally ignores his previous piece for the *Grand Jeu*, Daumal describes the request as “l'occasion unique de tenter de raconter cela.”¹⁶ He could not let it pass by. Still, why did Daumal ignore the other version, his other attempt? It seems likely that Daumal was trying to dissociate himself from his younger self and that the older mystic was none too comfortable with the younger revolutionary and self-declared pataphysician.¹⁷ There exists, after all, a fundamental contradiction between the absurd (recognition of the senselessness of things) and the mystical (recognition of a deep or higher sense in things).

Whatever Daumal's calculations, the volume Masui mentioned did not materialize. Intended for the “Métamorphoses” series created by Paulhan in 1936—which started off with Michaux's *Voyage en grande Garbagne*¹⁸ and continued shortly thereafter (volume two) with Daumal's *La Grande Beuverie*—it was replaced by Lecomte's own collection *L'Accent du secret*.¹⁹ The “souvenirs déterminants” were subsequently published separately by their individual authors, and it was not until 1996 that they were assembled by Philippe Dewolf, who collected the published pieces along with several unpublished, correspondence-bound vignettes in a volume of that name.²⁰

Why did the project fail? And what did its failure mean for Daumal? A letter Daumal wrote to Paulhan on 27 June 1943 is revealing on this score. He had

¹⁵ Hermès 5, 59. The punctuation in Masui's comment, though markedly strange, is reproduced here as originally printed.

¹⁶ Correspondances, III, 304

¹⁷ Rosenblatt, 10

¹⁸ OC, I, CIV

¹⁹ JP & Saint-Héliar, 177

²⁰ See bibliography: *Souvenirs déterminants*.

décidé de ne pas le publier autrement que dans le recueil, où, par la présentation d'ensemble, il aura le caractère de contribution à une enquête scientifique qu'il doit avoir. Je veux éviter qu'il ne prenne une allure littéraire (bien que pour moi cette rédaction ait été un des meilleurs exercices littéraires). ...Malgré toutes les précautions que je prends, je sais que mon récit peut faire du mal; mais, donné comme témoignage parmi d'autres témoignages, il me semble qu'il fera plus de bien que du mal.²¹

On the level of individual impact, the collapse of the Masui-Lecomte-Paulhan project meant the end of Daumal's desire to publish "Une Expérience fondamentale." He considered it inappropriate because, outside of the proper framework, it might become a risky piece, dangerous to those who would seek to imitate him. On the level of the project, Daumal's response points towards the reason for its failure. His somewhat paradoxical rejection and simultaneous honing of the piece's literary quality in favor of "une enquête scientifique" directly contradicts what Lecomte says explicitly in his "Introduction à une méthode du souvenir déterminant": "on ne doit pas penser qu'il s'agit ici d'une enquête" since "Le problème ne se laisserait point réduire à quelques questions trop précises."²² Daumal seems to have had some misconceptions about the project and, based on the collection gathered by Dewolf, it appears that he was not the only one.

In all likelihood, the book would have been along the lines of Martin Buber's *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, which Masui, in his posthumously published journal *Cheminements*, remarks that he read in 1942, the same year the "souvenirs déterminants" project was created.²³ Like Buber, Lecomte and Masui were after "communications by human beings concerning an experience which they felt to be beyond the human realm...not...a definition or an evaluation."²⁴ They

²¹ Correspondances, III, 349-50

²² SD, 11

²³ Masui, 65

²⁴ Buber, xxxi

wanted stories, accounts, confessions in which “the power of the experience, the will to utter the ineffable, and the *vox humana* ...created a memorable unity.”²⁵ Of course, the rarity of suitable events and the difficulties involved in recording them meant that very little of what they received from the writers they solicited proved adequate. Furthermore, unlike Buber, they did not have a range of historical texts from which to choose. Lecomte put the matter bluntly in a letter to Paulhan on 22 May 1942: “Il me semble que nous n’avons pas toujours été compris comme il eût été souhaitable.”²⁶ As the responses to the “souvenirs déterminants” prompt increasingly diverged, in Dewolf’s words, “le projet se perd dans les sables de l’indécision.”²⁷ The project’s organizational triumvirate called a halt to it.

Paulhan posthumously published “Une Expérience fondamentale,” however, against the wishes expressed in Daumal’s letter, though perhaps with the permission of his wife,²⁸ in 1946 in the first issue of *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*. Indeed, it became the centerpiece for the inaugural issue, serving, as one critic noted, as “[t]he most important single contribution to the *Cahiers* with respect to its new program.”²⁹ Daumal’s confession presented exactly the kind of evidence Paulhan wanted, possessing both an “aspect enfantin”³⁰ and a hermetic one—though this last judgment was leveled pejoratively against the review.³¹ It turned inwards and presented to its readers what it found there, never demanding “total liberation through the revolution” as the

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ SD, 8

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See footnote in Translation 1, p. 44. It seems unlikely that Paulhan would have forwarded further inquiries to Véra Daumal without discussing it with her first.

²⁹ Carmody, 26

³⁰ Brisset, 206

³¹ *Ibid.*, 207

writers of the 1930s had, Daumal included.³² Those days, for Paulhan's review as well as for Daumal, were over.

Daumal's letter to Paulhan of 27 June 1943 also hints at the light in which he tries to cast his experience and why. As discussed above, Daumal distances himself from literature (that is, writing with purely aesthetics ends) because of the takeover of his mystical interests. Yet, he does it in a very specific way. He bolsters his mystical exploration by looping it back through science. Doing so achieves two things: it provides social and ethical legitimacy, on the one hand,³³ and it provides epistemological legitimacy, in the form of a physical-metaphysical continuum, on the other.

First, the pragmatic component: the social and ethical legitimization. The use of drugs has rarely occurred without criticism. In the West, where people have been slower to pick up on both the benefits and dangers of mind-altering substances than people almost anywhere else, legal restrictions came late but with a vengeance. After WWI, several countries in Europe and the United States began to put into place laws against drug use.³⁴ Daumal, having written and taken drugs illegally, must have been aware of how such a status would reflect on his activities. Furthermore, by the time he wrote the second version of his experience, Daumal must have known of carbon tetrachloride's likely contribution to his failing health. Self-destructive and illegal actions always have a hard time justifying themselves. Making it into a matter of scientific inquiry helps. One can always say, *I had x, y, and z questions—and at least I tested it on myself.*

³² Carmody, 23. Arguably—indeed, Daumal's argument—internal liberation is more revolutionary than any kind of socio-politico-economic revolution.

³³ Michaux seems to have used this legitimizing effect to some extent, too, when the time came for his own drug works. It was not, of course, his only reason for allying himself with psychology—he had a true interest in the subject. Yet, it does not seem coincidental that the language Michaux's mescaline works use begins with a precise, scientific quality and ends with an abstract one.

³⁴ Boon, 60

Epistemologically matters are trickier. Throughout his life, Daumal continued to develop what started as the governing principle of his early intellectual and artistic activities: the *Grand Jeu*'s "métaphysique expérimentale." This "métaphysique expérimentale" had both a literary and a philosophical lineage. Literarily, the *Grand Jeu* traced it to Rimbaud and his dictum that "Le poète se fait *voyant* par un long, immense et raisonné *dérèglement de tous les sens*."³⁵ Philosophically, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Daumal's Simpliste "papa,"³⁶ described it as following "la tradition...de Pythagore, d'Héraclite, de Platon, de Plotin, des Gnostiques, d'Apollonius de Thyane, de Denys l'Aréopagite, de Giordano Bruno et même de Spinoza et même de Hegel pour qui l'aboutissement de la dialectique est le concept concret."³⁷ Most importantly, however, is the fact that the *Grand Jeu*, like their sibling Surrealists, did not see themselves principally as writers or intellectuals and did not leave Rimbaud, Hegel, Spinoza, etc. on the page. Instead, they put them to work, developing a game of brinkmanship played with the senses. The knowledge gained was that which was perceived just "avant l'Omniscience immédiate."³⁸ An example of it in Daumal's own writing (and this attests to the lasting hold the "métaphysique expérimentale" had on his thought) can be found in "Une Expérience fondamentale" when he remarks on the emotional aspect of his carbon tetrachloride experience and how "je voyais mon néant face à face, ou plutôt mon anéantissement perpétuel dans chaque instant, anéantissement *total* mais non *absolu*: les mathématiciens me comprendront si je dis « asymptotique »."³⁹ Daumal, through the dislocation of his normal perspectival self, has a vision of what it means for that self to undergo the experience of the "métaphysique expérimentale." No longer properly connected to his senses

³⁵ Tonnac, 56

³⁶ Rosenblatt, 18

³⁷ Tonnac, 57

³⁸ Lecomte in Tonnac, 57

³⁹ UEF, 171

as a result of the drug, the usual delineations of his self become fuzzy. He is caught in the penultimate moment of the transition from being to non-being, from individuality to sublimation in the totalizing unity of existence.

As promised, however, the *Grand Jeu*'s "métaphysique expérimentale" did not stand alone in Daumal's philosophical toolkit. Indeed, Daumal wove it in, tight, with his other areas of interest in works like his notable essay "Le Non-dualisme de Spinoza, ou la dynamite philosophique," written in 1932 and published in the *NRF* in 1934. As the title suggests, Daumal targets the dualism that has served as the foundation of Western philosophy since Descartes and which would clearly run counter to the totality that was assumed by the "métaphysique expérimentale." As an alternative, he points to Spinoza. And yet, he does not take up Spinoza straight—monism becomes non-dualism. In doing so, Daumal is able to bring together three important threads: the recently popularized German Idealism of Hegel and his dialectic (Kojève had begun giving his seminars on Hegel at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in 1933⁴⁰); Spinoza, of course, with his ethics and also his links to Kabbalah (Daumal was fascinated by the *Zohar*); and last, but certainly not least, the mystical, yet psychologically precise, Vedas.⁴¹ It is this last connection that is essential.

Before exploring it, however, it is perhaps necessary to offer a few remarks about the way in which all-things-Asian are used by the writers considered in this essay. In that way, I hope to avoid having to constantly situate their remarks. There exists a problematic European tendency (which was very strong when they were writing and is only lately beginning to dwindle or, at least, change) to view, or at least employ rhetoric that gestures towards, a monolithic "East" (Hindu equaling Indian, for example, or East equaling India, China, Japan, et al.). This

⁴⁰ Roth, 84

⁴¹ *Essais et Notes*, v.1, 81

monolith furthermore suffers from romanticization and exoticization, or in other words, Westerners tend to mistake ignorance for mysteriousness. Now, both Daumal and Michaux were aware of the problem. *Un barbare en Asie*, even in its first version, allows for great diversity and depends on careful, almost ethnological observation; Daumal frequently remarks on the poor quality of Sanskrit translations into Western European languages and the many misunderstandings that they cause. That said, the remarks that both of them make about Asia must always be held tentatively. They, too, conflate India with East with Asia. One must remember that, for all Daumal's studies, he never made it to the subcontinent and that, for all Michaux's voyages, he read with little consistency.

