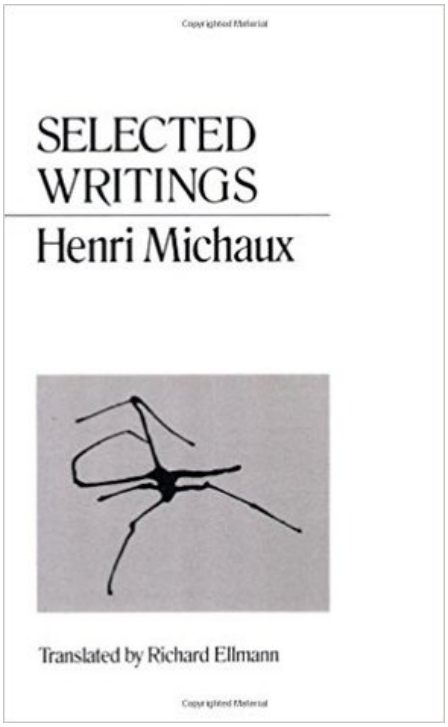

Selected Writings

Henri Michaux

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Henri Michaux is one of the great figures in modern French poetry. This selection is from L'Espace du Dedans, which collected eight books of prose poems, sketches and free verse. Brilliantly translated by Richard Ellmann, Michaux asks readers to join him in a fantastic world of the imagination. It is a world where wry humor plays against horror—where Chaplin meets Kafka—a world of pure and rare invention.

Selected Writings Details

Date	:	Published September 17th 1990 by New Directions (first published January 1st 1948)
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Author	:	Henri Michaux
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From Reader Review Selected Writings for online ebook

Justin Evans says

A solid volume, which could have been improved if whoever made the selections (the translator, Richard Ellmann?) had been a bit more ruthless and aimed for excellence rather than comprehensiveness.

That said, I seem to have had a very different reading experience than many others. Michaux's quasi-existentialist bits I found deeply boring, and the same can be said for the moments that verge towards surrealism. But his creation of worlds just slightly off the coast of our own was fascinating--basically, I read him as post-Gulliver rather than post-Kafka; post-Erewhon rather than post-Breton. And it didn't make me uncomfortable, it just made me interested in a variety of different shades: sadly, happily, angrily and so on. For instance, one of my favorite passages,

"Here, bleeding on the wall, alive, red or half infected, is the wound of a man; of a Mage who has put it there. Why? Out of asceticism, the better to suffer from it; for, if it was on his person, he would not be able to refrain from curing it by means of his thaumaturgic power, which is natural with him to the point of being entirely unconscious. But in this way he keeps it for a long time without its closing up. This process is common. Strange wounds, suffering on deserted walls, that you come upon with loathing and nausea..."

Could easily be read as high existentialism. It could be read as late surrealism. And I choose to read it as a wonderful, slightly scary imaginative investigation of morality. Anyone who can support three readings so easily deserves to be better read. As a special bonus, this edition has the French, which is often much more elegant than Ellmann's usually very good translation.

Cooper Renner says

Strange, sometimes tedious, often remarkable writings from the first 20 years or so of Michaux's career, translated by Richard Ellman, with French and English facing each other. Surrealist, I suppose, strongly imagistic, sometimes discursive. An entrance into a world of the imagination, but closing with a non-rational treatment of life in France during World War II.

Thomas Baughman says

This book was an important discovery in my very early 20s.

Alarie says

I’m not sure what happened. My love affair with Michaux was passionate, but burned out in just a few days. It must be akin to downing an entire box of chocolates in one sitting and never wanting to look at them again. I blame myself, so I’m not going to attach a rating. I’d have given him 5 stars in my first few days of reading.

I did at first find his work fresh, conversational, and avant garde 100 years after the writing. As a rule, I prefer his shorter poems, not the ones that go on for three pages or more, but that's my usual preference. I'll focus on what aspects I did enjoy, and let you decide whether you want to give him a try.

Most of us would probably describe Michaux's poems as surreal, but he balked at being labeled.
At times, he is amusing, cynical, whimsical, charming, and darkly humorous. I love the variety, especially since there's little change in form. He writes prose poems, and the length at times makes them seem more like short stories leaning toward Theater of the Absurd.

