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This thesis is dedicated to my two grandmothers, Irene and Muriel. Their unconditional love, encouragement and pride will always be remembered.

Figuring death: The phantom of presence in art

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

Chapter 1: The dissemination of the rhetorical subject(ivity)

Through an analysis of Hegel's master/slave dialectic and de Man's notion of *prosopopeia* I demonstrate how modernist discourses construct a figure [face] of/for the artist and cover up [entomb] the recalcitrance of his or her corporeal body to be the [ontological] site of meaning. Through Derrida's notions of *klang* and *force* I investigate the ways in which the disintegration of material objects interrupt the whole process of *facing* the art work in this way. Derrida's notion of *hauntology* is also utilised to argue that the self-identical subject(ivity) is in fact a semiotically induced *spectre*.

Chapter 2: Rothko, Death and Prosopopeia

Again de Man's figure of *prosopopeia* is explored to demonstrate how the artist Rothko is discursively posited as *overcoming* his own death. I argue that Rothko's paintings 'act' as self-portraits and 'figure' his [enduring] presence. Through Derrida's notion of the *paragon* [the frame] I also investigate how the propensity of the material to disintegrate ruptures the circularity of the discourse on Rothko and thereby undermines the transcendental moment proffered by his paintings. However, I also show, through an analysis of Derrida's notion of the *pharmakon*, how discursive strategies keep raising the *spectre* of the transcendental artist to keep the fallacy of the self-identical subject(ivity) 'alive'.

Chapter 3: Michaux's insomnia: The plenitude of the void

I argue that the *Mescaline drawings*, made by Michaux in the 1950s, cannot be interpreted through a 'standard' modernist framework. In trying to construct an alternative interpretation for Michaux's work I demonstrate how his drawings can be viewed as an attempt to articulate the excessive nature of corporeality and the impossibility of transcendence. Blanchot's notion of *insomnia* is used to go beyond the polarities of the negative and the positive to the neutral and excessive zone of *indeterminacy*. Deleuze and Guattari's notions of the *tonal* and *nagual*, *becoming-animal* and Bergson's notions of *extensity and duration* are also utilised to [theoretically] access this zone of indeterminacy, as that of the insomniac subject(ivity).

Conclusion: Face to de-face

Firstly I reiterate the claims made in chapter 2, that modernism, as a circular discourse, constantly offers the 'presence' of Rothko as proof of his enduring transcendentality. As a contrast I use Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *faciality* to argue that Michaux tried to *de-face* his art, but failed. I will therefore indicate the impossibility of totally de-facing the subject(ivity) within any discursive system where the *name* acts as primary signifier.

Contents

| | Page no. |
|---|----------|
| List of illustrations | 6 |
| Introduction | 9 |
| Chapter 1: | |
| The dissemination of the rhetorical subject(ivity) | 20 |
| 1.1 In memory of writing this thesis | 21 |
| 1.2 Face-ing art | 29 |
| 1.3 Naming the present (presence) | 34 |
| 1.4 An even greater light | 39 |
| 1.5 The 'klang' and the silencing of the noisy cadaver | 52 |
| 1.6 Hegel: The myth of the self-identical subject | 58 |
| 1.7 The circle (parergon) as frame | 59 |
| 1.8 'Force'-ing open the promise of subjectivity | 69 |
| Chapter 2: | |
| Rothko, death and prosopopeia | 74 |
| 2.1 Where to begin? | 75 |
| 2.2 The face of Rothko | 81 |
| 2.3 Outing the inside | 90 |
| 2.4 Seeing the light | 98 |
| 2.5 Stepping out with Rothko - onto the tape loop | 106 |
| 2.6 Biography | 124 |
| 2.7 Working Through the Problems of (Auto)Biography with Paul de Man: 'Confer[ring] Anthromorphic Attributes Upon a Stone'. | 130 |
| Summary | 149 |

Chapter 3:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Michaux, Insomnia and the plenitude of the void | 151 |
| 3.1 Uncoordinated leaps through Modernist discourse | 153 |
| 3.2 Filling the void | 165 |
| 3.3 Flying, but getting nowhere, with Michaux | 175 |
| 3.4 Lines, balls and sleepless nights | 187 |
| 3.5 Michaux becoming-animal | 197 |
| 3.6 A possible trajectory: time and space(d) out | 204 |
| Summary | 210 |