Daumal's interest in the Vedas began at the age of sixteen with his reading of René Guénon's writings on India⁴² and his own studies of Sanskrit, some time between his carbon tetrachloride experiments and the first written version of the experience.

These texts were a revelation for him. In them, Daumal found others alluding to the certainty he had found in his experiences with carbon tetrachloride. As Buber glossed them, "Only in the most ancient Indian sayings—and perhaps afterward in rare utterances of individuals—is the I proclaimed which is one with the universe, which is unity."⁴³

Not only that, however. In what he terms "Oriental psychology," Daumal finds a "scientific spirit and mathematical precision... so different from the metaphysical reveries and empiric agnosticism of" the West.⁴⁴ Thinking back to the "métaphysique expérimentale," what would the combination of an Absolute with precise psychology mean? For Daumal, it would mean a road, complete with signs, to the Absolute of which he is certain. He made this point fairly explicit in a

⁴² Rosenblatt, xiii

⁴³ Buber, 4

⁴⁴ Rasa, 61

letter to Masui during their collaboration on the volume *Approches de l'Inde* for *Cahiers du Sud* in the early 1940s, in which he compared the West with the East:

*pour l'Occidental, l'homme adulte et « cultivé » est en possession de tous ses instruments de connaissance, pleinement développés : parfaire sa connaissance c'est appliquer ces instruments à de nouveaux objets, c'est accumuler des savoirs ; pour l'Hindou, le progrès de la connaissance consiste dans l'acquisition et en le perfectionnement de nouveaux organes, liés à un changement de l'être lui-même.*⁴⁵

With “la métaphysique expérimentale,” the revelation was the flash that occurred at the limits of sensory perception. According to the Vedas, as Daumal sees it, this limit perpetually extends itself by the development of different modes of perception, which in turn shift the boundaries of the self. If properly directed, these new selves, these new states of consciousness allow for the complete sublimation of the individual in the all. Perfect, successful transcendence.

1a.

It is perhaps worth remembering that “The ultimate reference point for transcendence within modern paradigms is death.”⁴⁶ Daumal, as was just seen, fearing the latter, set out in search of it and by a fortunate chance found the former. When one examines Michaux, it appears that he, too, set his mescalinian course for death, perhaps even pushing himself to the brink of self-destruction with a rather suspicious overdose, in the hope that he would catch a glimpse of something else in its place.⁴⁷ *Misérable Miracle* describes this fascinating and disheartening

⁴⁵ Hermès 5, 64

⁴⁶ Boon, 122

⁴⁷ Indeed, *Misérable Miracle* may have been begun with orphic overtones (and ended with the myth's futility; even Persephone stayed out of sight) if a few lines of the elegy Michaux wrote for his late wife are any clue:

attempt. When he wrote the follow up volume, *L'Infini turbulent*—the account of his misleading (as shall soon be shown) success with transcendence—the question was put to him in blunt form by writer and critic Maurice Blanchot: “Pourquoi Michaux décida-t-il de poursuivre l’expérience?”⁴⁸ Why did he think it necessary to write about it again, to publish what he wrote on the matter again? That question must be left for Michaux (or at least for another occasion), for it has to do with the way a writer lives in his workshop. On the other hand, as to why he decided to continue taking mescaline, that is something that can be talked about here. It seems likely, and what follows will explore in more detail this possibility, that just as he and Daumal both set out to look at death, Michaux and Daumal were also both equally preoccupied with the time-requiring “progrès de la connaissance”⁴⁹ mentioned above in part 1. With that in mind, it is time to turn to their relationship.

The tracks of Michaux and Daumal’s relationship are scarce. Whether this is due to Michaux’s intense dislike for public appearance and public record, from more actual meetings than correspondence, from the chance nature of archives, or the inaccessibility of those archives to this student is even more difficult to state. That said, by looking at their mutual friends and professional acquaintances—in particular, Jean Paulhan and Jacques Masui, who were also on

...tu grelottes
attendant en ta merveilleuse confiance que je vienne t’aider à te tirer de là, pensant « À coup sûr, il
viendra
Il a pu être empêché, mais il ne saurait tarder
Il viendra, je le connais
Il ne va pas me laisser seule
C’est n’est pas possible
il ne va pas laisser seule, sa pauvre Lou... » (OC, II, 153)

⁴⁸ Blanchot, 84

⁴⁹ Hermès 5, 64

good terms with each other,⁵⁰ and, of course, Renéville—one can begin to get an idea of what brought Daumal and Michaux together. Here follows an attempt.

Daumal appears to have become acquainted with Paulhan sometime between 8 September and 25 November 1930, the first being the date on which he sent a letter to Renéville thanking him for offering to put in a good word for him with Paulhan,⁵¹ and the second being the date of his first letter, or at least the first on record, to Paulhan. This initial, paper-bound acquaintance was certainly only some few weeks after the letter of 8 September, for on 1 November 1930 Daumal published his first piece in the *NRF*, “Le Comte de Lautréamont et la critique.”⁵² In the years that followed, copious letters and the sixty-nine pieces (of poetry, criticism, and regular columns) written by Daumal for the *NRF* (or posthumously published in it; again, he only lived until May 1944) tell of their proximity. Paulhan’s response to criticism of Daumal’s first *NRF* essay gives us some idea of why he initially struck Paulhan’s fancy:

il s’agissait de justifier la place que je voudrais faire aux idées que *représente* Daumal. « Que représente » est injuste. Il est, je crois, des trois rédacteurs du *Grand Jeu*, le plus sûr: plus inventif que Renéville (qui me semble s’en tenir à des idées assez vagues sur la sagesse orientale) plus précis et plus obstiné que Gilbert-Lecomte. Et le *Grand Jeu* est, je crois, la seule « jeune revue » qui existe aujourd’hui. Je veux dire qu’elle apporte des documents, des réflexions nouvelles et ce corps de remarques qui sert un jeune écrivain (s’il n’est pas sot, ce que D. n’est pas) et le renseigne à peu près comme le succès peut renseigner un écrivain plus âgé.⁵³

Paulhan loved finding fresh talent (that is one of the primary tasks of an editor, after all) even naming his own “souvenir déterminant” for Lecomte and Masui’s project “L’Art d’influencer,” which, though beginning with incidents of his own shame, ends with how experiencing those incidents in turn led to his ability to effectively influence people. Several years before the *Grand*

⁵⁰Masui, 62

⁵¹Correspondances, II, 145

⁵²*Ibid.*, 177

⁵³Choix de Lettres, I, 201

Jeu, just after his taking over the *NRF*, it had been Michaux he was after, whom “les lecteurs de la revue ne connaissent pas encore.”⁵⁴ It was a matter of preserving freshness, currency, and breadth of appeal.

Michaux was more circumspect with regard to Daumal and the *Grand Jeu*. In 1936, Michaux participated in two literary conferences, the only two he ever spoke at, in Buenos Aires. At the second of these, he mentions the *Grand Jeu* in his talk, characterizing the group as “liés par un credo secret, une véritable initiation,” as “une sacristie.”⁵⁵ The valorization of autonomy that so dominates Michaux’s personality here appears in his tongue-and-cheek with regards to the religiosity and cultishness of the *Grand Jeu*. It also reflects his unwillingness to get involved despite the similarities between their interests and his own.⁵⁶ Whatever Paulhan saw in the artists and writers surrounding the journal, Michaux would keep his distance.

This fact—Daumal’s communalism, Michaux’s independence—served as a roadblock between Michaux and Daumal during much of the early 1930s. The most striking example, a case of Paulhan’s intentions going counter to Michaux’s comfort, was when in 1932 the former attempted to start an informal group including Daumal, Michaux, Antonin Artaud, Renéville, Jules Supervielle, Marcel Jouhandeau, Denis de Rougemont, and himself.⁵⁷ The aim of the group was for each to tell, and then for them all to discuss and meditate on, “ce qu’il *sait*, et comment il le sait.”⁵⁸ In doing so, Paulhan hoped not only for their mutual enlightenment, but also to establish “une sorte de direction, de présence, d’influence sur la *N.R.F.*”⁵⁹—not to mention, to take a stab at the Surrealists with whom several of this hypothetical group’s members, Paulhan

⁵⁴ Brisset, 250-1

⁵⁵ OC, I, 972

⁵⁶ This fear of communal activity and ritual may have also contributed to Michaux’s later ambivalence towards Hinduism. OC, II, 780-1.

⁵⁷ Choix de Lettres, I, 269

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 245

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 270

chief among them, had had problems. Unfortunately, or perhaps, fortunately since there is no way of knowing how this more restricted focus would have affected the *NRF*, this project miscarried. Artaud disappeared into his “théâtre de cruauté.” Michaux wrote to Renéville asking “Ne parlons plus de cette réunion...et n’y participons plus.”⁶⁰ Daumal was already sliding off into the teachings of Gurdjieff. The rest crumbled in suit.

That said, it does give one an idea of what Daumal, Paulhan, Renéville, and, to some extent, Michaux were up to. It also seems likely that it was in the course of one of these meetings or their pre- and postludes that Michaux first encountered the experience of Daumal. After all, in the 1945 letter with which this examination of Michaux and Daumal began, Michaux said “Ne suis pressé que de relire ds ta R le chef d’œuvre, la confession de Daumal.” What better occasion could present itself for the discussion of the cornerstone of one’s philosophy and religious thought?

Nevertheless, it is impossible given the documents currently available to pin down when the transmission took place. There may have been an ongoing discussion between Daumal, Michaux, and Paulhan a few years later, in 1935, about the autobiography of another certainty-obsessed man, the sixteenth-century mathematician, astrologer, and physician Girolamo Cardano. Indeed, Michaux compares Daumal’s confession to this book when he says that it is “Important comme la biographie de Jérôme Cardan.”⁶¹ The thread of any possible conversation left in their letters is extremely tenuous, there being only one other known letter, from Daumal to Paulhan, in which Cardano and a remark about Michaux’s absence appear in conjunction.⁶²

⁶⁰ Letter of HM to Renéville. See Martin, 221

⁶¹ OC, II, 1297

⁶² Correspondance, III, 71

Despite Michaux's dodging of group activities, however, he seems to have felt an affinity for Renéville and Daumal, both of whom he probably met through Paulhan and their involvement with the *NRF*. Renéville, whom Michaux saw often,⁶³ seems indeed to have been an avenue between him and Daumal, though by the late 1930s they were meeting and corresponding directly.⁶⁴ The question then becomes how did Michaux's interactions with Daumal and his reading of Daumal's writings about carbon tetrachloride and India affect his own writing about drugs?

