

A Disintegrating Lyric? – Henri Michaux and Chinese Lyricism

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Introduction

The Belgian-French writer Henri Michaux's relation to lyric poetry is as perplexing as it is thought-provoking. On the one hand, Michaux's poetry, according to critical consensus, 'considérée d'une façon globale, [...] n'est pas du tout lyrique'ⁱ ('considered overall, is not at all lyrical'), and is often even anti-lyrical. On the other hand, critics have not failed to notice Michaux's flights into lyricism in specific poems and especially his late works.ⁱⁱ Deftly encapsulated as a 'lyrisme dans les plis' ('lyricism in folds') by Jean-Yves Debreuille,ⁱⁱⁱ the non-straightforwardness of Michauxian lyricism is further complicated by Michaux's transcultural dimension that draws much inspiration from Chinese literature and poetic imagery.^{iv} How is this triangulation between Michaux's poetry, the European lyrical tradition, and Michaux's Chinese-inspired and 'Oriental-style' poems interwoven into the fabric of Michaux's (anti-)lyricism? In other words, how does Michaux's West-Eastern cross-cultural straddling relate to his problematisation of the lyric, and how can that help us re-read and perhaps unread the lyric (at least, its European understanding) in a comparative way?

To address this question, the present essay focuses on several specific points of analysis: firstly, I situate Michaux in the French lyric tradition and selectively read some poems that are representative of Michaux's uneasy and disintegrating lyricism; then I consider how Michaux's poems that allude to Chinese and Far Eastern sources of inspiration reinstate Michaux's lyric voice, but in a new, 'asianised' way. This raises the intriguing question asking why there exists a coincidence between Michaux's 'Chinese-style' and his lyrical moments.^v This not only concerns, I argue, Michaux's Chinese influences and the Orientalist stereotyping of Chinese literature as rhetorically ornate and full of 'sagesse' (wisdom), but more importantly, the question of whether the Chinese lyric exists and in what ways it may or may not engage with Michaux's poetry. As Srinivas Aravamudan argues,^{vi} narratives of influence between 'East' and 'West' are often deliberately contrasting, which then builds stereotypical images about cultural differences. Tracing the precise connections between Michaux's poetry and Chinese literature and culture is certainly one important step towards thinking against and beyond cultural stereotypes, as critics such as François Trotet and Liu Yang have done on the topic of Michaux's

Daoist and Buddhist inspirations,^{vii} Elodie Laügt and Wang Yu on Michaux's engagements with Chinese characters and calligraphy,^{viii} and numerous studies on Michaux's travelogue *Un Barbare en asie*. This essay follows upon this track by demonstrating details about Michaux's intertextuality with classical Chinese literature, but adding a theoretical perspective of the question of lyricism. Moreover, looking beyond influence and certain Chinese characteristics in Michaux's poetry, I attempt to conceptualise lyricism in the Chinese context by referring to the notion of *shuqing* poetic discourse and giving a few examples of Chinese poetry that approximate lyrical expression, so that they may shed light on Michaux's lyrical ambiguity and offer possibilities for a cross-cultural consideration of the lyric. Through this discussion, I finally argue that Michaux's poetry gives rise to an aesthetics of lyrical disintegration, the modes of poetic discourse of which are simultaneously augmented and fractured by Michaux's connections to Chinese lyricism. In this way, the West-Eastern lyric in Michaux's case may also activate a mode of comparative reading that sheds lights on the idea of lyric poetry and its linguistic, conceptual, and cultural limits.

Main analysis

Before considering Michaux's relation to lyricism we need to reflect on what the lyric is in the European poetic tradition. Rather than rehearse the array of theories on the lyric and the difficulties of its definition, I select here a few key expositions that relate to Michaux. To start with, the OED definition of 'lyric' gives 'of the lyre', 'characteristic of song', and 'poems directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments'. As Ralph Johnson observes, 'lyric as inherited from the Greeks is sung',^{ix} but musicality as a defining aspect of lyric became secondary with the advent of Romanticism, which posited the interiority and emotional life of the poetic persona as the lyric's crux. This Romantic definition of the lyric, established by Hegel as subjectivity with a 'developed self-consciousness',^x has become the key reference point for modern European lyric, including French lyric poetry. The first-person poetic persona and her interior monologue is therefore central to this understanding of the lyric, which partly explains New Criticism's focus on lyric as dramatic monologue. Hegel's categorisation of poetry into epic, dramatic, and lyric further means that the modern lyric is understood as 'mimetic [...] of the experience of the subject',^{xi} which extends to the view that the lyric represents and expresses personal emotions. In French criticism on lyric poetry (which differs from New Criticism), elevated and fervent poetic register in the form of verse – especially the 12-syllabled alexandrine – is seen as crucial, going back to the Renaissance poet Malherbe's 'grandeur

lyrique'^{xii} and Nicolas Boileau's *L'Art poétique*. The eulogy, ode, and elegy, for instance, with their song-like style and exclamatory, solemn tone, are representative lyric forms.^{xiii} Nineteenth-century French poetry (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud) turns the lyric voice towards self-interrogation and the ravaged interiority of the poet, connecting the lyric to negativity and confession. In brief, the European conceptualisation of the lyric is typically romanticist, in verse form, postulating the centrality of individual subjectivity (even if it is destabilised and in crisis), and associated with emotive enunciation through the 'I' poetic persona and high-flown, emotionally contagious rhetoric.