Conclusion:

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Face to (de)face | 212 |
| Summary | 228 |

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| Bibliography | 232 |
|---------------------|-----|

List of illustrations

| | Page no./Figure no. |
|---|---------------------|
| Chapter 2 | |
| Photograph of Mark Rothko, 1964. | 82/1 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Self Portrait</i> , 1936. Oil on Canvas. 82 x 66 cm. Rothko Estate, USA. | 84/2 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Untitled</i> , 1948. Oil on Canvas. 152.4 x 126.4 cm. Rothko Estate, USA. | 85/3 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Red, Orange, Orange on Red</i> , 1962. Oil on Canvas. St. Louis Art Museum, USA. | 91/4 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Number 1</i> , 1962. Oil on Canvas. 175.5 x 152.7 cm. Private Collection, USA. | 92/5 |
| Article in <i>Life Magazine</i> , 16th November 1959. Reads 'Mark ROTHKO Luminous hues to evoke Emotions and Mystery'. | 97/6 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Untitled [White, Blacks, Greys on Maroon]</i> 1963. Oil on Canvas. 228.6 x 175.3 cm. Kunsthaus Zürich. | 99/7 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Seagram Mural, Section 4 [Red on Maroon]</i> 1959. Oil on Canvas. 266.5 x 238.8 cm. Tate Gallery, London. | 100/8 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Yellow and Blue [Yellow, Blue and Orange]</i> .1955. Oil on Canvas. 259.4 x 169.6 cm. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. | 102/9 |
| Mark Rothko, Detail from <i>Yellow and Blue [Yellow, Blue and Orange]</i> 1955. Oil on Canvas. 259.4 x 169.6 cm. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. | 103/10 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Light Red Over Black</i> , 1957. Oil on Canvas. 232.7 x 152.7 cm. Tate Gallery, London. | 111/11 |
| Mark Rothko, <i>Untitled [Black on Grey]</i> 1969 - 1970. Acrylic on Canvas. 203.8 x175.6 cm. Solomon.R. Gugenheim Museum,New York. | 135/12 |
| Chapter 3 | |
| Henri Michaux, (<i>First</i>) <i>Mescaline Painting</i> , 1954. Oil on Wood. 18 x14 cm. Private Collection. | 152/13 |
| Henri Michaux, <i>Mescaline Drawing</i> , 1956. Ink on Paper. 39 x 26 cm. Private Collection. | 173/14 |
| Henri Michaux, <i>Mescaline Drawing</i> , 1956. Ink on Paper. 30.5 x 22.5 cm. Private Collection. | 174/15 |

- Henri Michaux, *Reaggregation Drawing*, 1966. 180/16
Ink on Paper. 26.8 x 20.2 cm. Collection of J-P Croisier, France.
- Henri Michaux, *Reaggregation Drawing*, 1966. Coloured 181/17
Ink on Paper. 32.5 x 23 cm. Collection of IVAM, Centre Julio Gonzalez, Generalitat Valenciana, Valencia.
- Henri Michaux, *Untitled (Movements [Mouvements])*, 182/18
1951. Indian Ink on Paper. 32.5 x 23.5 cm. Collection of Mr and Mrs Claude Frontisi.
- Henri Michaux, *Untitled (Movements [Mouvements])*, 185/19
1951. Indian Ink on Paper. 32 x 24 cm. Private Collection, Courtesy of Galerie Thessa Herold, Paris.
- Henri Michaux, *Untitled (Movements [Mouvements])*, 186/20
1951. Gouache on Black Paper. 32 x 24 cm. Collection of Claude Berri, Paris.
- Henri Michaux, *Mescaline Painting*, 1956. Oil on Cartoil. 196/21
33 x 19 cm. Private Collection.
- Henri Michaux, *Mescaline Drawing*, 1956. Ink on Paper. 207/22
26 x 17.5 cm. Galerie de France, Paris.
- Henri Michaux, *Mescaline Drawing*, 1956. Chinese 208/23
Ink on Vellum. x 24 cm. Collection of J-P Croisier, France.