Michaux wrote much more extensively about his experiences with mescaline and other drugs, like hashish and LSD, than Daumal did. Generally, scholars include five books in the Mescaline cycle because they are the works which Michaux derived directly from notes taken while intoxicated rather than from memory: *Misérable Miracle* (1956) and *L'Infini turbulent* (1957, 1964) already mentioned above, *Paix dans les brisements* (1959), *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1961, 1967), and *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'Esprit et les innombrables petites* (1966). The following discussion of Michaux and Daumal focuses primarily on the first two of these books. This emphasis on the beginning of the Mescaline cycle may at first appear imbalanced, but its whole span will be accounted for through the Addenda to *Misérable Miracle*, which was in fact Michaux's final word explicitly about his experiences with mescaline and other drugs.

At this point, I would like to return to Blanchot's question, posed at the beginning of this section (part 1a). He wondered why Michaux had continued writing drug books once they became, he believed, too far limited to the realm of personal experience. To this first question, I would also add a second question posed by Blanchot: why did Michaux the Skeptic give way so

⁶³ OC, I, XCVII

⁶⁴ For an example of this, see OC, I, CVIII. Michaux seeks out Daumal in 11 September 1937 when, at La Grave, he asked Paulhan if Daumal was in the area because he wanted to see him.

easily before his vision of “LES MILLIERS DE DIEUX”⁶⁵ and claim it as certainty-granting transcendence?⁶⁶ Michaux never tells his readers, so nobody can know for sure. And yet, taking into account another text that Michaux talks briefly about in *L’Infini turbulent* and that Daumal mentions in “Une Expérience fondamentale,” the experience of the multitude of gods can be broken down in such a way as to offer one clue.

The *Bardo tho dol*, or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead: the Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*,⁶⁷ according to a 1934 review by Daumal of an English translation of the text, is “a ritual text read to the dying man or to his effigy ... to guide ... in the decisive experience of death ... and to help him to profit from this unique opportunity to awaken and to escape from the cycle of rebirth.”⁶⁸ In addition, “the *Bardo-Thodol* was for those who were aware of it a memento mori related to moments of human life other than physical death.”⁶⁹ The psychological progression depicted in its pages could equally be applied to other in-between moments (“*Bar-do*... literally means ‘between two’”⁷⁰), including the near-death experiences of Daumal and Michaux.

It has already been said that, in taking mescaline, Michaux set out on a path towards (and into) death. In *Misérable Miracle*, transcendence had been hoped for but not found. With the experience of the multitude of gods, however, the flip side to that paradigm, transcendence, a surreal living, becomes an option. And yet, as I have suggested, one should not be too hasty. As it turns out, in *L’Infini turbulent*, he whose “étude a commencé de la sorte: fidèle au

⁶⁵ OC, II, 852

⁶⁶ Blanchot, 83

⁶⁷ Tibetan Buddhism is not Hinduism. However, since Daumal’s review of this text was included in a collection of pieces on India, Hinduism, and Sanskrit poetics, it seems reasonable to discuss it here.

⁶⁸ Rasa, 61

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 61-2

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-2

phénomène”⁷¹ ended faithful to phenomena, too. Later on in the same book review quoted above, Daumal outlines the states of consciousness that rest, according to the *Bardo tho dol*, between death and re-birth. In the second of the three bardos, or the “experience of reality,” a person who does not recognize himself in what he sees, and therefore does not awaken, instead “believes he is seeing and hearing ‘divinities’ (those of the Lamaist pantheon, if he is a believing Tibetan), that is to say, exterior phenomena.”⁷² Michaux’s supposed transcendence is no more than the flight of a bird with clipped wings. He remains in “The commotion [that] lets me have things and the ideas that go with them, only not unity of world or of I.”⁷³ In seeing divinities, even more in wanting and thinking it necessary to see divinities, he has preserved his self and the multiplicity of *them*. It is a beginning and in no way an end. He becomes willing to open the door in accepting, like Daumal, some kind of certainty, some sort of destination.

Furthermore, to return to Blanchot’s first question, if a text like the *Bardo tho dol* accords with Michaux’s experiences, then perhaps they are decidedly less personal than is thought (if he is merely choosing to line up his interpretation with it, things are more complicated, and the truth of course is often somewhere in the middle). Buber addressed the issue when he noticed that his collection was disproportionately European—and not just as a result of the inaccessibility for him of Asian languages. Instead he suggested that “In the Orient, ecstasy is a far more frequent, ordinary, ‘normal’ phenomenon than it is in Europe.”⁷⁴ It is not confessed. It is not miraculous. It is quotidian. This fact would also put the second question about why Michaux believes in “les milliers de dieux” on unsteady footing. Like with Daumal’s “métaphysique expérimentale” and his subsequent “progrès de la connaissance,” the *Bardo tho dol* offers a *proven* path. Even one

⁷¹ OC, II, 816

⁷² Rasa, 63

⁷³ Buber, 1

⁷⁴ Buber, xxxv

step along it, even Michaux's unsuccessful transcendence, therefore, confirms that it is likely valid. The drug may be working with Michaux's consciousness in particular, but apparently enough of that consciousness is shared by human beings that, in the same fashion people compare the ailments of their bodies, they can compare the turmoil of their minds. In this case, the Eastern perspective on matters becomes anything but mysterious.

Having seen Michaux launch out on his drug trajectory, it is time to turn to the end point found in the Addenda. Like "Une Expérience fondamentale," Michaux's Addenda staggered into existence, the second addendum, "Ineffable vide," first of all. According to a letter to Masui,⁷⁵ then the editor of the journal *Hermès: Recherches sur l'expérience spirituelle*, this "aventure de la perte de l'avoir,"⁷⁶ as it is subtitled, was originally begun in March 1967, though it was not published until early 1969, after a grueling writing process, in issue six of *Hermès* "LE VIDE dans la pensée occidentale et orientale."⁷⁷ Addenda one, three, and four, along with a revised version of the second addendum, appear to have followed between 1968 and 1971, if Michaux's dating of the works is correct.⁷⁸

By the time of the Addenda, the stakes were different. Unlike the first two mescaline books, they assume transcendence to be possible, if incomplete for Michaux. At the time, Michaux was re-visiting Asia, and India in particular, both literally and in his writing and related activities. In 1966, he worked with Masui on the special issue of *Hermès* on Daumal. Then, he made a trip to India, Thailand, and Cambodia in December 1966.⁷⁹ Finally, in 1967 he completed major revisions for *Un barbare en Asie*, during the course of which René Bertelé

⁷⁵ OC, III, XXXV

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 776

⁷⁷ de Lussy, 55

⁷⁸ OC, II, 769

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, III, XXXIII

reported to Claude Gallimard that Michaux wanted to “arracher le tout.”⁸⁰ Michaux’s understanding of India had changed since the writing of the original text after his trip to Asia in 1930 to 1931⁸¹—or rather, he had come to recognize his own limitations with regard to translating his Eastern experience. As he put it in the 1967 preface, “*Ici, barbare on fut, barbare on doit rester.*”⁸²

Drugs were among the things of which he had new opinions.⁸³ By the time of the Addenda, Michaux had stopped taking drugs and could comment on them with the advantage temporal distance affords. He adopted a biographical structure composed of three parts: a chronology as seen in the frame that joins the first two addenda and wraps up with the fourth; a tracery of the internal experiences with its emptying from infinite plenitude (addendum one) into infinite void (addendum two); and a tabulation—a critical *why?* for society as well as for himself. There is also something markedly absent in the Addenda: Daumal, named in “Ineffable vide” as published in *Hermès*, has gone missing. As the second of the only two explicit references to Daumal in Michaux’s drug works, that is significant. The first mention had appeared in *Misérable Miracle* in a footnote to the second section, “Avec la mescaline.” It pokes fun at Daumal for treating his carbon tetrachloride experiments with a “surprenante foi.”⁸⁴ The second Daumal reference is of an entirely different nature. It points to Daumal as an example of someone who realized the necessity of preparation for transcendence and drugs, and who, as a result of this realization, afterwards made his life into “une longue, sévère recherche.”⁸⁵ Yet, even this remark has tones of ambivalence. On the one hand, Daumal is the real thing, the man

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, XXXIV

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, I, CXXXIII

⁸² *Ibid.*, 281

⁸³ “La religion hindoue est parmi les grandes une des seules qui aient accordé une réelle importance à la drogue.” OC, II, 780

⁸⁴ OC, II, 642

⁸⁵ *Hermès* 6, 226

who read and watched and listened in order to gain a deeper insight and expand the intuitive understanding he already possessed.⁸⁶ He is a challenge to “les naïfs de la drogue.”⁸⁷ On the other hand, Daumal has been preserved as the Sanskritist, the Indologist, the Orientalist, the remaining slice of the 1930s, and Michaux’s glance backwards prevents this vision of him from comfortably staying in that historical context..

That all makes sense, yet still, Michaux cuts it. Why? Michaux seems to be involved in a double motion around the time of writing the Addenda. Michaux’s fuller understanding of his own limitations only covers half the matter. There is also his push towards the re-aestheticization of his writing. Michaux seems to have been feeling the pressure that had been mounting since the publication of *Misérable Miracle* to choose—was he writing about drugs as a psychologist, a mystic, or a poet? The doubts of the literati were embodied in Maurice Blanchot’s 1958 essay “L’Infini et l’infini,” which has already been mentioned. Masui “plus que personne encourageait dans une voie spirituelle certains de ceux qu’il voyait avec regret demeurer dans le littéraire.”⁸⁸ Roger Heim of the National Museum of Natural History had invited him “de publier un jour « dans un de ces volumes auprès desquels la “littérature” semblera toujours manquer d’autorité ».”⁸⁹ Each front asked him, *what is your final answer?* With the Addenda, he at last answered decisively, *poet*. Not that the mystic and the psychologist immediately took flight, of

⁸⁶ Hermès 5, 58

⁸⁷ Hermès 6, 226

⁸⁸ OC, III, 1408

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, LII

Interestingly, this kind of research—they were looking at the psychological effects of psilocybin, a variety of mushrooms—has recently resurfaced and been given legal dispensation in the US. In 2009/2010, scientists at John Hopkins began a study in which they sought to use psilocybin’s ability to induce ecstasy as a way to treat depression. Daumal and Michaux, of course, would probably not approve. No matter how much doctors prepared the patients and their surroundings physically, the problem of their internal preparation would still remain. See Tierney.

course, but the orientation changed. His writing left behind the earlier need to communicate⁹⁰ for a Sartrean adventure.⁹¹

Daumal seems to have been tossed out (or at least hidden) along with this notion that “Certaines expériences pourtant doivent être communiquées.”⁹² He would have been a tricky figure for Michaux, after all. Daumal, as well as being an exemplary ascetic, was an example of someone who did not end up being much of a writer. He epitomized, for Michaux, the man lured away by the sirens of mysticism. Furthermore, Michaux may have feared association with him for the same reason he feared it with the journal *Hermès*: it was “une entreprise dont le cadre et le champ, très vaste, sont susceptibles d’accueillir les esprits les plus variés.”⁹³ Indeed, it was one thing to be connected with a serious student of Hinduism, though even here Michaux’s interest (and France’s) was waning with the realization of his own limits; it was another to be connected with someone who treated the studies of Gurdjieff with the same diligence.