Michaux offers touches of self-deprecation:

"These properties are my only properties and I
have resided on them since my childhood and I can
say that very few people own poorer ones."
("My Properties")

moments of charming whimsy:

"I shaped out of a piece of bread a little animal,
a sort of mouse. Just as I was completing her
third paw, why look, she began to run… She fled
away under cover of night."
("Enigmas")

even occasional passages that could be mainstream poetry:

"Icebergs, Icebergs, back of the North Atlantic,
august Buddhas frozen on uncontemplated seas,
gleaming Lighthouses of Death without issue, the
desperate cry of the silence lasts for centuries.

Icebergs, Icebergs, Solitaries without cause,
countries barred-up, distant and free of vermin.
Parents of islands, parents of springs, how well I
see you, how familiar you are to me…
("Icebergs")

but I think my favorite poem is a very dark cross between Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Beckett: "The Night of the Bulgarians." Although it went on for five pages, the narrative, though odd, held together and kept me curious to see what was next. It also seemed relevant to today's culture of Us vs. Them. It begins,

"You see, we were homeward bound. We took
the wrong train. Then, since there we were with
a bunch of Bulgarians who kept muttering some-
thing or other among themselves, who kept moving
around on the time, we preferred to put an end to
the business at once. We drew our revolvers and
fired. We shot in a hurry because we didn't trust
them. It seemed preferable to put them out of ac-

tion straightaway. They looked astonished, on the whole, but these Bulgarians, you simply can’t trust them.”

See? Don’t you want to know what happens next?

Jen says

Why is it not surprising that I find it difficult to even begin characterizing the writing of a French man (born in Belgium but lived most of his life in France) who wrote in the early part of the 20th Century? This is a bilingual New Directions edition translated by Richard Ellmann. It's a hard cover old library edition (originally priced 3.50 I now see on the dust jacket flap) that I found at the odd book tables at the what-not warehouse. It was priced at .50 there and has been on my shelves for goodness knows how long because I'd never heard of this poet/author/artist and expected to be disappointed. Well, I wasn't. Quite the contrary. I wondered why in all of my reading of prose poetry and surrealism that I'd never come across him. In places, he reminded me of Italo Calvino, who I love, and who Michaux pre-dates by 20 years and of Russell Edson, who is even younger than Calvino. So I feel like I've discovered one of the great sources. And kick myself for not diving in sooner. The "writings" span from 1927-1943. I was excited to see that Michaux's books began to be reprinted in the 1990s and 2000s and are available on amazon. The copy I have is deeply yellowed and probably better off not being in anyone's library, which is a big part of why I finally decided to read it (thinking I'd read a few pages, become bored and pass it along).

So there's all that about the physical product without saying much about the poetry. It's surrealist prose poetry, which is to say it's weird and fantastical. It often looks at darkness without becoming dark, remaining a few steps removed in the narration. It's quirky and sometimes humorous, but more in tone than in overt humor. It's also often satirical. It's not difficult to see ourselves and the societies that humans construct in the cultures he creates. And yet they're never analogies. It's more that they suggest that we have no right to consider these creatures/peoples weird if we examine our own way of dealing with the world and one another. Here is a sample from his earlier work called "The Jetty."

During the month that I was living at Honfleur I had not yet seen the sea, for the doctor was making me stay in my room.

But last night, tired of being so isolated, I built, taking advantage of the fog, a jetty as far as the sea.

Then, right at the end of it, letting my legs hang down, I looked at the sea, below me, which was breathing deeply.

A murmur came from my right. It was a man sitting like me with legs swinging and looking at the sea. "Now that I am old," he said, "I am going to pull up everything I have put there during the years." He began to draw things up by means of pulleys.

And he brought up riches in abundance. He brought up captains from other ages in dress uniforms, chests studded with all sorts of precious things, and women dressed lavishly but as they no longer dress. And as he brought up each being or thing to the surface, he looked at it carefully with high hopes, then without saying a word, while his face fell, he pushed it behind him. So we filled up the entire pier. I don't remember exactly there was, for I have no memory, but obviously it was not satisfactory, in everything something had been lost

which he hoped to recover and which had faded away.

Then he began to throw everything back into the sea.

Like a long ribbon it fell and, when it wet you, froze you.

A last piece of junk which he was pushing off dragged him in too.

As for me, shivering with fever, I wonder how I was ever able to get back to my bed.

Not all of Michaux's work in this volume ties up so neatly or is so obviously psychological. Some of it is more like a wild ride for the sake of a wild ride with all sorts of refracted truths that flash and are gone. The beginning of "Magic" goes like this:

I used to be very nervous. But I have started on a new road.

I put an apple on my table. Then I put myself into the apple. How peaceful!