Consciously distancing himself from the major literary and intellectual trends in twentieth-century France, particularly surrealism and the postwar penchant for rationality and precision in literature (e.g. Francis Ponge, Raymond Queneau), Michaux occupies a unique place in modern French poetry. Anti-lyricism, 'littéralisme' (anti-idealism, refusal of figurative and metaphoric language), and an autobiographical lyric contesting the subject became the general trend in postwar France poetry,^{xiv} accompanied by the vehement reaction to any grandiose rhetoric that could be ideologically contagious. Meanwhile, Michaux's own engagements with lyricism ambiguously both complement and contrast these tendencies. On the one hand, even in his early interwar-era poems, before the anti-lyrical turn, Michaux already adopted an ironic underwhelming tone that manifested intense mistrust of any central lyric subject. Consider the poem *Entre centre et absence* (1935):

C'était à l'aurore d'une convalescence, la mienne sans doute, qui sait? Qui sait?
Brouillard! Brouillard! [...]
'Médicastres infâmes', me disais-je, 'vous écrasez en moi l'homme que je
désaltère'. [...]^{xv}

(It was at the dawn of a recovery, my recovery doubtless, who knows? Who
knows? Mists! Mists! [...]
'Villainous quacks!' I said to myself, 'you are crushing the man inside me whom I
am quenching'.)

The first lines seem to assume the typical lyrical 'I' persona who refers to an experience of suffering or illness by mentioning 'convalescence', but immediately muddles the certainty of the subject and the recovery by ironically juxtaposing 'sans doute' with 'qui sait?' and 'brouillard!'.

The second stanza's rant against 'quacks' draws a parallel between the healing process and the extermination of a parasitical alter-ego who embodies the I persona's illness and demands that its thirst or hunger be placated. The 'I' persona is doubled and rendered self-contradictory: one ego is ill whereas the other luxuriates, one recovers whereas the other dies. The positive-sounding lilt of the beginning 'aurore' is dumbed down by mists and ends up being undesirable, for the I persona would rather appease his sick alter-ego than recover. Combined with its prose-like style, the poem's overall effect, therefore, powerfully undercuts lyric subjectivity and sentimental language.

Simultaneously, it is no secret that Michaux's poetry obsessively returns to the favourite topic of the *poète maudit*: suffering and negativity. 'On avale toujours la boule aux mille pointes de souffrances'^{xvi} ('You repeatedly swallow the thousand-barbed ball of pain'), Michaux professes resignedly. The outpour of negative emotions stemming from a tormented heart is a typical lyric trope, consider Verlaine's 'Oh! je souffre, je souffre affreusement' (Ah! I'm suffering, I'm suffering terribly'),^{xvii} and Rimbaud's 'Je me crois en enfer, donc j'y suis' ('I believe I am in hell, therefore I am there').^{xviii} How does Michaux's poems square their malaise with his scepticism about lyrical emotion and the first-person subject? A later poem in extremely prosaic form, *Entre ciel et terre* (1949), of which the title echoes *Entre centre et absence*, offers some clues:

Quand je ne souffre pas, me trouvant entre deux périodes de souffrance, je vis
comme si je ne vivais pas. Loin d'être un individu chargé d'os, de muscles, de
chair, d'organes, de mémoire, de desseins, je me croirais volontiers, tant mon
sentiment de vie est faible et indéterminé, un unicellulaire microscopique, pendu
à un fil et voguant à la dérive entre ciel et terre, dans un espace incirconscrit,
poussé par des vents, et encore, pas nettement.^{xix}

(Between heaven and earth

When I am not suffering, finding myself between two phases of suffering, I live as
if I were not living.

Far from being an individual weighted with bones, muscles, flesh, organs,
memory, and intentions, I would gladly imagine myself – my feeling of life being
so weak and indefinite – as a microscopic amoeba, hanging from a thread and
wandering adrift between heaven and earth, in an unlimited space, pushed by

the winds, and yet, not quite.)

Although suffering is emphatically signaled from the very beginning, the poem immediately turns the negativity of suffering on its head when it gives supreme value to suffering by equating it to life itself. This poem is instead about the negativity of not suffering, it is an anti-plaint. In the state of non-suffering, the 'I' persona's bodily existence, individuality, and personal feelings dissipate into the smallest atomistic existence: an amoeba drifting without agency in a vast indeterminate space. Though Michaux does not completely withdraw the lyric subject and its experience, they are attenuated to quasi-zero. But perhaps, this amoebic state of weakness could also be somewhat desirable ('je me croirais volontiers')? Note the hint of beauty in the image of the wandering amoeba immersed in the cosmos, only tied down by a single thread. Might not this image be a metaphor for Michaux's own lingering lyric voice - fragile and ready to snap, but not quite ('pas nettement')? On the other hand, the poem negatively re-defines and in fact reinforces the suffering poetic persona: only suffering can attest to the intensity and individuality of existence.