1b.

The story of the Addenda, like that of his encounter with the gods, was one of limited success. Michaux did not arrive, transcendence proving to be the pot of gold at rainbow’s end.

Of course, that is not to say he did not make it anywhere. As he says, “Avec les années, j’avais

⁹⁰ OC, II, 816

⁹¹ Much of the language Michaux uses in the Addenda points implicitly to Sartre (adventure, event, void—if of a different kind). Furthermore, in his novel *La Nausée*, Sartre told the story of the existential crisis of a former dilettante of the Eastern experience, one of those “jeunes gens” that Michaux discusses repeatedly in the third addendum. Michaux may not have wanted to mention Sartre (Michaux was none too keen on politics), but the philosopher looms inescapably in the background.

⁹² OC, II, 816

⁹³ De Lussy, 54

fait des progrès... vers des états importants, vers ceux qui comptent.”⁹⁴ The problem was that he could only direct himself into states of consciousness with a limited consistency.⁹⁵ The risk of “le dépouillement, l’effacement, le non-attachement”⁹⁶ remained.

Michaux’s ambivalence towards India, which prevented him from letting his previous attachment to the country go, also kept Daumal with him, if only in a subterranean fashion. Take another step away from Michaux’s work and a pair of brackets appears, surrounding the Daumal issue of *Hermès*, “Ineffable vide,” the revision of *Un barbare en Asie*, and the Addenda. In 1973, Michaux published *Moments: traversées du temps*, a book including eleven poems, several from earlier volumes, in which the counterpart to *L’Infini turbulent*’s revelation of the gods is mapped out—“l’Un, de plus en plus ouvertement, gagne sur le multiple.”⁹⁷ More precisely, the turn towards a truly Hindu unity in these poems, in Michaux’s production of them, occurs in “Vers la complétude (Saisie et Dessaisies),” written in 1966.⁹⁸ That date places the poem’s composition as simultaneous with the work he did with Masui on the Daumal issue of *Hermès*, a fact which it of course bears out, since in it “la marque de l’Inde se fait apparente.”⁹⁹ Yet, that is no reason to think of it in terms of 1966 alone. For, as was seen above with regards to *Un barbare en Asie*, Michaux had no problems with completely uprooting a work to which he no longer adhered. If Michaux had not felt in line in 1973 with what he had written seven years earlier, it would not have made it into *Moments*.

It has already been mentioned that “Vers la complétude (Saisie et Dessaisies)” bore the stamp of a unity nearly unique to Hinduism. Yet, while that is the quality that makes the poem

⁹⁴ OC, II, 784

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Hermès* 6, 226

⁹⁷ OC, III, 1631. It should also be noted that the poems are not in chronological order and are therefore not organized into any kind of multiplicity-to-unity trend.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ De Lussy, 54

stand out from the point of view of Michaux's transcendence trajectory, its roots in India and Hinduism run even deeper. The poem's length and how it is built out of short, incomplete phrases racked with mantra-like repetition give it the feel of ancient Hindu verse. According to Micheline Phankim, early drafts even contained pencil markings over certain letters, calling for accents—an unusual feature for French and one which points to Michaux's auditory preoccupations.¹⁰⁰

Another way in which “Vers la complétude (Saisie et Dessaisies)” appears to have brushed up against Hindu thought (and an important one, given Michaux's scientific and psychological interests) is in the problem of scale and cosmos. Because it is a poem and not prose, Michaux does not take part in a formal space-time discussion like the one he had used earlier in *Misérable Miracle* and which Daumal had used, in imitation of Miłosz, in “Une Expérience fondamentale.” Yet, readers are still faced with a vastness both infinite and infinitesimal, a conflation of nothing and everything that is typical of Hindu thought or, one might say, a kind of ambiguous Eastern thought. In the third addendum to *Misérable Miracle*, Michaux had discussed Hindu cosmogonies. By definition, a cosmogony should refer to the origin of the cosmos. In the case of Hindu ones, however, “origin” is slightly misleading. Like human beings in the *Bardo tho dol*, the cosmoi are supposed to cycle rather than proceed along a straight line, folding into and out of themselves according to “leurs cycles de 311 040 milliards d'années humaines et la périodique réabsorption du Monde dans Brahma.”¹⁰¹ Lines such as “Entre les lignes de l'Univers / un microbe est pris”¹⁰² fit into that structure. They contain the immensity of the universe as well as the minutia of the microbe, the emptiness of a space

¹⁰⁰ OC, III, 1645

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 782

¹⁰² Moments, 96

between, as well as the busyness of something involved in generation. Of course, Michaux is not entirely convinced that this concurrence does not result from the derivation of Hindu cosmogonies from the drugs themselves, which over thousands of years have been a staple of Hindu religious life.

Yet this last curious pondering of Michaux makes things much more interesting, rather than less so. It returns one to the fundamental difference in the mainstream thinking of the East and the West that had preoccupied both Daumal and Michaux, and which surfaces in the question of whether or not Michaux's mescaline experiences were wholly personal, and therefore off limits to readers. It also gives a kind of confirmation to their certainty. In Hinduism, observation has grounded religion in a way it has not in the West, granting legitimacy to sensorial (and their odd extended sensorial) perception right from the start. Contemplation could layer on top of it only what the foundation allowed.¹⁰³ For those who remain skeptical, Michaux offers for consideration (he does not push the matter) what one Hindu pointed out to him: the Hindu cosmogonies are, as metaphors, much more adaptable to modern science than their Western counterparts, being "au même niveau de grandeur que le cosmos selon la science moderne, quant aux espaces, aux temps sidéraux, aux amas galactiques. La vue indienne n'aura pas à dilater."¹⁰⁴ It has already made room.

¹⁰³ Interestingly, modern scientists and mathematicians in the West have also begun to realize that there may indeed be some truth to this assertion. For example, British mathematician Ian Stewart has written a little on chaos theory, one of his particular areas of interest and a field particularly given to the kind of cyclical structures inherent in Hinduism, and karma and other aspects of Hindu cosmology.

¹⁰⁴ OC, II, 782-3.

Daumal and Michaux experienced a fruitful, if foreshortened, intellectual exchange. Daumal was able to provide Michaux with access to new information about, and new interpretations of, India, the East more broadly, and their practices. Furthermore, unlike most writer-druggies, he provided Michaux a model of one signed on for a journey through consciousness, not a quick layover in paradise. He also provided Michaux with an example of the dangers—the physical ones certainly—but also, and perhaps more importantly, the intellectual and artistic dangers faced by a person juggling scientific and mystical interests with his art. Although Daumal and Michaux knew each other for a mere decade and a half, it cannot be denied that Daumal became one of the columns upon Michaux rested his lifelong interests in drugs, India and the East, and consciousness.

TRANSLATIONS

Introduction.

I originally came to this project with an eye towards translating only Henri Michaux and not René Daumal at all. I had first become interested in Michaux in the fall of 2007 when I read Sylvia Beach's English translation of *Un barbare en Asie (A Barbarian in Asia)* and Louise Varèse's translation of *Misérable Miracle (Miserable Miracle)* in a comparative literature course here at the University of Georgia. In the winter break that followed, I picked up Richard Ellman's translation of Michaux (*Selected Writings*). After that, however, I found myself quickly running out of Michaux in English and, at the time, I knew no French. Two years later, I am now able to begin amending that situation by making small steps towards wider availability of Michaux in English.

Still, that leaves the question, *why Daumal?* Having expressed interest in Michaux's Mescaline writings and their similarity to near death experiences, I was directed by Dr. Thomas Cerbu to something he had noticed in reading *Misérable Miracle*: the excerpted letter between Michaux and Paulhan in which Michaux expresses his excitement about the impending publication of Daumal's confession. As I began to follow the lead, I discovered that Daumal actually shared a major vein with Michaux, the interest in India (and more broadly Orientalism), mysticism, and drugs that was seen to direct the paper above. Further, I found that "Une Expérience fondamentale" was an amazing text and one that had not received entirely proper treatment despite two previous translations: the beautifully-bound translation that Roger Shattuck

did for Hanuman Books in 1987, *A Fundamental Experience*, and a translation by Mark Polizzotti for Daumal's selected essays (*The Powers of the Word*), entitled "The Determining Memory." In particular, both these translations strove to corral Daumal's slightly bizarre syntax, which seemed unfortunate as it is one of the things that makes the text so distinctive. Furthermore, although Daumal did not necessarily intend to write it under these auspices, when published by Paulhan, it became part of *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, this review "placée sous le signe du baroque."¹⁰⁵ Straightjacketing the grammar into tidy sentences punctuated almost solely by periods seemed inauthentic. Instead, I have tried to leave the punctuation intact, even if it has meant giving some sentences slightly odd appendages.

The other problem that I noticed with the Shattuck translation in particular was that the mathematical language used by Daumal was not necessarily coming through unharmed. Certain terms and operations that Daumal uses, such as when he says "[p]rojeté sur un plan euclidien"¹⁰⁶ and "soit un cercle,"¹⁰⁷ are, in fact, technical—the language of proof—and recognizable to any student of mathematics. Because "Une Expérience fondamentale" offered up a certainty, and also because of Daumal's interest in other writers' use of mathematical frameworks for philosophy as a form of demonstration (like in the case of Spinoza's *Ethics*), it seemed necessary to preserve the technical nature of these words and phrases by sticking to their counterparts in English. One does not "imagine" a circle in a geometric proof. One says "let there be a circle such that..."¹⁰⁸ In the case of "projecting," using that word specifically harnesses the model of the Riemann sphere with its un-mappable point at infinity, a kind of God-point from which Daumal then sees himself in relation to the totality. Without that word, the image becomes fuzzy and undermines

¹⁰⁵ Brisset, 210

¹⁰⁶ UEF, 169

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 169

¹⁰⁸ See translation, p 57.

the representation that Daumal has chosen as a way to face an extremely difficult to describe event.