Chapter 4

- Henri Michaux, Detail of *(First) Mescaline Painting*, 1954. 222/24
Oil on Wood. 18 x 14 cm. Private Collection.
- Henri Michaux, *Mescaline Drawing*, 1959. Ink and 223/25
Watercolour on Paper. 28 x 18.5 cm. Collection of Pierre Alechinsky, Bougival, France.
- Henri Michaux, Detail of *Mescaline Drawing*, 224/26
1959. Ink and Watercolour on Paper. 28 x 18.5 cm. Collection of Pierre Alechinsky, Bougival, France.
- Henri Michaux, *Untitled*, 1960. Wash and Watercolour 225/27
on Paper. 50 x 56.5 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris.

Miscellaneous

- Henri Michaux, *Mescaline Drawing*, n.d. Ink on Paper. 230/28
26.5 x 18 cm. Collection of Marie-Claude Tubiana, Paris.
- Mark Rothko, *Untitled [White, Blacks, Greys on Maroon]* 1963. Oil on Canvas. 228.6 x 175.3 cm. Kunsthaus 231/29
Zürich.

Introduction

One of the main concepts under scrutiny in this dissertation will be that of *Modernism*. Modernism takes on many guises, and tends to transform itself into something different once you are certain that you understand what it 'is'. Modernism can be reduced to an epoch, an artistic 'style', an ideology, a mode of criticism, a fallacy. There is a long 'version' of it that spans over two centuries, and a shorter version that only covers a few decades. Its 'origin' can be traced back to Paris in the nineteenth century, and/or American in the twentieth. It can be discussed within the 'domains' of formalism, social and political history, feminism and psychoanalysis, philosophy, politics, literature and/or music. The list is endless. So in the name of clarity, if only for the duration of this dissertation, I will outline my 'version' of Modernism as a specific approach.

My concept of Modernism will always be *based* on the writings of Greenberg, as a form of art practice and criticism, and on the philosophies of Hegel and Kant. In turn Modernism, as a transcendental logic, will also be seen as symptomatic of a wider mode of seeing, representing and making sense of the world. Although it is fundamental to my overall argument that no ideology or culture is all-encompassing, and *always* contains the mechanisms of, and for, its own undoing; it would be expedient to keep this reductive *sense* of a Greenbergian/Hegelian Modernism, even if only in the margins, as you read through the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

As the epitome of Modernist art practice I have chosen to concentrate on the 'life' and paintings of Mark Rothko. There are various reasons for this, mainly because I have always loved his paintings and wanted to find out why I found the authorised interpretations of/on his life and work so irritatingly repetitive. I have yet to find a critique of Rothko's paintings that doesn't, at some point, refer to his suicide in 1970, or his alleged preoccupation with mortality as *the* 'universal condition'. I initially felt that such repetition was

symptomatic of something else and I wasn't quite sure what, but I felt that Rothko's critics were somehow stuck within a philosophical paradigm of perception, validation and reciprocation which warranted further investigation.

I first came across the drawings of Henri Michaux, my second artist for consideration, I'm ashamed to say, by accident. The morning after attending a Pollock retrospective, held at the Tate (Millbank) in January 1999, I went along to the Whitechapel Gallery where there was a small exhibition of Michaux's work, an artist I'd never heard of before. The contrast between the endeavours of Pollock and Michaux was overwhelming, especially given that what Michaux was offering was a completely different vision of the world in the 1950s and seemed to find his place within it a precarious and unstable one. His drawings were small and intricate, unfocused and incoherent and they completely undermined the kind of narrative of 'being' expounded by the Modernist critics of/on Rothko.

* * * * *

When I was a small child, I used to lay in bed, in the dark, and pretend. I wasn't allowed a night light, or have the curtains open, so the night enveloped the room and me within it. I would remain very still with my eyes wide open and see nothing. I would pretend that I was dead, that I was floating in a vast sea of nothingness. Of course I couldn't articulate it as such at the time, my vocabulary was rather limited at the age of five (unlike my imagination) but these early 'voyages' fed into a later fascination with, and dread of, my own death. Such dread and fascination was augmented by the intensification of the nuclear arms race in the late 1970s and 80s and the environmental damage inflicted on the world by man and his machines. On top of this a number of close family and friends died in quick succession.

The aim of those who practice philosophy in the *proper* manner is to practice for dying and death.¹

It wasn't until 1992, when I began to study philosophy as an undergraduate at Leeds University, that I was facilitated with a vocabulary on/of 'death' and could attempt to project a theoretical distance between me and 'it'.