The emotional anti-climax and lyrical ambiguity in both poems above align well with Michaux's view that lyric poetry is confessional, but always in a state of self-surveillance: 'Les poésies lyriques souvent sont des confessions, mais ces confessions se surveillent' ('Lyric poems are often confessions, but these confessions monitor themselves').^{xx} This self-monitoring checks any outburst of romantic sentimentality and renders the lyrical subject self-consciously critical. This is not to say that emotion and authenticity are impossible, but that 'même si c'est vrai, c'est faux' ('even if it's true, it's false').^{xxi} As Michaux ironically describes, the narcissistic subject invents self-inflicted pain out of boredom: 'Quel drôle de Narcisse je fais: Je me scalpe. Je m'écorche. [...] Ainsi je me martyrise. Pourquoi? Besoin d'activité. Que faire alors? [...] Je n'ai pas l'imagination du bonheur' ('What a funny Narcissus I am: I scalp myself. I flay myself. [...] Thus I torture myself. Why? Need some activity. What to do then? [...] I have no imagination for happiness').^{xxii} Poetic subjectivity can exist, but only if it is aware of the possibility for its own inauthenticity and parody. In Jean-Michel Maulpoix's view, Michaux's poetry comes close to a 'lyrisme critique', characterised by 'dépersonnalisation', 'impuissance', and an 'impoverished' lyric voice,^{xxiii} where lyricism itself is poetry's 'objet critique'.^{xxiv} Thus for Michaux, suffering is allowed lyricism, provided it is whispered, and purged of the centrality of human subjectivity:

l'homme modeste ne dit pas je suis malheureux [...]
il dit nos arbres souffrent^{xxv}

(the humble man does not say 'I am miserable' [...]
he says 'our trees suffer')

But there is more to Michaux's poetics than critical lyricism, self-dismantling, and negativity. Michaux's approach to lyricism is not only post-romantic and mistrustful, it co-exists surprisingly, even jarringly, with a dimension of Michaux that is deeply serious and profoundly philosophical, often without undercutting irony. In this dimension, we find the desire for inner peace, cosmic indifferenciation, beauty, the out-of-this-world ('un autre monde', in Le Clézio's words),^{xxvi} often spoken through a contemplative lyrical voice that evokes the sublime and religious emotion. Intriguingly, this sublime-orientated lyricism is particularly accentuated in Michaux's 'Oriental-style' poems that allude to Chinese and Far Eastern literature and imagery. Or, even when these poems are not devoid of scepticism, once we take into account their possible Chinese sources of inspiration, their apparent underwhelming effect is reduced and takes on a new light. For example, referring back to *Entre ciel et terre*, the idea of the self's dissolution in cosmic space is already present. The poem's title could also be a literal translation of the Chinese expression 天地之間 *tiandi zhi jian*, literally 'between sky and earth', but figuratively meaning 'in the world', since heaven and earth are two contrasting cosmological poles used synecdochically to mean 'world' in classical Chinese. The 'dérive' of the amoeba also has a particular echo of the *Zhuangzi*'s 逍遙游 *xiaoyaoyou*, 'free and easy wandering' (*Zhuangzi* 1.1), and '彷徨乎馮閱' ('wandering irresolutely in boundless vastness', *Zhuangzi* 22.6), both of which are positive images of unfettered movement in the Daoist literary repertoire. The lifeless mood of *Entre ciel et terre* heralded in the first lines is alleviated when we recognise the poem's Daoist connotations.

Another poem that is more explicitly allusive to Daoist texts and images is *Vers la sérénité* (1934),^{xxvii} published shortly after Michaux extensive travels in 1932 in the Far East, including India, China, and Japan. The notion of 'sérénité' – directly connected to Michaux's concern about 'l'équilibre savant' ('fine balance'), which he sees as a cardinal Chinese virtue^{xxviii} – recurs in Michaux's œuvre. Trotet argues perceptively that 'sérénité' complements Michaux's aspirations to Daoist emptiness ('le Vide') and non-action ('le non-agir').^{xxix} Here, however, I

trace more precisely this particular poem's intertextual connections to Daoist literature.

Vers la sérénité

Celui qui n'accepte pas ce monde n'y bâtit pas de maison. S'il a froid, c'est sans avoir froid. Il a chaud sans chaleur. [...] [1]

Il boit l'eau sans avoir soif. Il s'enfonce dans le roc sans se trouver mal.

La jambe cassée, [...] il garde son air habituel et songe à la paix [...]

Sans être jamais sorti, le monde lui est familier. Il connaît bien la mer. [...] [2]

Ainsi à l'écart, toujours seul au rendez-vous, sans jamais retenir une main dans ses mains, il songe, l'hameçon au cœur, à la paix, à la damnée paix lancinante, la sienne, et à la paix qu'on dit être par-dessus cette paix.^{xxx} [3]

(Towards Serenity

He who does not accept this world does not build his house there. If he is cold, it is without being cold. He is hot without heat. [...]

He drinks water without being thirsty; he beds down in rocks without feeling uncomfortable.

With a broken leg, [...] he carries on with his usual demeanour and reflects upon peace [...]

Without ever going outside, he is knowledgeable about the world. He knows the sea well [...]

Thus living at a distance, always alone when showing up, never holding a hand in his hands, he reflects, fishhook in his heart, upon peace, upon the damned agonising peace, his own peace, and the peace that is said to be beyond this peace.)