That said, I had some difficulties of mine own in translating “Une Expérience fondamentale.” The title itself has posed one of the largest problems. In it, Daumal begins nurturing the tension between the two meanings of “expérience”: the English cognate “experience,” on the one hand, and its cousin “experiment,” on the other. Both become essential as the work continues. Yet, there is no word in English that can play out the pun. Furthermore, “fondamentale” does not carry quite the same signification as “fundamental” in English, which tends to be associated with “basic” or a particular evangelical Christian faction. In French, the root “fond,” which is approximately equivalent to the English “bottom,” is much more expressive of that which is in the depths of something. As a substitute then for what makes an ungainly pair in English, I have chosen “A Principle Experience.” “Experience” conveys the personal, confessional aspect of the work while, I hope, “principle,” a near pun, captures the scientific side in its relation to “principles” as well as the idea of that which comes first and is most important. The confession, after all, described the experience which initiated all of his subsequent studies and writings. It is their source.

The text translated comes from that version of “Une Expérience fondamentale” published in Jean Paulhan’s *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*. There were several errors, however, in that text. In these cases, I have referred to the second volume of Daumal’s collected essays and notes entitled *Les Pouvoirs de la Parole*, the information for which is contained in the bibliography.

The second translation included here is of Michaux’s poem “Vers la complétude (Saisie et Dessaisies)” from his book *Moments: traversées du temps*, which was written in 1966, at the second turning point in Michaux’s relation to ecstatic experiences, the one from multiplicity to

unity. In many ways, despite possessing an analogous position as a remembered drug experience, this poem poses problems diametrically opposed to those presented by “Une Expérience fondamentale.” Rather than fighting to maintain the complexity of the syntax, it forced me to preserve a syntactical simplicity. Each line has the feeling of a pin being stuck into space and left, suspended there, for a potential eternity. Trying to reconstruct this cleanness and energy proved to be a very difficult task, especially because the gender inflections of French become an inimitable scaffold for English. The stanza most affected by this particular problem occurred, of course, right towards the beginning, in the penultimate stanza of the second page of the poem. The French reads “Temps mobile / à plusieurs étages / ascendants, panoramiques.”¹⁰⁹ The adjectives of the third line describe “étage” on the second line. However, in English there is no way to show that they describe “stages” rather than “Time.” The best I could do was to alter the capitalization and hope that, by starting the second line with “In,” the second two lines would be more closely associated with each other than they were with the first one.

Now, however, I will leave the translations to speak for themselves.

¹⁰⁹ Moments, 94

Translation 1. A Principle Experience
By René Daumal

The event cannot be recounted. I have tried to speak of it often in the almost eighteen years since it came to pass. I would like, just once, to exhaust my linguistic resources in reporting at least the external and internal circumstances involved. This event is a certainty, acquired by accident in my sixteenth or seventeenth year, and the memory of which has oriented the better part of me towards finding means to possess it again and in an enduring form.

My memories of childhood and adolescence are punctuated by a series of attempts to experience the beyond, and this set of attempts, made at random, led me to the principle experience of which I speak. Around the age of six, not having been inculcated with any religious beliefs, the problem of death presented itself to me in all its nakedness. I passed atrocious nights, clawed in the stomach and seized by the throat with the anguish of nothingness, of the “no more of it all.” Around age eleven, one night, relaxing all of my body, I quieted the terror and revolt of my organism before the unknown, and a new sentiment was born in me, hope and foretaste of an imperishable. But I wanted more, I wanted certainty. At fifteen or sixteen, I began my experimental research without direction and a little at random. Not finding the means to experiment directly on death—on *my* death—I tried to study my sleep, supposing an analogy between it and what I wanted. I tried, through diverse processes, to enter awake into the sleeping state. The enterprise is not as rigorously absurd as it appears; but it is perilous in many respects. I could not pursue it very far; Nature gave me serious warnings about the risks I ran. One day, I

decided however to confront the problem of death itself; I would put my body into a state as near as possible to physiological death but employ all my attention in order to stay awake and to register all that presented itself to me. I had on hand some carbon tetrachloride, which I used to kill the beetles I collected. Knowing that this compound is, chemically, of the same series as chloroform—though more toxic than it—I thought to regulate the action in a comfortable enough fashion: at the moment the syncope occurred, my hand would fall back down with the handkerchief that I had kept under my nostrils, soaked with the volatile liquid. Afterwards, I repeated the experiment in the presence of friends, who would have been able to help me if necessary. The result was always exactly the same, which is to say it exceeded and overwhelmed my expectations in shattering the limits of the possible and in throwing me brutally into another world.

At first, there were the ordinary phenomena of asphyxia: throbbing in the arteries, buzzing, pounding at the temples, the painful effect of the least exterior sound, fluttering lights; then the feeling that it was getting serious, that playtime was over, followed by a rapid recapitulation of my life just up to that day. If there was a light anguish, it was not distinct from the bodily malaise which left my intellect completely untouched and repeating to itself: *look out! don't go to sleep, it's time to keep your eyes open*. The spots that danced before my eyes soon covered all the space filled with the sound of my blood; noise and light filled the world and yet made nothing more than a rhythm. By this time, I no longer had the use of speech, even internally; thoughts were much too quick to pull words with them. I noted, in a flash, that I still had control of the hand holding the handkerchief, that I continued to perceive correctly the space where my body was, that I heard the words spoken near me, that I perceived their sense—but suddenly objects, words and the meanings of words no longer had signification; they were like

those words one has repeated too often, and that seem dead and strange in the mouth: one still knows what the word “table” means, one could employ it correctly, but it no longer evokes anything of its object. Consequently, everything that in my ordinary state was for me “the world” was still there but as if abruptly emptied of substance; it was nothing more than a phantasmagoria, at once empty, absurd, precise, and necessary. And this “world” appeared thus in its unreality because, abruptly, I had entered another world, more intensely real, an instantaneous world, eternal, a burning brazier of reality and evidence into which I was tossed, twirling like a butterfly into flames. In this moment was the *certainty*, and it is here that speech must content itself with circling around the event.

Certainty about what? Words are heavy, words are slow, words are too limp or too rigid. With these poor words, I can only put forward imprecise propositions while *my certainty* is for me the archetype of precision. All that remains of this experience thinkable and formulable in my ordinary state is this (—but I would bet my life on it): I had the certainty of the existence of *something else*, of a *beyond*, of another world or of another sort of knowing; and, in that moment, I knew directly, I tested this beyond’s very reality. It is important to repeat that, in this new state, I perceived and understood very well the ordinary state, it being contained in the new one, as waking understands dreams and not the inverse; this irreversible relationship proves the superiority (on the scale of reality, or of consciousness) of the second state over the first. I thought clearly: shortly I will return to what one calls “the normal state,” and perhaps the memory of this terrible revelation will dim, but it is in this moment that I see the truth. I thought all that without words and in accompaniment to a superior thought that traversed me, that thought, so to speak, in my very substance with a quickness tending towards instantaneity. I was caught in a trap, for all eternity, accelerating towards an ever-immanent annihilation through the

terrifying mechanism of the law that denied me. “It’s that one! Then that one!” —such was the cry of my thoughts. Under pain of worse, I had to follow the movement; it was a terrible effort, always more difficult, but I was *forced* to make this effort; just until the moment when, letting go, I fell, without a doubt, into a very brief state of syncope; my hand let go of the handkerchief, I breathed air, and I remained, for the rest of the day, dazed, deadened, with a violent headache.

I will now attempt to close in on the unspeakable certainty by means of images and concepts. It is first necessary to understand that, in relation to our ordinary thoughts, this certainty is of a *higher degree of signification*. We are accustomed to making use of images to signify concepts; thus, the image of a circle to signify the concept of a circle. Here, the concept itself is no longer the final term, the thing signified; the concept—the idea in the ordinary sense of the word—is itself a sign of something higher. I remember that in the moment in which the *certainty* revealed itself, my ordinary intellectual mechanisms continued to function: images formed, concepts and judgments occurred to me, but without being encumbered by words, a fact which gave these processes the speed and simultaneity that they often have in moments of great danger, such as during a mountain climbing fall, for example.

The images and concepts that I will describe were thus present at the time of the experience at a level of intermediate reality in between the appearance of the quotidian “external world” and *the certainty* itself. However, certain images and concepts result from a subsequent confabulation due to the fact that, as soon as I wanted to recount the experience, and first of all to myself, I was obliged to employ words and thus to develop certain aspects implicit in the images and concepts.

I will begin with the images, even though images and concepts were simultaneous. They are visual and auditory. The first ones presented themselves as a veil of spots—more real than

the “world” of the ordinary state—which I could continually see through. A circle, half red, half black, was inscribed in a triangle of the same composition, the red semicircle being in the black half of the triangle and vice versa; and the entire space was thus divided indefinitely into circles and triangles, one inscribed inside the other, organizing and moving themselves and becoming one another in a manner geometrically impossible, that is to say, not representable in the ordinary state. A sound accompanied this luminous movement, and I suddenly perceived that it was me producing this sound; I was almost the sound itself, I sustained my existence by emitting the sound. This sound was composed of a formula, a set of magic words, that I had to repeat more and more quickly in order to “follow the movement”; this formula (I recount the facts without trying to disguise their absurdity) was pronounced approximately: “tem gwef tem gwef dr rr rrr” with a tonic accent on the second “gwef”; and the last syllable, merging with the first, gave a perpetual impulse to the rhythm, which was, I repeat, that of my very own existence. I knew that, as soon as it went too fast for me to follow, the unnamable and terrifying thing would happen. It was in effect *infinitely close* to happening, and at the limit...I can say no more about it.

As to concepts, they pivot on the central point of identity: everything returns to its origin in each instant; and they are expressed by spatial, temporal, numeric schemas—schemas that are there in the moment, but whose discrimination into these different categories and verbalization occur, it is understood, later.

The *space* where the representations took place was not Euclidian, as it was a space such that any indefinite extension from a point of departure returned to this point of departure; I believe it is what mathematicians call a “curved space.” Projected onto a Euclidian plane, the movement could be described thus: let there be an immense circle, the circumference of which,

perfect, pure, and homogeneous, is projected to infinity—*except at one point*: but in fact this point grows into a circle that expands indefinitely, shoots its circumference out to infinity, and merges with the original circle, perfect, pure, and homogeneous—except at one point that grows into a circle...and so on, perpetually, and to tell the truth instantaneously, because in each instant the circumference shoots out to infinity and reappears simultaneously as a *point*; not a central point, that would be *too perfect*, but an eccentric point that represents both the nothingness of my existence and the disequilibrium that this existence, in its particularity, introduces in the immense circle of All, which in each instant annihilates me in re-conquering its integrity (which it had never lost: it is me that is always *lost*).

In relation to *time*, it is a perfectly analogous schema, and this movement of return to an origin after an indefinite expansion is understood as duration (a “curved” duration) just as with space: the last moment is perpetually identical to the first, all of it vibrates simultaneously in that instant, and it is only because of the necessity of representing things in our ordinary “time” that I need speak of an indefinite *repetition*: that which I see, I have always seen, I will always see, again and again, it all re-starts identically in each instant—as if my particular and rigorously stupid existence was, in the homogenous substance of the Immobile, the cause of a cancerous proliferation of moments.