That may sound simple. And yet I have been trying for twenty years; and I would not have succeeded if I had wanted to begin with that. Why not? Maybe I thought I might be humiliated, considering its small size and its opaque and slow life. That is possible. The thoughts of the lower layer are rarely beautiful.

I therefore started on a new tack and united myself with the river Sheldt.

And so we're off for a wild ride complete with peculiar rationales for the odd activities.

Prose poetry and surrealism are not everyone's cup of tea. But if it is yours, get yourself some Michaux and enjoy.

W.B. says

Why is he not considered as great a writer as Borges? (He is.) If you don't know his drawings and other visual art, check that out too. Henri never fit anywhere. This is probably why he still fits everywhere today.

Tess says

I love this book -- many of his shorter prose pieces are here -- namely, "I am writing to you from a far off country...."

J.D.G. says

Without being too reductionistic, I believe the oft-noted "strangeness" of Michaux lies in how he took

consciousness itself as the central character of both his prose and poetry; all the refractions and reflections of ontology, all the degradations and sublimations of Earth's only self-conscious organism: the human animal.

The variety of effects which Michaux draws from his central focus on consciousness keeps these barely classifiable selections from becoming an abstrusely philosphical mess. Demonstrating Michaux's excellent comedic timing and absurdist wit is a series of episodes involving an extremely passive and unfortunate man named Plume who makes a dinner order which ends in an investigation by the secret police among many other amusing misadventures."My King" is another humorous piece in which the narrator continually affronts his master all to no avail; it is, however, also a very incisive work in its portrayal of the incontestable though idiotic nature of sovereign power.

"And More Changes Still" and "My Properties" show the more surrealism-drenched, introspective side of Michaux, which some may find difficult; the former piece begins with a narrator who, having lost the limits of his body, documents his continual shapeshifting into various creatures and objects, while the latter is the narrative of a lonely man who tends to his damp, dark property where new phenomena spontaneously emerge and vanish in spite of his attempts to develop his land into an ideal form. Both of these pieces defy simple allegorical reduction while also--thanks to the simple lucidity of Michaux's language--being realized enough to offer multiple interpretations.

Does the nameless narrator's constant transformation into different forms correspond to the equally constant fluctuations of his consciousness?

Do the properties describe the inner landscape of the mind distinct and isolated from the world?

Michaux certainly leaves enough space to develop these interpretations, but these pieces, for all their brevity, maintain a deeply dimensional aspect in which the adventurous reader can immerse himself again and again. The depth of his work far surpasses conventional authors who are still concerned with the trifles of character and plot as opposed to exploring the limits of what is communicable.

But speaking further of the effects achieved in this book, I must also comment on the brief anguish-riddled prose poems which, unlike the other works, largely forgo humor and abstraction for very visceral portraits of the self shorn of delusions. "Clown" is an exemplary work in this regard:

"Drained of the abscess of being somebody, I will drink again of nourishing space....Cancelled in pride, canceled in reputation, lost in a far-off place (or even not), without name, without identity. Clown destroyed in laughter, in grotesqueness, in guffawing, the meaning that contrary to all indications I had developed about my own importance."

With flashes of absurdist wit, deeply psychonautic journeys and harrowing moments of inner turbulence, Michaux is a writer surprisingly capable of both intellectually stimulating the reader while evoking a diverse range of affective responses. In originality of thought and intensity of emotion, he's one of the best writers I've encountered in a very long time.

Christina says

I don't think I've ever read anything more strange. Entertaining and thought provoking, sometimes deeply emotional. Sometimes baffling...

Lukáš Palán says

Henri Michaux to mel v mozku dobre popleteny a nekolik stranek jsem dokonce malem dusevne omdleval, ale zhruba ve druhe tretine bylo dost casti, ktere mne moc nebraly. Ve finale nadhernych 8,65/10.

Nevim, co vic bych dodal, nejsem totiz dodavatel.

Peter Crofts says

Odd that I haven't rated this already, its been a late night turn to read for me for years.

I guess you could call him a surrealist, though the term is so stale and over used it doesn't really do him justice. The introduction, by the translator, considers him to be a disconcerting writer. I suppose, but the tone and subject matter of these, for the most part, prose poems is so completely off the wall that he's also very funny. A matter of fact way of relating the absolutely bizarre. Most of the work would seem to be a metaphorical representation of a highly neurotic, restless mind.

There's also a fair amount of his writings of some of his very odd imaginary worlds, where he, in the guise of an anthropologist, describes their cultural mores. These feel Swiftian, though I don't think they're social satire.