The emotional state and character portrayal here are very cryptic. The 'he' persona reminds us of Michaux's bland buffoon-like character Plume, who is numb to sensory experiences and devoid of feeling. But when we recognise Michaux's classical Chinese references, this strange impersonality and apatheticness become sagely characteristics: the lines at location [1] echo the *Zhuangzi's* (2.11) description that '至人神矣：大澤焚而不能熱，河、漢互而不能寒' ('the perfect man is spirit-like: though the huge swamps burn him, he cannot feel the heat; though the great rivers freeze up, he cannot feel the cold'); [2] connects with the *Daodejing's* (section 47)

depiction of the sage: '不出戶知天下; 不闕牖見天道' ('Without going outside one's door, one knows everything under the sky; without looking out from one's window, one sees the Dao of heaven'. The sage, moreover, is 'knowledgeable without travelling' ('聖人不行而知', *Daodejing* 47); finally, the fishhook image in [3] probably alludes to, as Liu Yang has observed,^{xxxii} the *Liezi's* (5.8) image of the early Chinese sage Zhan He fishing: '臨河持竿, 心无雜慮, 唯魚之念; [...] 手无輕重, 物莫能亂' ('I [i.e. Zhan] hold the fishing rod beside the river, fishing without any distracted thoughts in the heart, intent on the fish only; [...] my hand moves neither too lightly nor heavily, and external things cannot disturb me'). Zhan's concentrated mood is transposed to Michaux's poem, through the 'hameçon' that is literarily fixed in the heart. But Michaux also adds a dash of disorder in this reflective state when he embeds 'paix' between 'damnée' 'lancinante', before ending on a suggestive aspiration towards a higher state of peacefulness, or serenity. Given Michaux's admiration for the *Zhuangzi*, *Liezi*, and *Daodejing*, expressed notably in *Un Barbare en asie*,^{xxxiii} *Vers la sérénité* most probably involves a conscious allusion and imitation on Michaux's part. The negative experiences of the poetic persona, including being beaten and having his leg crushed, are offset by a quasi-sagely attitude of detachment. This mixture of philosophical indifference and a pinch of bitterness and anguish results in a simultaneously incongruous and wondrous effect. Thus the poem both attempts and suppresses the tendency towards a eulogy of sagehood. The eulogy, as mentioned above, is seen as a crucial lyrical form that goes hand in hand with the song and high-flown rhetoric. Here, we should note that the eulogistic and lyrical evocation is sustained by Michaux's Chinese allusions.

The positive connection between Michaux's lyrical voice and his 'asianised'^{xxxiii} style and Eastern sources of inspiration is even more pronounced in Michaux's group of six poems gathered under the title *Le Dit du Maître de Ho* (c. 1943-1945), of which the song-like elegiac style contrasts *Vers la sérénité*. Roger Dadoun suggests that the enigmatic name Ho evokes 'O comme Orient', 'H comme Henri', and 'O comme Michaux'.^{xxxiv} The Oriental impression is indeed unmistakable, for the title of 'Maître de Ho', 'Master XX' immediately refers to the honorific title of 'master' (子 *zi*) used for prominent early Chinese thinkers and teachers, e.g. Zhuangzi, Xunzi are literally 'Master Zhuang', 'Master Xun'. 'Ho' also phonetically evokes a Chinese surname: He ('Ho' in French transliteration). To add to the intrigue, there is in fact a Master He-Guan in early China, rendered in French as 'Ho-kouan-tseu', who is considered

Daoist. The 1844 *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques* lists Ho-kouan-tseu in the section 'Philosophes des Chinois' immediately following Liezi and Zhuangzi, as followers of 'l'école du Lao-tseu' (i.e. the *Daodejing*).^{xxxv} Considering Michaux's eclectic reading about ancient China and love for Daoism, could Michaux be referring obliquely to Ho-kouan-tseu in *Le Dit du Maître de Ho*? Though we have to leave that to speculation, the poems speak for themselves through their aphoristic style that resembles Daoist rhetoric, for instance the poem *Monde*:

Celui dont le destin est de mourir doit naître. Hélas, mille fois hélas pour les naissances, dit le Maître de Ho. C'est un enlacement, qui est un entrelacement. On perd en gagnant. On recule en approchant. [...] ^{xxxvi}

(*World*

Those whose fate is to die must be born. Alas! A thousand-fold alas for all births! Says the Master of Ho. This is an enlacing that is an interlacement. One loses by winning. One recedes by approaching. [...])

Michaux's juxtaposition of pairs of opposites in short aphoristic sentences: mourir – naître, perdre – gagner, reculer – approcher, which then posit a *coincidentia oppositorum* that makes the opposites interdependent, is typically found in Daoist texts. For instance, the *Zhuangzi*'s (2.5) '方生方死' ('simultaneously with birth there is death'); and the *Daodejing*'s '進道若退' (section 41) ('advancing towards the Way is like regressing'), and '物或損之而益、或益之而損' (section 42) ('some things are increased by being reduced, some others are reduced by being increased'). Michaux's echoing of these Daoist aphorisms can hardly be coincidental, for he comments elsewhere on the *Daodejing*'s style and 'le style chinois' more broadly: 'Lao-tseu vous lance un gros caillou', 'ce style où l'on épargne les mots' ('Laozi throws you a big stone', 'this style where words are used sparingly');^{xxxvii} and although Michaux sees little 'développement lyrique' ('lyrical development') in the ancient Chinese style,^{xxxviii} he affirms that the Chinese language 'est chantée' ('is sung').^{xxxix} In *Monde*, we see Michaux's experimentative interplay of these diverse aspects of Chinese-style poetic language: concise, poised to stun, formally prose-like rather than versed, but simultaneously sustaining a lyrical mood through the exclamative and lamenting tone.