Similarly, in relation to *number*, the indefinite multiplication of points, of circles, of triangles, instantly approaches the regenerated Unity, perfect *except me*, and this *except me*, unbalancing the unity of the All, engenders an indefinite and instantaneous multiplication that will immediately merge at the limit with the regenerated unity, perfect *except me*...and it all re-starts—always in the same place and in an instant without the All being truly altered.

I would be led to the same absurd expressions if I were to continue trying to enclose the *certainty* in a series of logical categories; within the category of causality, for example, cause and effect envelop and develop in each instant, passing from one to the other as a result of the disequilibrium that produces through their marked identity the void, the infinitesimal hole that *I am*.

I have said enough for one to understand that the certainty of which I speak is at the same time mathematical, experimental and emotional; *mathematical*—or rather *mathematico-logical*—as one can grasp, indirectly, from the conceptual descriptions that I have just attempted and that can be summarized thus: identity of the existence and non-existence of the finite in the infinite; *experimental*, not only because it is founded on a direct vision (which could be observation and not necessarily experimentation), not only because the experiment can be repeated at any moment, but also because it was tested in each instant by my fight to “follow the movement” which annihilated me, through the repetition of the formula through which I pronounced myself; *emotional* because in all of that—and there lies the center of the experience—*it's me that it's about*: I look at my nothingness face to face, or rather at my perpetual annihilation, annihilation which is *total* but not *absolute*: mathematicians will understand me if I say “asymptotic.”

I insist on the triple character of my certainty in order to head off, on the part of the reader, three sorts of misunderstanding. First, I would like to sidestep among vague minds the illusion of comprehending me since they have, to respond to my certainty, only vague feelings of mystery, of the beyond, etc.... Second, I would like to prevent psychologists, and especially psychiatrists, from taking my testimony not as testimony, but as a psychological manifestation interesting to study and explicable by what they call “psychological science,” and it is in order to render their attempts vain that I have insisted on the experimental (and not simply introspective)

character of my certainty; finally, the very heart of this certainty, the cry: “That’s me there! it’s me that it’s about”—this cry should frighten the curious who would, one way or another, attempt the same experiment; I warn them that it is a terrible experience, and if they want the details of the dangers, they can demand them of me in private^{*}; I am not talking about the physiological dangers (which are very great) because if, by means of the acceptance of grave maladies or infirmities or of a sharp abbreviation of physical life’s duration, one might acquire a *single* certainty, the price for it would not be too high; nor am I speaking only of the very real risk of madness or of permanent brain damage, from which I escaped only by extraordinary luck about which I cannot write. The danger is much graver, and the story of Bluebeard’s wife illustrates it well; she opens the door to the forbidden cabinet, and the spectacle of horror that strikes her brands her deepest self as with a red-hot iron. After the first experiment, moreover, I spent several days in a state of “unstuckness” from what one ordinarily calls “real”; everything appeared to me an absurd phantasmagoria, no logic could convince me of what it might have been, I was ready to follow, like a leaf in the wind, it-didn’t-matter-what impulse, exterior or interior, and that very nearly drove me to commit several irreparable “acts” (if it can be so put)—nothing having any more importance for me. I repeated the experiment several times, always with exactly the same result; or rather, it was always the *same* moment, the same instant that I found, coexisting eternally with the illusory unfurling of my duration. Having seen the danger, however, I ceased to repeat the test. Still, one day several years later, I was, for a small operation, anesthetized with nitrous oxide; it was exactly the same thing, the same unique moment that I found—this time, it is true, even to the total syncope.

^{*} René Daumal is no more. But Véra Daumal, his wife, remains ready to respond in his place. [—Paulhan’s note]

My certainty certainly needed no external confirmation, but rather cleared up for me suddenly the meaning behind all sorts of stories through which others had tried to speak of the same revelation. In effect, I soon knew that I was not alone, that I was not an isolated and pathological case in the cosmos. At first, several of my comrades tried to share in the same experience. For the most part, nothing happened outside of the ordinary phenomena preceding narcosis. Two of them went a little bit farther, but reported nothing more of their escapades than vague images of a profound daze; one said it was like the advertisement for a certain aperitif in which two waiters carry bottles on the labels of which two waiters carry bottles on the labels of which...and the other, painfully crisscrossing his memory, tried to explain to me: “Ixian, ixian i...Ixian, ixian i....,” which clearly translated into his language “Tem gwef tem gwef drr rr....” But a third knew exactly the same reality as I did, and it was not necessary for us to exchange more than a glance to know that we had seen the same thing; that was Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, with whom I directed *Le Grand Jeu*, a magazine toned with deep conviction as a mere reflection of our shared certainty; and I am persuaded that this experience determined his life as it did mine, if in a different sense.

And little by little, I discovered in my readings other witnesses to the same experience since I now had the key to stories and descriptions I had not previously suspected of being related to a common and unique reality. William James speaks of it. O.V. de L. Miłosz, in his *Epistle to Storge*, tells a story that affects me deeply through the terms he employs and which I re-discovered in my own mouth. The famous circle spoken of by a medieval monk, and which Pascal saw (but who saw it and spoke of it first?) ceased to be for me a cold allegory, and I knew

it was the devouring vision of what I too had seen. And so, all these human testimonies, more or less complete (there is hardly a real poet in whose work there is not at least a fragment of it), the confessions of the great mystics, and even certain of the sacred texts of diverse religions affirmed for me the same reality—sometimes in its terrifying form, when it is perceived by a limited individual who is yet incapable of perceiving it, who, like me, tried to look at the infinite through a keyhole only to find himself in front of Bluebeard’s armoire, sometimes in its peaceful form, fully happy and intensely luminous, the vision of beings who are truly transformed and can see it, this reality, face to face, without being destroyed. I am thinking, for example, of the revelation of the divine Being in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, of the visions of Ezekiel and of Saint John of Patmos, of certain descriptions in the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” (*Bardo tho dol*), of a passage of the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*...

Not having become immediately and definitively mad, I began to philosophize little by little about the memory of this experiment. And I would have been consumed in my own philosophy if, at the right moment, someone had not stopped me in my tracks and told me: here is an open door; narrow and hard to access, but a door, and it is the only door for you.

Translation 2. Towards Completeness (Seizure and Releases)
by Henri Michaux

One receives
one receives
one is enchanted to receive
to secretly without end
the Impalpable receive

DAY OF THE BIRTH OF ILLIMITATION

Another World accepts me
agrees to me
absorbs me
absolves me

Armistice of the passions

From banks of clarity
Subterraneously
sovereignly

The emanation of existing
the aggrandizement of existing
the promontory, the impetuosity of existing

I am at the edge of plenitude
The instant is more than being
Being is more than the beings
and all the beings are infinite

I witness the invasion that is an evasion

Time, mobile
In many stories
Ascendant, panoramic

An invisible vehicle carries me

Resonance
Resonance from everywhere
Presences
I hear words that prophesy
out loud

Course
Course on a wire

The slowness of consciousness
fights against the speed of unconsciousness

Deprived of sense
Taken by the essence

A consciousness encircling
my consciousness
poses itself
superimposes itself

I exist in duplicate

Between the lines of the Universe
a microbe is caught

Crumblings
indeterminate crumblings

Visionary by extension
by limpidity
by increase

Words reread in the flames
and the relegation extend
extend
vast, sacred, solemn
in violent lights
in burgeonings

Infinite
Infinite that no longer intimidates

I read
I see
I leaf thru the gospel of the open heavens

Light
I come
I inhabit the light

Uplifting impotencies

Access to All

no mistake about it...

Mercy by undulations
Miracles in a miracle

Waves propagate me
indefinitely prolong me

Mosaics
of the tiniest

of the ever more tiny
of the humblest
of the most subdivided

Colloid

For moments cry
trumpets assuredly long

The edifice folds
once I had legs
My hand also comes off

Words intervene
to traverse me

I jump from one clairvoyance
into another

Ears filled to the brim
That was thirty years ago

Now it's
Retrospective carillon

A plant listens to me

Sickle-shaped facets
that send me into shivers

Atremble within the elements

My heart would like to set sail

The gold of non-interruption heaps up

Influx
Influx of unifying
Flux
the One finally
in a mass
remaining alone, including all
the One

Spacious
sanctifying
spacing at the point of culmination
at the point of beatitude

Redemption
The world begins vibrating
with the feeling of the Unsayable

The solid, the hard, the constructed
is troubled by lightness, the impalpable

The Imperishable displaces, defies the mortal
The Sublime sponges up, devastates the common
The Sublime outside of the sanctuary

Oscillating in the immense
the echo
where resides the being
beyond the being

Calm

Searching
A comparison digs for me

I advance

for the continuation
for the perpetuation

Doors poised as lookouts

Strong curtains of nerves

Progression of abandonment
Again coherence comes undone
Circumstantial becomes center
In contretemps, a black hole...
the chest heaves free
From so much once again unburdens me

No more occupant
Carcass of dead leaves
How long before the resurgence?

A thought runs away
Fly off significances

The splinters take to the road

Oriented otherwise
shivering in the heat

The place of comprehension
no longer rejoins the places of the excitation

Impressions of strange intentions

Vibrations
Vibration-whips

A sound comes from the shadows
soon forms a sphere
a barn
a group
an armada
a universe of Universes

sobered
totally recovering from the habitual
contradict contradicting contradictory
linked loosed
muffled reverberating
proclaimed obliterated
in the breach nowhere
unique hundred thousand
lost
everywhere

I no longer fight
I amalgamate myself

The infinite is a region
To make for it

That in which evil manifests itself
That in which good manifests itself...

Just like that
a veil made of millions of veils
of opacity,
of the opposition of creatures
is avoided

Bivouac under open skies

Springs
No more tomorrow
No more missions

I have no origin
I no longer remember my shoulders
Where then the apparatus for willing?

after a long voyage

Nothing
only Nothing
“Nothing” rises from the shipwreck

Bigger than a temple
purer than a god

“Nothing” suffices
rendering the rest insignificant
an unheard, implausible
pacifying insignificance
Benediction by the “Nothing”
for eternity
“Nothing”
rejoicing the heart
distributed to all

The table lives off me
I live off it

Is it so different?
Does there exist anything whatever
totally different
coat table tissue limetree
hill boar
different solely
because alike

Above all
effacing all
Unity
Totally
All the beings
the reign of the existence common to all
Magnificent!