He flits between genres and I think that's why people have a hard time pegging him to any particular one. He just seems to go about his odd musings oblivious to how they will be interprered nor, I suspect, particularly concerned. It doesn't feel like he's writing for anyone but himself.

A singular writer. This collection is a gem.

Vincent Eaton says

Strange, short bits, pieces and poems of odd elegance and harsh reading of human character and the thing of life.

Sarah says

Wow, this was a really fascinating book. I love the dream-like world that Michaux has created in his works. I didn't understand it necessarily, but it created a definite mood for me. Some of it was a bit dense, though, and didn't tie into the rest of it for me, so it was difficult to get into. It probably didn't help that I started it while at the Stonecoast Writers' Conference, so I wasn't able to devote my full attention to it, and then I put it aside for about a week before finishing it. I'll be interested to see what happens when I read it again, in time.

PGR Nair says

THE POETRY OF HENRI MICHAUX

Born in Belgium in 1899, Henri Michaux (1899-1984) defies common critical definition. He was educated at a Jesuit school in Brussels. He contemplated entering the priesthood then enrolled in medical school before abandoning his studies and becoming a merchant seaman. A painter as well as poet, he travelled widely in Africa and Asia and also supported himself in Paris as a teacher and secretary. His voyages inspired two travelogues on Ecuador and Asia. He finally settled in Paris, where he began to write and paint. In 1948, Michaux's wife died after accidentally setting fire to her nightgown: devastated, he began to take mescaline, a hallucinating drug, painstakingly recording his experiences in prose-poems accompanied by distinctive calligraphic line drawings. He has authored more than 30 books of poems, prose poems, essays, journals, and drawings. Whether in poetry or prose, his weird visions seem to emerge as messages from his inner space.

If poetry can be a wonderful tool to render exceptional or extreme experiences, then the hallucinating poems of Henri Michaux will top that list. I have grown fond of reading his outlandish poems. They stick out so sharp and sublime against the dull poems that one regularly encounter that I have the feeling of being reborn when I read it. Henri Michaux is a perfect antidote for the winter blues and I am glad that I chose to read him early this year. He can be an anti-poet, anti-God or a sort of Buddha tossing us into a new awareness. He thus gives us another being, shows us another way of thinking, observing and writing-vital skills that one deeply desire these days.

John Ashberry described Michaux as ‘hardly a painter, hardly even a writer, but a conscience-the most sensitive substance yet discovered for registering the fluctuating anguish of day-to-day, minute-to-minute living’. Allen Ginsberg venerated him as a master and genius. The great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges liked his writings and considered ‘his work is without equal in the literature of our time’. Without the slightest concern for any ‘ism’, he produced strange but original little fables, apparitions in poetry or prose or paint, pictures of fantastic predicaments and fantastic inventions and desires, coldly objective descriptions of strange voyages and places (as in the celebrated prose poem ‘I Am Writing to You from a Far-off Country’).

Reading Michaux makes one uncomfortable. The world of his poems bears some relation to that of everyday, but it is hard to determine what. If we try to assure ourselves by calling it fantasy, we have to ignore the scalpel which is playing about our insides. On the other hand, the term satire at first seems equally inappropriate, for the point of reference is hidden, and no obvious appeal to law, conventions, or common sense provides a focus for an attack on human ways. And to call Michaux’s world obsessive, neurotic, as we may also be tempted momentarily to do, is to disregard the pervasive wit, a wit which is too keen, and implies too much control, to confirm a psychiatric explanation.

Here are some samples from his oevre.

MY OCCUPATIONS(Translated by Richard Ellmann)

I can rarely see anyone without fighting him. Others prefer the interior monologue. Not me, I like fighting best.
There are people who sit down in front of me at the restaurant and say nothing, they stay on a while, for they have decided to eat.
Here is one of them.
See how I grab him, boom!
See how I re-grab him, boom!
I hang him on the coat hook.
I unhook him.
I hang him up again.
I re-unhook him.
I put him on the table, I push him together and
choke him.
I foul him up, I flood him
He revives.
I rinse him off, I stretch him out (I am beginning to get worked up, I must finish off),

I bunch him together, I squeeze him, I sum him up and introduce him in my glass, and ostentatiously throw the contents to the ground, and say to the waiter:<< Let me have a cleaner glass>>

But I feel ill, pay the check quickly and go.

In the above poem, the immediate scene is a restaurant; one diner takes a dislike to another; instead of letting his hatred build and struggling to control it, he simply lets go and attacks the man for no apparent reason.