Michaux's lyricism is not an occasional eccentricity but in fact grows considerably in his late

poems – again, especially in poems which evoke the Far East. In his *En Occident le jardin d'une femme indienne* and *Fille de la Montagne* (1984), the latter dedicated to the Bengali poet Lokenath Bhattacharya, Michaux emphatically repeats the word 'beauté', i.e. the lyrical topic par excellence;^{xl} whereas in *Le jardin exalté* (1983), lyrical elevation of the highest degree is reinstated: the 'I' persona's malaise is cleansed when he listens to karnatic music in a garden, and the poem overflows with ecstasy and musicality:

[...] un vrai jardin de paradis.

C'était donc possible, et pas de pomme, ni de serpent, ni de Dieu punisseur, seulement l'inespéré paradis. [...]

Le monde exalté de l'Orient était là, un et total, exprimant le summum d'extase au nom de tous, de tous sur Terre.

[...] là où l'indicible reste secret, sacré.

[...] s'y agglutinait scansion imperturbable, [...] tel le martèlement d'un cœur, qui aurait été musical, un cœur venu aux arbres, [...] issu d'un grand cœur végétal (on eût dit planétaire), cœur participant à tout, retrouvé, enfin perçu, audible aux possédés de l'émotion souveraine, celle qui tout accompagne, qui emporte l'Univers.^{xli}

([...] a real garden of paradise.

So it was possible, no apple, nor serpent, nor God the punisher, simply the serendipitous paradise. [...]

The exalted world of the Orient was there, one and complete, expressing the ultimate ecstasy in the name of everything, everything on Earth.

[...] there where the unspeakable stays secret, sacred.

[...] there was assembling a serene rhyming, [...] like the beating of a heart that would have been musical, a heart coming from trees [...] stemming from a great vegetal heart (almost planetary), a heart that joins everything, re-discovered, finally perceived, audible to those possessed by the supreme emotion, the emotion that accompanies everything, and moves the Universe.'

No more irony or suspicion, instead there is a recuperation ('retrouvé') of lyrical emotion and poetic musicality. The focus on the heart echoes Baudelaire's *Mon cœur mis à nu*, but the mood here is sanguine and contemplatively ecstatic, quasi-religious, without the *poète maudit's*

satanic, tormented, neurotic sensibility. Nor can we miss the romantic sensitivity à la Novalis almost resuscitated in the beating heart's cosmic dimensions here^{xlii} – 'almost' because the mystery of the world remains unrevealed and the heart is vegetal, not human. Michaux's eulogistic evocation of the Orient also brings to mind various images of paradisiacal and landscape gardens in Asian cultures. Surprisingly, Michaux is both ahead and out of his time: before WWII when French poets were experimenting with free lyrical expression, Michaux's early poems were already deliberately anti-lyrical and prosaic; whereas while anti-lyricism became established in postwar France, Michaux's lyrical voice grew increasingly powerful.

In sum, Michaux's poetry paradoxically encompasses both anti-lyrical and weaker or stronger lyrical modes. Although Michaux's lyric subject is diminished and de-centralised, it still exists, even in the state of self-parody, dispersion, and fragmentation. The occasions where Michaux's lyrical voice is heightened are also strongly related to emotional expression, but this expression is solipsist rather than contagious, inclined towards the far horizons of one's interiority and philosophical contemplation. Michaux thus marks a point where lyricism is the very process of its own disintegration and reformulation. The crucial question here is: given the connection between Michaux's Far Eastern, especially Chinese allusions and a strengthened lyrical voice (as the poems discussed above show), how and why does a sinized style lend itself to stronger lyricism? As Roger observes, Ponge sees Michaux's 'asianisme' as a deliberate baroqueness and mannerism, exploiting the stereotypes of Oriental literatures as flowery 'excès du discours' ('excessiveness of rhetoric') in contrast to French classicism and 'clarté'.^{xliii} But is this only a question of Michaux's internalisation of certain Orientalist stereotypes imagined by the West and his imitation of a perceived 'Chinese-style' (e.g. high-flown and sagely)? Or can there be some more substantial connection between Michaux and Chinese poetics, in the sense that Michaux's poetry shares some common ground with Chinese lyricism, and/or that Michaux's lyricism – especially its reinvigorated instances – can be better expounded by certain Chinese notions of the lyric?

To answer these questions we need to consider what Chinese lyricism is, beginning with the very question of whether the poetic category of lyric exists in the Chinese context. To start with, the lyric has no equivalent category in Chinese poetry, which has a different classification of poetic writings comprising several major genres with different prosodic patterns: 詩 *shi*; 騷體 *sao*-style; 樂府 *yuefu*: music bureau (folk-song style) poetry; 賦 *fu*: rhapsodic rhyme-prose; 詞 *ci*; and 曲 *qu*. Although the Chinese term 抒情 *shuqing* typically translates as 'lyric', it is an