The large puddle of intelligence
spreads over the world
inert
appeased
without competition

without claws
without ambition

on the way to meeting
embracing embraced
World

The tools lost
rediscovered the seed

The utmost
the utmost calls me
only the utmost

Universal arms that hold all enlaced

Universe given
given by deprivation

Ablation
Oblation

union in the utmost depths

Attraction

Carried to a higher power
to a power
implausibly high

Separated from separation
I live in an immense ensemble
flooded with vibrations

the chest with a hundred open doors

A flotilla of ships sets sail from us
sets off from all

In the denuded is conferred the acute
the level, the great, the grandiose
agility, uniqueness, extension
enormity, liberality

Instructed invisibly

A place is given
when all places are removed

To no one
for nothing
one could no longer feel envy

Sleepy whirlwinds
the jewel remains

Seizure, releases

Flux
Influx
Affluent attraction

Jamming of signals

Waves of vertigo
on the slopes of the swale

The revealers!

Invasive
Bustling
felicity that wants all the room
elementary
eliminating

Finished the course of pretexts
The arrow shoots as soon as there is oblivion

The privilege of living
unheard
dilated

vacant
suspended in time

Tree of Knowledge

Omniscience in all the consciousnesses
perceiving the perpetual...

APPENDIX. "UNE EXPÉRIENCE FONDAMENTALE"
BY RENÉ DAUMAL*

* Daumal, René. "Une expérience fondamentale." *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*. 1 (April 1946) : 166-173.

UNE EXPÉRIENCE FONDAMENTALE

Le fait est impossible à raconter. J'ai souvent essayé de le dire, depuis près de dix-huit ans qu'il s'est produit. Je voudrais, une bonne fois, épuiser toutes mes ressources de langage à en rapporter du moins les circonstances externes et internes. Ce fait, c'est une certitude, acquise par accident dans ma seizième ou dix-septième année, et dont le souvenir a orienté le meilleur de moi vers la recherche des moyens de la retrouver durablement.

Mes souvenirs d'enfance et d'adolescence sont jalonnés d'une série de tentatives pour faire l'expérience de l'au-delà, et cette suite d'essais, faits au petit bonheur, me conduisit à l'expérience fondamentale dont je parle. Vers l'âge de six ans, aucune croyance religieuse ne m'ayant été inculquée, le problème de la mort se présenta à moi dans toute sa nudité. Je passais des nuits atroces, griffé au ventre et pris à la gorge par l'angoisse du néant, du « plus rien du tout ». Vers onze ans, une nuit, relâchant tout mon corps, j'apaisai la terreur et la révolte de mon organisme devant l'inconnu, et un sentiment nouveau naquit en moi, espérance et avant-goût d'un impérissable. Mais je voulais plus, je voulais une certitude. A quinze ou seize ans, je commençai mes recherches expérimentales, sans direction et un peu au hasard. Ne trouvant pas le moyen d'expérimenter directement sur la mort — sur *ma* mort — j'essayai d'étudier mon sommeil, supposant une analogie entre celui-ci et celle-là. Je tentai, par divers procédés, d'entrer éveillé dans l'état de sommeil. L'entreprise est moins rigoureusement absurde qu'elle ne semble, mais elle est périlleuse à divers égards. Je ne pus la poursuivre bien loin; la nature me donna quelques sérieux avertissements sur les dangers que je courais. Un jour, je décidai pourtant d'affronter le problème de la mort elle-même; je mettrai mon corps dans un état aussi voisin que possible de la mort physiologique, mais en employant toute mon attention à rester éveillé et à enregistrer tout ce qui se présenterait à moi. J'avais sous la main du tétrachlorure de carbone, dont je me servais pour tuer les coléoptères que je collectionnais. Sachant que ce produit est, chimiquement, de

Affronter la mort.

UNE
EXPÉRIENCE
FONDA-
MENTALE
(Suite)

la même série que le chloroforme — plus toxique que lui — je pensai pouvoir en régler l'action d'une façon assez commode : au moment où la syncope se produirait, ma main retomberait avec le mouchoir que j'aurais maintenu sous mes narines, imbibé du liquide volatil. Par la suite, je répétai l'expérience en présence de camarades, qui auraient pu me porter secours au besoin. Le résultat fut toujours exactement le même, c'est-à-dire qu'il dépassa et bouleversa mon attente en faisant éclater les limites du possible et en me jetant brutalement dans un autre monde.

Il y avait d'abord les phénomènes ordinaires de l'asphyxie : battements des artères, bourdonnements, bruits de pompe dans les tempes, retentissement douloureux du moindre son extérieur, papillonnements de lumière; puis sentiment que cela devient sérieux, que c'est fini de jouer, et rapide récapitulation de ma vie jusqu'à ce jour. S'il y avait une légère angoisse, elle n'était pas distincte d'un malaise corporel dont mon intellect était tout à fait libre, et celui-ci se répétait à lui-même : attention, ne t'endors pas, c'est le moment de tenir l'œil ouvert. Les phosphènes qui dansaient devant mes yeux couvraient bientôt tout l'espace, qu'emplissait le bruit de mon sang; bruit et lumière emplissaient le monde et ne faisaient qu'un rythme. A ce moment-là, je n'avais déjà plus l'usage de la parole, et même de la parole intérieure; la pensée était beaucoup trop rapide pour traîner des mots avec elle. Je notais, en un éclair, que j'avais toujours le contrôle de la main qui tenait le tampon, que je percevais toujours correctement le lieu où était mon corps, que j'entendais les paroles prononcées près de moi, que j'en percevais le sens, — mais objets, mots et sens des mots n'avaient soudain plus de signification; il en était comme de ces mots que l'on a répétés longtemps, et qui semblent morts et étranges dans la bouche : on sait encore ce que signifie le mot « table », on pourrait l'employer correctement, mais il n'évoque plus du tout son objet. Donc tout ce qui, dans mon état ordinaire, était pour moi « le monde » était toujours là, mais comme si brusquement on l'avait vidé de sa substance; ce n'était plus qu'une fantasmagorie à la fois vide, absurde, précise et nécessaire. Et ce « monde » apparaissait ainsi dans son irréalité parce que brusquement j'étais entré dans un autre monde, intensément plus réel, un monde instantané, éternel, un brasier ardent de réalité et d'évidence dans lequel j'étais jeté tourbillonnant comme un papillon dans la flamme. A ce moment, c'est la *certitude*, et c'est ici que la parole doit se contenter autour du fait.

Certitude de quoi? Les mots sont lourds, les mots sont lents, les mots sont trop mous ou trop rigides. Avec ces pauvres mots, je ne puis émettre que des propositions imprécises, alors que *ma certitude* est

Un monde
instantané.

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C'est donc cela!

pour moi l'archétype de la précision. Tout ce qui, de cette expérience, reste pensable et formulable dans mon état ordinaire, c'est ceci — mais j'en donnerais ma tête à couper : j'ai la certitude de l'existence d'autre chose, d'un *au-delà*, d'un autre monde ou d'une autre sorte de connaissance; et, à ce moment-là, je connaissais directement, j'éprouvais cet *au-delà* dans sa réalité même. Il est important de répéter que, dans ce nouvel état, je percevais et comprenais très bien l'état ordinaire, celui-ci étant contenu dans celui-là, comme la veille comprend les rêves, et non inversement; cette relation irréversible prouve la supériorité (dans l'échelle de la réalité, ou de la conscience) du second état sur le premier. Je pensais nettement : tout à l'heure je serai revenu à ce qu'on appelle « l'état normal », et peut-être le souvenir de cette épouvantable révélation s'assombriera, mais c'est en ce moment que je vois la vérité. Je pensais cela sans mots, et en accompagnement d'une pensée supérieure qui me traversait, qui se pensait pour ainsi dire dans ma substance même avec une vitesse tendant à l'instantané. J'étais pris au piège, de toute éternité, précipité vers un anéantissement toujours imminent avec une vitesse accélérée, à travers le mécanisme terrifiant de la loi qui me nait. « C'est cela! C'est donc cela! » — tel était le cri de ma pensée. Je devais, sous peine du pire, suivre le mouvement; c'était un effort terrible et toujours plus difficile, mais j'étais forcé de faire cet effort; jusqu'au moment où, lâchant prise, je tombais sans doute dans un très bref état de syncope; ma main lâchait le tampon, j'aspirais de l'air, et je restais, pour le restant de la journée, ahuri, abruti, avec un violent mal de tête.

Je vais maintenant tenter de cerner la certitude indicible, au moyen d'images et de concepts. Il faut comprendre d'abord que, par rapport à notre pensée ordinaire, cette certitude est à un degré supérieur de signification. Nous sommes accoutumés à nous servir d'images pour signifier des concepts; ainsi, l'image d'un cercle pour signifier le concept de cercle. Ici, le concept lui-même n'est plus le terme final, la chose à signifier; le concept — l'idée au sens ordinaire du mot — est lui-même un signe de quelque chose de supérieur. Je rappelle qu'au moment où la certitude se révélait, mes mécanismes intellectuels ordinaires continuaient à fonctionner : des images se formaient, des concepts et des jugements se pensaient, mais sans avoir à s'encombrer de mots, ce qui donnait à ces processus la vitesse et la simultanéité qu'ils ont souvent dans des moments de grand danger, comme au cours d'une chute en montagne, par exemple.

Les images et concepts que je vais décrire étaient donc présents au moment de l'expérience, à un niveau de réalité intermédiaire entre

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Un cercle mi-parti
rouge et noir.

l'apparence du « monde extérieur », quotidien et *la certitude* elle-même. Cependant, certaines de ces images et certains de ces concepts résultant d'une affabulation ultérieure, due à ce que, dès que je voulus raconter l'expérience, et d'abord à moi-même, je fus obligé d'employer des mots, donc de développer certains aspects implicites des images et concepts.

Je commencerai par les images, bien qu'images et concepts fussent simultanés. Elles sont visuelles et sonores. Les premières se présentaient comme un voile de phosphènes, plus réel que le « monde » de l'état ordinaire, que je pouvais toujours percevoir au travers. Un cercle mi-parti rouge et noir inscrit dans un triangle mi-parti de même, le demi-cercle rouge étant dans le demi-triangle noir et inversement; et l'espace entier était divisé indéfiniment ainsi en cercles et triangles inscrits les uns dans les autres, s'agençant et se mouvant, et devenant les uns les autres d'une manière géométriquement impossible, c'est-à-dire non représentable dans l'état ordinaire. Un son accompagnait ce mouvement lumineux, et je m'apercevais soudain que c'était moi qui produisait ce son; j'étais presque ce son lui-même, j'entretenais mon existence en émettant ce son. Ce son s'exprimait par une formule que je devais répéter de plus en plus vite, pour « suivre le mouvement »; cette formule (je raconte les faits sans essayer de déguiser leur absurdité) se prononçait à peu près : « tem gwef tem gwef dr rr rr » avec un accent tonique sur le deuxième « gwef »; et la dernière syllabe se confondant avec la première, donnait une impulsion perpétuelle au rythme, qui était, je le répète, celui de ma propre existence. Je savais que, dès que cela irait trop vite pour que je puisse suivre, la chose innommable et épouvantable se produirait. Elle était en effet toujours *infiniment* près de se réaliser, et à la limite... je ne puis rien en dire de plus.

