

From thematic criticism to semiotics*

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It is not easy to assess a book consisting of two halves which are quite different in their method of investigation. Particularly not if both had been written more than a decade before they were published. Part 1 of Lajos Elkan's book ('Le voyage, source d'inspiration poétique dans l'oeuvre d'Henri Michaux') dates from 1969, whereas part 2 ('Les propriétés d'Henri Michaux') was completed in 1977. It is difficult for the reviewer to ignore what has been written on the semiotics of poetry in the last decade. Criticism has come to be dominated by reader-oriented approaches, and a work inspired by earlier scholarly trends might seem somewhat old-fashioned in view of this radical shift of emphasis.

The first eighty pages of Elkan's book on Michaux show the influence of what is sometimes called the '*école thématique*'. Although it would be unfair to say that this more conventional study is not related to the semiological investigation that follows it, there are fundamental differences between the two approaches. While the three opening chapters on 'real', 'phantastic', and 'psychédélique' (drug-related) voyages describe what the author regards as three successive stages in Michaux's career, the four chapters of part 2 detail analyses of relatively short texts written at the beginning of the poet's career and belonging to the cycle 'Mes propriétés' (1930). Undeniably, Elkan's interest in psychology and linguistics is manifest in both studies, and they could be viewed as supplementing each other; but I find the semiotic analyses more illuminating than the synthetic first half of the book.

My preference may be due to a methodological bias. The language used in the thematic inquiry is essayistic in the sense that the terminology requires further clarification. 'Le voyage réel a un but', the critic asserts (p. 25). If this is the basis for distinguishing between 'real' and 'phantastic' voyages, the concept of teleology would ask for further investigation. It

* Lajos Elkan, *Les voyages et les propriétés d'Henri Michaux*. New York: Peter Lang, 1988.

is certainly true that Michaux's intention is 'élucider le rapport entre la sensation et l'expression' (p. 65), but no evidence is offered to prove that it is possible to speak of a 'décalage de temps entre la pensée et son expression' (p. 75). 'Je voudrais dévoiler les mécanismes complexes, qui font de l'homme avant tout un opérateur', the poet argues in *Les grandes épreuves de l'esprit* (p. 69). This would suggest that the very distinction between thought and expression may be at odds with Michaux's poetics. On the basis of what is said about the writing under investigation, in the semiology-oriented second half of the book, the reader might believe that the Belgian poet's basic assumption is somewhat similar to Heidegger's: instead of using language, he lets it speak for him. 'Les mots parlent d'eux-mêmes', Michaux remarks in *Passages*, as quoted by Elkan (p. 90). If this is so, it might be misleading to postulate a difference between thought and expression.

The issues raised in the first half of the book are undoubtedly serious, but sometimes they are treated almost haphazardly. It is suggested, for example, that Michaux's cult of the voyage may be taken as a form of criticizing Belgian or even Western culture, but the possible reasons for his interest in Chinese philosophy or Buddhism are not further examined. Similarly, his connection with Surrealism is only mentioned, rather than analyzed. When reading that 'le mouvement surréaliste n'a été vraiment heureux que dans les arts plastiques et non pas en littérature' (p. 47), my impression is that Lajos Elkan either fails to do justice to the achievement of the Surrealists, or at least does not care to justify his value-judgment of it. At any rate, the difference between Surrealist writing and Michaux's style is asserted rather than fully argued. Nowhere in the book is Michaux's attitude to automatic writing discussed. At the end of the first semiotic chapter an important point is made when it is stated that 'il y a du reste très peu d'images dans les textes de Michaux' (p. 123); but this hypothesis does not lead to a comparison with the Surrealists' cult of certain images.

Paradoxically, it is in the seemingly hair-splitting textual analyses rather than in the more synthetic first half of the book that the author succeeds in formulating general rules of how poetic writing operates. The method followed in the chapters on 'Mes occupations', 'Petit', 'Une vie de chien', and 'Mes propriétés' is highly biased, but this one-sidedness is preferable to the eclecticism of the thematic chapters because it makes systematic inquiry possible. For Elkan, close reading has a psychoanalytic and linguistic orientation. The contrast between 'je/tu' and 'il' is interpreted as expressing an opposition between 'l'autorité, la loi, et par extension l'ordre du père en tant que faiseur de loi au nom du langage' (p. 117), and the personal, subversive, and irrational female element. Anagram-

matic puns and shifters are viewed as 'mécanismes de condensation', distinguishing features of writing which represent a kind of destruction of language. 'Le pratique verbale de Michaux cherche donc des voies variées pour échapper à une condition linguistique pré-établie' (p. 149). Etymology is treated seriously on the ground that a linguistic utterance is always the manipulation of other linguistic utterances behind it. The fact that in poetry there are words behind the words reveals 'une intentionnalité de sens que le langage conventionnel ne possède pas' (p. 171).

This conclusion cannot be called original, but the merit of Elkan's book lies less in the conclusions than in the analysis. While it could be argued that the sexual symbolism is taken too seriously at the risk of ignoring the grotesque humor in Michaux's works, it cannot be denied that the argument about 'l'alternance d'opacité et de transparence' (p. 106) is subtly made. The book contributes to the understanding of how Michaux undermines generic distinctions, by pointing to 'une coïncidence voulue entre le déroulement de fiction et l'acte d'écrire' (p. 122). Moreover, it reveals how closely condensation is tied to imprecision in poetry, and thereby formulates a general principle governing the interrelations among the phonetic, semic, syntagmatic, and intertextual levels of linguistic utterances. The reviewer's only complaint can be that our critic seems reluctant to speak about the reader's response to Michaux's works. The impact his texts make upon us certainly involves humor, irony, and fictionality — concepts that are not examined in this book. Lajos Elkan tends to consider ambiguity a quality inherent in poetic language, whereas it could be regarded also as a result of the act of interpretation. What Michaux himself expresses in one of the texts analyzed in this book also applies to the work of Lajos Elkan, as well as to that of any other analyst: 'Quant aux livres, ils me harassent par-dessus tout. Je ne laisse pas un mot dans son sens ni même dans sa forme. Je l'attrape et, après quelques efforts, je le déracine et le détourne définitivement du troupeau de l'auteur'.

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