adjective that denotes a mode of discourse or style but does not specify literary genre, nor necessarily refers to a linguistic artefact. So *shuqing* poetry may be written in any of the major poetic genres, and we also have *shuqing* prose (散文 *sanwen*), *shuqing* reasoning (議論 *yilun*, for presenting arguments), *shuqing* songs, and *shuqing* music. The *shuqing* mode therefore does not associate with particular expectations about generic or formal aspects. Here we may recognise that there is no Chinese-style poetry, but many different styles of Chinese poetic writing, and that the *shuqing* mode in Chinese writing is not necessarily flowery or sagely. So we need to think outside the definitions and stylistics of the lyric in European poetry, and beyond the Western imagination of Chinese lyrical rhetoric. How, then, may we translate – terminologically and conceptually – *shuqing* as an approximation of 'lyrical'? The term's etymology is telling: firstly, the character 抒 *shu* covers various meanings from the literal 'ladle out water', 'discharge (fluid)', 'unblock', 'unravel (from a weaving machine)', to the figurative 'alleviate', 'give relief to', 'express', 'vent'. *Shu*'s connotations involve water-related metaphors of allowing something pent-up to flow and be relieved, typically used for the release of negative rather than positive feelings. Secondly, the character 情 *qing*, despite its primary modern meaning of 'emotion', 'sentiment', has a very complex conceptual history that reaches back to early China, when *qing* encompassed a spectrum of meanings including 'situation', 'facts', 'conditions' (these meanings still exist in present-day use of modern Chinese, as in *bingqing* 'state of illness'), 'emotional and psychological responses' with cosmological elements,^{xliv} 'disposition' (especially referring to personal character). How does *qing* reconcile its two very dissimilar meanings of 'fact' and 'emotion' in poetic discourse then, as in the term *shuqing*? It certainly involves emotional expression, since as early as the long plaintive *sao*-style poem 九章 *Nine Chapters*, attributed to the arch-poet Qu Yuan (339-278 BCE), we read:

惜誦以致愍兮，

發憤以抒情。^{xlv} [my italics for *shuqing*]

(Cherishing my plaint, I express my sorrow,
Venting my rancour, I release my pent-up feelings.)

Qu Yuan, misunderstood by his lord, exiled and driven to suicide, sets the lamenting tone for much of later Chinese elegiac poetry that sings of the wronged scholar-official's grievances. The sense of individual subjectivity and sentiment in Qu's poems shares some commonalities with the lyric subject in European poetry and its focus on emotional elocution, especially of the negative type (e.g. misery, despair). This point about releasing (*shu*) emotional negativity connects with Michaux's lyricism, which brims with deep-seated malaise, as we have seen above. The water metaphor for 'discharged' emotions is also ubiquitous in Michaux, e.g. *Le jardin exalté*'s analogy between karnatic music and water invading the riverbed of the heart; it is also crucial for Michaux's frequent liquidations of the poetic persona: 'Je suis fleuve dans le fleuve qui passe'^{xlvi} ('I am a river in the river that flows').

Despite the apparent focus on emotions in Qu Yuan's lyrical complaints, however, they can be also be read as political criticism and responses to historical circumstances. These interpretations engage with the dimension of *qing* that refers to 'situation' and 'facts'. As David Schaberg argues, early Chinese songs and poems (including Qu Yuan) 'assert the importance of personal actions, emotions, and responses in historical events'.^{xlvi} Qu's lament is not only personal but directed towards the ruler, presenting a reaction to the ruler's maltreatment of his officials and implied 'moral judgement'.^{xlvi} Complaints have a didactic effect and socio-political function, which affirms obliquely the early Chinese dictum '詩言志' ('*shi* poetry expresses intent').^{xlvi} In David Der-Wei Wang's view,^l therefore, the lyrical rhetoric in Qu Yuan and much of Chinese literature is neither solipsistic self-indulgence nor flights of whimsical sentiments, but serious reflections on cosmological and historical changes. In this way, the emotive and factual sides of *qing* correlate perfectly with each other: situations and events prompt emotional responses, vice versa these responses shape historical memory. This historicist reading of *shuqing* distances Chinese lyricism considerably from the European lyric, which revolves around the alienated individual and his transcendent vision; it also sits uncomfortably with Michaux's lyricism, for Michaux's poetic emotions are primarily solipsist and ahistorical, nor does Michaux shirk from capturing the whimsical and trivial, especially in his mescaline poems.

The early Chinese critical view 'poetry expresses intent' came to be espoused 'by critics who preoccupied themselves with public, socio-ethical dimensions of emotion',^{li} but that is not the final say on lyricism and articulations of *qing* in Chinese poetry. During the Six Dynasties (220-589), when belletristic literature became of utmost importance and the concern with didacticism waned, Lu Ji's and Liu Xie's literary criticism presented a re-interpretation of

poetry that distanced poetic vision from morality and became more individualist and focused on the heart-mind (心 *xin*). *Qing* and lyricism are re-articulated, which then creates some new connections to Michaux. More specifically, Lu Ji states in his 文賦 *Rhymeprose on Literature*:

精驚八極，心游萬仞

其致也，情瞳朧而彌鮮，物昭晰而互進 [...]

詩緣情而綺靡

賦體物而瀏亮 [...]

誄纏綿而淒愴 [...]

頌優游而彬蔚^{lii} [my italics]

(The [writer's] spirit gallops to the eight limits of the cosmos, the heart-mind soars towards boundless heights,

When this process is complete, emotions pass from misty glimmers to full luminosity, things become clear-cut and light up each other [...]

Shi poetry originates from emotions and is ornate and delicate as gossamer,

Fu [Rhymeprose] embodies things and gives them clear and bright form [...]

Lei [elegy] is touching and lingering with heartfelt grief [...]