Quant aux concepts, ils tournent autour d'une idée centrale d'*identité* : tout revient au même à tout instant; et ils s'expriment par des schémas spatiaux, temporels, numériques, — schémas présents au moment même, mais dont la discrimination en ces diverses catégories et l'expression verbale sont, bien entendu, postérieures.

L'espace où avait lieu les représentations n'était pas euclidien, car c'est un espace tel que toute extension indéfinie à partir d'un point de départ revient à ce point de départ; je crois que c'est cela que les mathématiciens appellent un « espace courbe ». Projeté sur un plan euclidien, le mouvement peut se décrire ainsi : soit un cercle immense, dont la circonférence est projetée à l'infini, parfait, pur et homogène — *sauf un point* : mais de ce fait ce point s'élargit en un cercle qui croît indéfiniment, rejette sa circonférence à l'infini et se confond avec le

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C'est moi qui suis
perdu.

cercle originel, parfait, pur et homogène — *sauf un point*, qui s'élargit en un cercle... et ainsi de suite, perpétuellement, et à vrai dire instantanément, car c'est à chaque instant que la circonférence rejetée à l'infini, réapparaît simultanément comme *point*; non pas un *point* central, ce serait trop beau, mais un point excentrique, qui représente à la fois le néant de mon existence et le déséquilibre que cette existence, par sa particularité, introduit dans le cercle immense du Tout, qui à chaque instant *m'annule* en reconquérant son intégrité (qu'il n'a jamais perdue : c'est moi qui suis toujours perdu).

Sous le rapport du *temps*, c'est un schéma parfaitement analogue, et ce mouvement de retour à son origine d'une expansion indéfinie s'entend comme durée (une durée « courbe ») aussi bien que comme espace : le dernier moment est perpétuellement identique au premier, tout cela vibre simultanément dans l'instant, et c'est seulement par nécessité de représenter les choses dans notre « temps » ordinal que je dois parler d'une *répétition* indéfinie : cela que je vois, je l'ai toujours vu, je le verrai toujours, encore et encore, tout recommence identiquement à chaque instant — comme si mon existence particulière et rigoureusement nulle était, dans la substance homogène de l'Immobile, la cause d'une prolifération cancéreuse de moments.

Sous le rapport du *nombre*, de même, la multiplication indéfinie des points, des cercles, des triangles, aboutit instantanément à l'Unité régénérée, parfaite *sauf moi*, et ce *sauf moi* déséquilibrant l'unité du Tout engendre une multiplication indéfinie et instantanée qui va immédiatement se confondre à la limite, avec l'unité régénérée, parfaite *sauf moi*... et tout recommence — toujours sur place et en un instant, sans que le Tout soit réellement altéré.

Je serais conduit aux mêmes expressions absurdes si je continuais ainsi à essayer d'enfermer la *certitude* dans la série des catégories logiques; sous la catégorie de *causalité*, par exemple, la cause et l'effet s'enveloppent et se développent à chaque instant, passant l'une dans l'autre à cause du déséquilibre que produit dans leur identité substantielle le vide, le trou infinitésimal que *je suis*.

J'en ai assez dit pour que l'on comprenne que la certitude dont je parle est à la fois mathématique, expérimentale et émotionnelle; *mathématique* — ou plutôt *mathématico-logique* — on peut saisir cela, indirectement, par la description conceptuelle que je viens de tenter et qui peut se résumer abstraitement ainsi : identité de l'existence et de la non-existence du fini dans l'infini; *expérimentale*, non seulement parce qu'elle est fondée sur une vision directe (ce qui serait observation

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Les dangers sont
grands.

et non forcément expérience), non seulement parce que l'expérience peut être refaite à tout moment, mais parce qu'elle était éprouvée à chaque instant par ma lutte pour « suivre le mouvement » qui m'annulait en répétant la formule par laquelle je me prononçais moi-même; *émotionnelle*, parce que dans tout cela — et c'est là le centre de l'expérience — c'est de moi qu'il s'agit : je voyais mon néant face à face, ou plutôt mon anéantissement perpétuel dans chaque instant, anéantissement *total* mais non *absolu* : les mathématiciens me comprendront si je dis « asymptotique ».

J'insiste sur ce triple caractère de la certitude afin de prévenir, chez le lecteur, trois sortes d'incompréhension. Premièrement, je veux éviter à des esprits vagues l'illusion de me comprendre alors qu'ils n'auraient, pour répondre à ma certitude mathématique, que de vagues sentiments de mystère, d'au-delà, etc... Deuxièmement, je veux empêcher les psychologues, et spécialement les psychiatres, de prendre mon témoignage non comme un témoignage, mais comme une manifestation psychique intéressante à étudier et explicable par ce qu'ils croient être leur « science psychologique », et c'est pour rendre vaines leurs tentatives que j'ai insisté sur le caractère expérimental (et non simplement introspectif) de ma certitude; enfin, le cœur même de cette certitude, le cri : « C'est moi cela! c'est de moi qu'il s'agit » — ce cri doit effrayer les curieux qui voudraient d'une façon ou d'une autre, faire la même expérience; je les avertis que c'est une expérience terrible, et s'ils veulent des précisions sur ses dangers, ils peuvent me les demander en privé (1); je ne parle pas des dangers physiologiques (qui sont très grands), car si, moyennant l'acceptation de graves maladies ou infirmités, ou d'une abréviation très sensible de la durée de la vie physique, on pouvait acquérir une certitude, ce ne serait pas la payer trop cher; je ne parle pas seulement non plus du risque très réel de folie ou d'abrutissement définitif, auquel je n'ai échappé que par une chance extraordinaire dont je ne puis parler par écrit. Le danger est bien plus grave, et l'histoire de la femme de Barbe-Bleue l'illustre bien; elle ouvre la porte du cabinet défendu, et le spectacle d'horreur qui la frappe la marquera comme au fer rouge au plus profond d'elle-même. Après la première expérience, d'ailleurs, je passai plusieurs jours dans un état de « décollement » de ce qu'on appelle d'ordinaire le « réel »; tout me paraissait une absurde fantasmagorie, aucune logique ne pouvait plus me convaincre de quoi que ce fût, j'étais prêt à suivre, comme une feuille au vent, n'importe quelle impulsion extérieure ou

(1) René Daumal n'est plus. Mais Véra Daumal, sa femme, demeure prête à répondre à sa place.

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intérieure, et cela faillit m'entraîner à des « actes » (si l'on peut dire) irréparables — rien n'ayant plus d'importance pour moi. Je répétais plusieurs fois l'expérience, toujours avec exactement le même résultat; ou plutôt c'était toujours le même moment, le même instant que je retrouvais, coexistant éternellement au déroulement illusoire de ma durée. Ayant vu le danger, cependant, je cessais de renouveler l'épreuve. Un jour pourtant, plusieurs années après, je fus pour une petite intervention chirurgicale, anesthésié au protoxyde d'azote; ce fut exactement la même chose, le même instant unique que je retrouvai — cette fois, il est vrai, jusqu'à la syncope totale.

Ma certitude n'avait certes pas besoin de confirmations extérieures, mais bien plutôt c'est elle qui m'éclaira soudain le sens de toutes sortes de récits que d'autres hommes ont tenté de faire de la même révélation. En effet, je sus bientôt que je n'étais pas le seul, que je n'étais pas un cas isolé et pathologique dans le cosmos. D'abord plusieurs de mes camarades essayèrent de faire la même expérience. Pour la plupart, il ne se passa rien, sauf les phénomènes ordinaires qui précèdent la narcose. Deux d'entre eux allèrent un peu plus loin, mais ne rapportèrent de leur escapade que les images assez vagues d'un profond ahurissement; l'un disait que c'était comme les affiches de réclame pour un certain apéritif, où deux garçons de café portent des bouteilles sur les étiquettes desquelles deux garçons de café portent des bouteilles sur les étiquettes desquelles... et l'autre, creusant douloureusement sa mémoire, essayait de m'expliquer : « Ixian, ixian i., Ixian, Ixian I... » ce qui traduisait évidemment dans sa langue « Tem gwef tem gwef drr rr... ». Mais un troisième connut exactement la même réalité que moi, et il ne nous fallut qu'un regard échangé pour savoir que nous avions vu la même chose; c'était Roger-Gilbert Lecomte, avec qui je devais diriger la revue *Le Grand Jeu*, dont le ton de conviction profonde n'était que le reflet de notre certitude commune; et je suis persuadé que cette expérience déterminait sa vie comme elle déterminait la mienne, bien que dans un sens différent.

Et peu à peu, je découvris dans mes lectures des témoignages de la même expérience, car j'avais eu la clef de ces récits et de ces descriptions dont je ne pouvais, auparavant, soupçonner le rapport avec une même et unique réalité. William James parle de la chose. O. V. de L. Milosz, dans son *Épître à Storge*, en fait un récit qui me bouleversa par les termes qu'il emploie, et que je retrouvais dans ma bouche. Le fameux cercle dont parla un moine du Moyen Age, et que vit Pascal (mais qui le

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vit et qui en parla le premier ?) cessa d'être pour moi une froide allégorie, mais je sus qu'il était une vision dévorante de ce que j'avais vu aussi. Et, par delà tous ces témoignages humains, plus ou moins complets (il n'est guère de vrai poète chez qui je n'en retrouvais au moins un fragment), les confessions des grands mystiques, et, par delà encore, certains textes sacrés de diverses religions, m'apportaient l'affirmation de la même réalité, — parfois sous sa forme terrifiante, lorsqu'elle est perçue par un individu limité, qui ne s'est pas rendu capable de la percevoir, qui, comme moi, a essayé de regarder l'infini par le trou de la serrure et s'est trouvé devant l'armoire de Barbe-Bleue, parfois sous la forme paisible, pleinement heureuse et intensément lumineuse qui est la vision des êtres qui se sont réellement transformés et peuvent la voir, cette réalité, face à face, sans en être détruits. Je pense, par exemple, à la révélation de l'Être divin dans la *Bhagavad-gîtâ*, aux visions d'Ezéchiel et de Saint Jean à Pathmos, à certaines descriptions du « Livre des morts tibétain » (*Bardo tho dol*), à un passage du *Lankâvatâra Sûtra*...

N'étant pas devenu fou tout de suite définitivement, je me mis peu à peu à philosopher sur le souvenir de cette expérience. Et, j'aurais sombré dans ma propre philosophie si, au bon moment, quelqu'un ne s'était trouvé sur ma route pour me dire : voici, il y a une porte ouverte; étroite et d'accès dur, mais une porte, et c'est la seule pour toi.

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