The first philosopher I encountered who dealt with the subject of death was Martin Heidegger. 'Existentialism', the module, introduced to me in eleven short weeks the theoretical delights of Heidegger, Husserl and Sartre. During that time I encountered a new vocabulary of uncertainty, of angst and nausea and the impossibility of ever being separate from the decaying flux of the material world.

Heidegger, was the philosopher that I found the most interesting in that with finding himself in the increasingly secular world of the twentieth century he turned towards the 'problem' of a death without the reassurance of God.

Death 'itself', as a process, had, in the twentieth century, been 'appropriated' by the clinical and the scientific. The western world was being systematically purged of the messiness of death, especially in a society driven by the 'progressiveness' of the modern and the commodification of the cadaver and its attendant rituals.² The promise of an 'afterlife' came under review, especially given the fact that now you didn't have to wait for heaven - there was the increasing promise of a spectacular³ paradise here on earth. The question 'What is death?' thereby shifted in twentieth century

¹ Plato, 'Phaedo' in *Five Dialogues*, page 64. My italics.

² The growing number of undertakers, for instance, and the increased ritualisation of mourning 'proper' meant that, in the twentieth century, the business of death became based on the exchange of money and (safe) platitudes. Any excess of mourning seemed (and still seems) to be improper and repugnant. The quickest and most efficient method of disposing of the now deceased 'loved one' is preferred (for the right price).

³ I use 'spectacular' here in the Debordian sense, where the dazzle of the commodified world, and the objects it contains, covers the mass/mess of unfulfilled and unequal social relations and the demise of 'traditional' institutions and belief systems (e.g. the church).

philosophy,⁴ from the idea⁵ that it was the *moment* when the corporeal body is released the soul into the eternal realm of the god(s), to being a matter of the hygienic and inconvenience.

Since the times of Socrates and Aristotle the concept of the soul has travelled largely intact, through the texts of Western philosophy and theology, as an indelibly immortal, commutable and indestructible essence. Life, accordingly, was seen as the imprisonment of such an essential being within the encumberment of the material and temporal.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, moves away from this vision of life and death as well as the forceful Aristotelian idea that essence [*ousia*] equals actuality [*energeia*]. According to Aristotle essence endures as existence within the temporality of here and now (life thereby becomes a stable succession of ‘nows’) through which it reinforces its knowledge of itself and the world around it. Heidegger argues against this legacy of Aristotle by positing the notion of *Dasein*. *Dasein*, for Heidegger, is an *existence* rather than essence, which although is embodied and somehow understanding of its position in the world *prior* to any epistemological or logical frameworks of meaning, is not an enduring soul. Death, within Heidegger’s theory cannot be *held* or *contained* within any metaphysical or transcendental framework of meaning as it is beyond any system of representation or knowledge, yet is (almost) instinctively felt, and then *acknowledged*, by those wanting to lead an *authentic* life. Nevertheless, *dasein* is driven by death, as its *possibility*, and thereby constitutes its very being (as being-towards-death).

Yet death, according to Heidegger, as a concept, is ‘non-relational’ in that it cannot be contained or made meaningful within the daily events or rituals of life; it can only be represented as the death of the other, and only becomes *one’s own* when you or I (paradoxically) cease to be. ‘I can never own my

⁴ It needs to be noted here that the slow and steady move away from the grip of the ancient Greeks happened later for philosophy (c20th), than say art or literature (c19th).

⁵ The idea of the immortality of the soul can be traced back to the writings of Socrates and Aristotle, through the vast body of Western philosophy and theology.

own death whilst I am alive, although I can *sense* its proximity and inevitability.

In dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive *for* death. Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially.⁶

Death thereby, according to Heidegger's theory, becomes a non-event, and has no-place, no-where and no-being, however it is certain that 'I' will die and that certainty that drives my life. Anxiety comes about because I do not know when or how death will occur, and when it does eventually occur I know it will sever me from everyone and everything that I know and am certain of. Heidegger thereby argues that as there is no transcendental or enduring soul, but only *dasein*, death offering *nothing* but absolute and irreversible oblivion.