Song [eulogy] wanders carefree and is rich and lush.)

Many translators have translated *shi* in the third line as 'lyric poetry'^{liii} to highlight the emphasis on *qing* in Lu's new dictum about poetry: its origins are emotions and aesthetic sensibility. But we do not need to limit lyricism to *shi*, since other poetic genres (e.g. *lei*, *song*) Lu cites clearly relate to emotional expression too. Lu's new vocabulary describing poetry's luxuriously elegant style (綺靡, 彬蔚) strongly contrasts the 'classicism' of earlier critics, whose concern about poetry's didactic and historically-engaged role supported stylistic simplicity.^{liiv} Relating Lu's views to the European lyric, there are a number of coincidences such as the emphasis on ornate and elevated language, and on the poet's subjectivity, sensibility, and moods. In Michaux's case, *Le jardin exalté*'s sanguine mood and profuse vegetal images

approximate the 'carefree wandering' and 'lushness' of Lu's eulogy. The cosmic dimensions in Michaux's poetic heart also parallel the cosmic flights of Lu's writerly imagination and spirit. As for Michaux's frequently attenuated and prosaic language that is far from high-flown lyricism, can we not nonetheless see an aesthetic sensibility that interweaves with 'gossamer-like delicateness' and the vivid 'embodiment' of things? Consider the floating amoeba dangling from a thread (*Entre ciel et terre*), the mists and bubbles ('bulles') in *Entre centre et absence*,^{lv} and Michaux's impersonification of objects: 'Je suis gong et ouate et chant neigeux'^{lvi} ('I am a gong and cotton wadding and a snowy song'); 'Je mets une pomme sur ma table. Puis je me mets dans cette pomme. Quelle tranquillité!'^{lvii} ('I put an apple on my table. Then I put myself in the apple. What peace!') As Liu Xie says, after Lu Ji, in his treatise 文心雕龍 *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (30.1): '因情立體, 即體成勢'^{lviii} ('emotions determine the form, the form then produces the stylistic force'). The form of such poetic utterances and their images are states of mind, moods, emotions, affects, just as the lyricism of *qing* that 'flows from' (緣) the Chinese poet.

Chinese lyricism as a poetic mode involves both an act (*shu*, release) and feelings or emotive responses (*qing*). Michaux's poetry shares some commonalities with these aspects of Chinese lyricism, but more importantly, we could also say that Michaux is disposed towards being read through certain Chinese notions and modes of lyricism. Additionally, given Michaux's Chinese allusions, it is not hard to understand why a more lyrical voice arises from Michaux's sinized-style poems. In this aspect, Michaux's evocation of China and the Far East sustains the disintegrating lyricism that he inherits from Romanticism in a post-romantic context. But this sinized and asianised lyrical strain cannot really reformulate lyricism in toto, but rather exists as the sign of radical alterity in Michaux's poetry. After all, Michaux writes in *French*, not Chinese. After all, Michaux's lingering lyricism, contemplative ecstasy, and desire for beauty co-exist strikingly, often discordantly with his ironic, scepticist, and debilitating anti-lyrical voice. Michaux's French side and his Chinese-orientated style are in a state of constant *agon* rather than harmonious fusion. This does not mean, however, that the connection between Michaux's French and Chinese sides is weak; on the contrary it is a strong connection because Chinese lyricism is deliberately juxtaposed to the French lyric tradition where Michaux is situated. Thus Michaux's lyricism is 'West-Eastern' in the sense of juxtapositional tension and contrastive connection, with its transcultural elements co-existing in disintegration and as a splintering of poetics. Paradoxically, this impossibility of squaring the circle of Michaux's not-quite-

disintegrating lyricism is also the disjuncture where Michaux's poetic force and emotions emerge in the strongest form: the powerful refusal of a reconciliatory lyricism, the intensity of poetry's infinite fracturing into self-critical points. To borrow from Mallarmé, Michaux's West-Eastern lyric is language in the state of crisis, not despite but because of its transcultural aesthetics.