I think Michaux is talking here about the restlessness of human beings and their predisposition to indulge in power games. One can take it is a metaphor for violent emotion, for an emptiness arising out of hate, for dissatisfaction, for needing something "strong" to distract one from existential angst etc. What I like about him is that Michaux is very good in casting psychological insight in physical terms rather than mental terms.

Let us consider another interesting prose poem titled ‘Simplicity’.

SIMPLICITY
(Translated by Richard Ellmann)

"What has been particularly lacking in my life up to now is simplicity. Little by little I am beginning to change.

For example, I always go out with my bed now and when a woman pleases me, I take her and go to bed with her immediately.

If her ears are ugly and large, or her nose, I remove them along with her clothes and put them under the bed, for her to take back when she leaves; I keep only what I like.

If her underthings would improve by being changed, I change them immediately. That is my gift. But, if I see a better-looking woman go by, I apologize to the first and make her disappear at once.

People who know me claim that I am incapable of doing what I just described, that I haven't enough spunk. I once thought so myself, but that was because I wasn't doing everything just as I pleased.

Now, I always have excellent afternoons. (Mornings I work.) "

What man has not fantasized some version of complete sexual freedom as described by Michaux in this poem? Though tongue-in-check blend of surrealism, common sense, and outrageous male egoism, the poet arrives at the ultimate reductive male version of the 'good life': good work and good sex. Another underlying theme may be that he wants to eliminate the superficial and artificial and liberate the core of his self from the external problems.

One aspect we can notice from the above two poems is that they are devoid of beautiful phrases and embellishments. Michaux fundamentally distrusted beautiful language.

In the last poem I have quoted here titled "The Jetty", an old man tosses back into the ocean an entire lifetime's worth of treasured moments, memories which no longer hold for him any value, but their weight eventually pulls him under the water.

THE JETTY
(Translated by Richard Ellmann)

"During the month that I was living at Honfleur I had not yet seen the sea, for the doctor made me stay in my room.

But last night, tired of being so isolated, I built, taking advantage of the fog, a jetty as far as the sea. Then, right at the end of it, letting my legs hang down, I looked at the sea, below me , which was breathing deeply.

A murmur came from my right. It was a man sitting like me with legs swinging and looking at the sea. "Now that I am old" he said "I am going to pull up everything I have put there during the years." He began to draw things up by means of pulleys.

And he brought up riches in abundance. He brought up captains from other ages in dress uniforms, chests studded with all sorts of precious things, and women dressed lavishly but as they no longer dress. And as he brought each being or thing to the surface, he looked at it carefully with high hopes, then without saying a word, while his face fell, he pushed it behind him. So we filled up the entire pier. I don't remember exactly what there was, for I have no memory, but obviously it was not satisfactory, in everything something had been lost which he hoped to recover and which had faded away.

Then he began to throw everything back into the sea.
Like a long ribbon it fell and, when it wet you, froze you.
A last piece of junk which he was pushing off dragged him in too.
As for me, shivering with fever, I wonder how I was ever able to get back to my bed."

To conclude, Michaux writings are purposefully impersonal and unembellished. They celebrate every aspect of the self. As the translator Nin Andrews rightly observes - " It was as if the poems were written by a detached and bemused observer, a witness both above and beneath the normal "I". No matter what spiritual heights a Michaux character aspired to, there was no depth to which his character wouldn't plunge, no temple he might not desecrate. Happily, many an "I" was not sophisticated, holy or resplendent. In fact,

many were what one might call the unconfesssed “I”, the “I” one might deny, repress, ignore; the “I” who often makes no sense and is logical as a dream , a serious as a clown, as gentle and mannerly as a rhinoceros, loose on streets. The “I” in Michaux’s work was often the socially unacceptable one a person might delete from family photo albums or from memory.”

For some, reading Michaux could be like undergoing multiple weather changes, display of thoughts that might last in their realm for a few days or moments and then vanish without leaving trace. For others, he might be an icon who clearly and clinically presents the algebra of human sufferings in spare, almost antiseptic terms. The truth is that we are enchanted by his writings at every reading.

It is common place to say that great writers augment our experience realm. I have no doubt that Michaux does that more than most.

As Gide rightly remarked, “Michaux excels in making us feel intuitively both the strangeness of natural things and the naturalness of strange things.”

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1. Selected Writings of Henri Michaux translated by Richard Ellmann
2. Someone wants to steal my name: and other poems: By Henri Michaux. Nin Andrews (Translator)

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