It was on this brink of nihilism therefore, with the discovery of Heidegger, that this particular philosophy student began to find her vocabulary on/of death. However, it is fair to say that the majority of philosophical texts being fed to me during that time did not sit comfortably with Heidegger's theories. I was instructed to wade through the texts of a number of dry, analytical philosophers; Quine, Frege, Russell and the like. Heidegger became marginalised accordingly. In retrospect I think that he was introduced into my thinking only to be dismissed and ridiculed, definitely not to be taken seriously, as a 'proper' philosopher. Nevertheless, in 1995, I embarked on my MA in the Social History of Art and discovered other 'improper' philosophers' such as de Man, Derrida and Foucault. Heidegger came back in from the cold and my intellectual activity and research has largely remained within the province of twentieth century continental philosophy ever since.⁷

⁶ Heidegger 'Being and Time', in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, page 293. My emphasis.

⁷ It is important to stress, however, that the division between philosophers such as the 'analytic' and the 'continental' is a false one as all such bodies of thought feed into and 'contaminate' each other. Philosophy for me is bigger than its discipline, although others may not agree and have a rather narrow concept of its field and importance.

It may surprise the reader to discover that I will not be concentrating on the theories of Heidegger for the duration of this thesis, and that there is one fundamental reason for this. Heidegger will be mentioned occasionally, and his presence is definitely an important one, but Derrida and de Man have become, during the thinking through and writing of this dissertation, more useful allies. Nevertheless I do not take on their theories wholesale so cannot say that I am a resolute 'Derridian' or 'de Manian', instead I consider myself as a scavenger picking up on the more useful elements of their philosophies and using them to spur on my own thoughts and theories.

One of the most influential texts by Derrida, on my project, is his book *Aporias*. Within this text he thinks through to the limits of truth and then discusses them in relation to the unknowability of death. The etymology of the word 'aporetic' is of an inconclusive argument, a stalling point in thinking which provides no movement towards a solution, literally a non-passable situation, or a place without pores [*a-poria*]. Death according to Derrida is *the* aporetic. Therefore life knows no resolution or absolute end (or beginning) constantly unravels itself in/as an infinite number of *ends*, which lead to a no-place and to no-knowledge. Death in this 'context' becomes both the (non)foundation of truth, life, and its *limits*:

Although Derrida (rightly) takes on Heidegger's project on/of death as a non-event, or the 'possibility of impossibility', he steers it away from any nostalgia for presence (as *dasein*), and away from *necessarily* linking the philosophical pursuit of knowledge with anthropology. Derrida does not posit an end to man as death, but the ends of man as the impossibility of ever knowing the truth. To posit an end, according to Derrida, would be to construct a finality to the pursuit of knowledge, as well as a beginning, neither of which exist in relation to life and death. The idea of a circularity of time, of beginnings, ends and beginnings again, is an anathema to Derrida's deconstructive processes. For Derrida the end of life is a plurality of ends, social, epistemological, physical, which in turn are endless; positing

that such plurality is evident in *any* system of meaning. Although Derrida acknowledges the importance of Heidegger's theories on death, he points out that one fundamental flaw in his argument is that he posits the *certainty* of the end (as death) as, paradoxically, both the beginning, and the beginning of the end, of an *authentic* life. Dasein as existence becomes authentic when it grasps the reality of its eventual death thereby making its life meaningful through the kinds of choices he or she consequently makes. However, this means that life (as authentic) only begins to have meaning once death and its uncertainty is embraced, which also heralds the beginning of the end of life:

In the thinking and the language of Being, the end of man has been prescribed since always, and this prescription has never done anything but modulate the equivocality of the end, in the play of the telos and death. In the reading of this play, one may take the following sequence in all its sense: the end of man is the thinking of Being, man is the end of thinking of Being, the end of man is the end of the thinking of Being. Man, since always, is its proper end, that is, the end of its proper. Being, since always, is its proper end, that is, the end of its proper.⁸

Heidegger, therefore implies the complicity of both beginning and end in allowing the thinking of being to occur, and it is the claim, or potential of, 'proper' presencing, which hints at essence that remains as a fundamental flaw in his thinking. Derrida is (rightly) suspicious that Heidegger argues that the ends might meaningfully meet the beginnings in a fuller realisation of the presencing of being and thereby becomes both a (potentially) essentialist theory of being and a tautological one at that - Heidegger thereby 'risks sinking into the autism of closure.'⁹

The reason why I chose the theories of Derrida rather than of Heidegger, therefore, is because Derrida is doubtful of any 'proper' foundation of humanity, and instead affirms a radically non-foundational notion of *play* as the de-focusing and deconstructing of stable essences.¹⁰ The notion of the

⁸ Derrida, 'The Ends of Man' in *Margins of Philosophy*, page 134.