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- i Etienne Rabaté, 'Michaux et le lyrisme travesti', in *Le Sujet lyrique en question*, edited by Dominique Rabaté, Joëlle de Sermet, Yves Vadé (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1996), pp.191-202 (p.191).
- ii See Nina Parish, *Henri Michaux: Experimentation with Signs* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.21.
- iii Jean-Yves Debreuille, 'Le lyrisme dans les plis', in *Henri Michaux: Plis et cris du lyrisme*, edited by Catherine Mayaux (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), pp.233-246.
- iv See Xiaofan Amy Li, 'A Distant Dream: Balthus, Henri Michaux, and the Chinese aesthetic tradition', *Word & Image*, 34:3 (2018), 281-296, for details about Michaux's painterly engagements with Chinese poetics.
- v Parish, *Henri Michaux*, p.21 notes this coincidence but it is not explored in detail.
- vi Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- vii François Trotet, *Henri Michaux ou La sagesse du vide* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992); Yang Liu, *Henri Michaux et la Chine* (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2006).
- viii Elodie Laügt, *L'Orient du signe* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008); Yu Wang, 'Henri Michaux et la poésie chinoise', *Poésie-première*, n.67 (2017), pp.9-16.
- ix Ralph Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p.3.
- x G. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol.2, Part III, Section III, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998 (c1975)), p.1127.
- xi Jonathan Culler, 'Theory of the Lyric', *Nordisk Poesi*, vol.2, no.2 (2017), p.119-133 (p.121).
- xii Saint-Beuve, 'Malherbe', in *Nouveaux lundis*, vol.13 (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1883-1886), p.395.
- xiii See G. Duhamel, *Anthologie de la poésie lyrique en France* (Paris: Flammarion, 1946); Jean-Michel Maulpoix, *Du Lyrisme* (Paris: Corti, 2000).
- xiv See Emmanuel Hocquard, *Tout le monde se ressemble*, (Paris: P. O. L, 1995); Jean-Marie Gleize, *A noir: Poésie et littéralité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); and Ross Chambers 'Four Ways to Meddle With Subjectivity: French Lyric Poetry Since Baudelaire', *AJFS*, 41: 3(2004), pp.10-25.
- xv Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, vol.1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp.571-572. All translations are my own.
- xvi Michaux, *Face aux verrous* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p.187.
- xvii Paul Verlaine, 'A une femme', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol.1 (Paris: L. Vanier, 1902-1905), p.16.
- xviii Arthur Rimbaud, 'Nuit de l'enfer', in *Une saison en Enfer* (Bruxelles, Alliance typographique, 1873), p.15.
- xix Michaux, *OC*, vol 2, (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p.194.
- xx Michaux, *OC*, vol.1, p.58.
- xxi Michaux, *Face aux verrous*, p.66.
- xxii Michaux, *La vie dans les plis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p.112.
- xxiii Maulpoix, *Pour un lyrisme critique* (Paris: Corti, 2009), p.38, 48, 22.
- xxiv *Ibid.*, p.27.
- xxv Michaux, *A distance: poèmes* (Mayenne: Mercure de France, 1997), p.46.
- xxvi Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, *Vers les icebergs*, (Montpellier: fata morgana, 1978 (2005 reprint)), p.10.
- xxvii There are two poems by Michaux both entitled *Vers la sérénité*, the other one is also included in *La Nuit remue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).
- xxviii Michaux, *Un Barbare en asie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967 (c1933)), p.147.
- xxix Trotet, *Henri Michaux*, pp.215-217.
- xxx Michaux, *OC*, vol.1, p.463-464.
- xxxi Liu, *Michaux et la Chine*, p.122.

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- xxxii Michaux, *Un Barbare*, pp.185-186. Michaux also compares Zhuangzi to Kant in his 'Portrait du Chinois', *OC*, vol.1, p.540.
- xxxiii Jérôme Roger, 'Ponge, lecteur de Michaux', *Littérature*, n°115 (1999), 70-86 (p.77).
- xxxiv Roger Dadoun, 'Ho', *Europe*, issue 'Henri Michaux', n°698-699 (1987), 101-106. Raymond Bellour and Ysé Tran (in Michaux, *OC*, vol.1, p.1357) also suggest that 'Ho' may be derived from Louis Lewin's remark that the peyote is called 'Ho' by native Americans, and Michaux quotes Lewin in 1942.
- xxxv Adolphe Franck, ed., *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques*, vol.1 (Paris: Chez L. Hachette, 1844), p.499.
- xxxvi Michaux, *Epreuves, exorcismes 1940-1944* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p.68.
- xxxvii Michaux, *OC*, vol.1, p.381.
- xxxviii *Ibid.*, p.380.
- xxxix *Ibid.*, p.361.
- xl Michaux, *OC*, vol.3 (2004), p.1454, pp.1290-1292.
- xli Michaux, *Le jardin exalté* (Montpellier: fata morgana, 1983), pp.20-28.
- xlii See Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, translated by Mabel Cotterell (London: Phoenix Press, 1948).
- xlili Roger, 'Ponge', p.74.
- xliv Brian Bruya, 'Qing and Emotion in Early Chinese Thought', *Ming Qing Yanjiu* (2001), 151-176 (p.151).
- xlvi Qu Yuan, 'Jiu Zhang', digitised text, <https://ctext.org/chu-ci/jiu-zhang> [accessed 25 January 2019];
- xlvi Michaux, *Espace du dedans* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p.369.
- xlvi David Schaberg, 'Song and the Historical Imagination in Early China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol.59, No.2 (1999), 305-361(p.358).
- xlvi *Ibid.*, p.359.
- xlvi '舜典, section 16' in *Shangshu*, <https://ctext.org/shang-shu/canon-of-shun> [accessed 25 January 2019];
- l Der-Wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
- li Zongqi Cai, 'The Rethinking of Emotion', *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 45 (1997), pp.65-66.
- lii Lu Ji, *Wenfu*, in Achilles Fang, 'Rhyme-prose on Literature', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 14, No. ¾ (1951), 527-566(pp.532-536).
- liii See Fang, 'Rhyme-prose', and Shih-Hsiang Chen, *Essay on Literature* (Portland: Anthoensen Press, 1952).
- liv See Fu-Sheng Wu, 'The Concept of Decadence in the Chinese Poetic Tradition', *Monumenta Serica*, 45:1(1997), 39-62.
- lv Michaux, *OC*, vol.1, p.572.
- lvi *Ibid.*, p.505.
- lvii Michaux, *Espace du dedans*, p.199.
- lviii Liu Xie, 文心雕龍, <https://ctext.org/wenxin-diaolong/ding-shi> [accessed 26 January 2019]