⁹ Derrida, 'The Ends of Man' in *Margins of Philosophy*, page 135.

¹⁰ Although I have myself been accused of trying to reclaim this 'proper' humanity in my work, I will continue to resist in order to continue this particular project.

aporetic, as death and as the limit(s) of truth, is one that will reoccur throughout this dissertation as the ‘possibility as impossibility’; where the possibility becomes that of playing with institutional structures of (impossible) meaning and knowledge of being.

Within the context of my dissertation I will be showing how interpretations of art inhabit such an aporetic space, as an entombment - as a place of impossibility, yet as a place from which the spectre of the artist emerges in order to validate our own spectrality of being. The persona of Rothko for example, is *given* as a certainty of its ability to endure physical death and maintain itself within the structures of artistic production and (consequent) interpretations.

One more caveat: Throughout this dissertation I use two concepts; the subject *and* subjectivity. A false dichotomy is constructed here in that the subject, as the socially and culturally constructed notion of self is part of the same process that enables subjectivity to emerge and consolidate. At certain points in this dissertation I become uncertain whether to use the concept of the subject or that of subjectivity. This indecision can radically alter the ways in which my argument is read and understood, however after much deliberation I decided to, at times, combine the two as (the) subject(ivity) and at others to just use the subject or subjectivity.

It is with this notion of the subject and subjectivity that I will begin.

Within the next chapter I outline the methodologies to be utilised in the remaining chapters. The primary concept under investigation here is that of a *modern subject(ivity)* and its relationship to art objects. By exploring the crucial, yet illicit, alliance between Hegel's notion of the self-identical subject, and the rhetoric of the aesthetic, I will demonstrate how cultural

production reinforces the belief that consciousness and subjectivity coincide in a mutually reciprocal and dialectical relationship. This belief, I will contend, enables the otherness of the art object (its materiality) to be overcome, in order for the viewing subject to recognise itself. Within the philosophical rhetoric of the aesthetic, I will argue, it is believed that the art object is constituted in the same way as the encountering subject, that art somehow has the potentiality for a transcendental subjectivity or 'presence' of being. However, by utilising the theories of de Man, Derrida and Nietzsche, I will also argue that both subjectivity and 'presence' are only ever partial, constituted through a process within which numerous semiotic, material and rhetorical components accumulate onto, and into, the 'individual' or indeed the 'art object'. Such 'components', I argue are neither unique or stable. It will be my contention that instead of finding recognition within the art object, the subject coincides with these multiple, discursive and material 'components'. The subject butts up against the art object's blind materiality and coincides with the 'memories' of a disparate, disembodied and rhetorically induced subjectivity (that of the artist). By approaching the art object in this way I will argue that subject(ivity) is in constant danger of uncovering its own, and the object's instability and becomes open to other (potentially deadly) possibilities. The transcendental aesthetic is instantly put into place, ironically through the same rhetorical structure that threatens to unravel the subject, in order to cover up, or overcome, this lack of essential (self-identical) being. Creating and viewing art begins as a process of mourning. It is within the rhetoric of the aesthetic that the repetition of the promise of reflection and redemption occurs. The modern subject keeps creating and approaching art in a process of forgetfulness, believing that one day such a promise will be kept. This promise, I have contended, is 'made' in the name of the artist (as origin), where the aesthetic constitutes the pleasure of overcoming otherness and the viewing subject recognises itself in and by the 'presence' of the artist.

Chapter 1:

The dissemination of a rhetorical
subject(ivity)

1.1 In memory of writing this thesis

To write (of) oneself is to cease to be, in order to confide in a guest/host [*hôte*] - the other, a reader - who will henceforth have as charge and as life nothing but your inexistence.¹¹

An *imagined* performance will occur every time this thesis is read and 'understood'. The performativity of each statement will operate within an envisioned *scene* of originary writing. Within this process both 'you' as the reader and 'I' as the writer will consent to an abuse of *time* where the temporal chaos of 'life', the life and time that it has taken to write this thesis, will be swallowed up into an uninterrupted and intimate sequence of mutual reflectivity - an imaginary and dialectical crossing of proprietorial borders,¹² between what is 'mine' and what is 'yours'. This will also necessitate the *abstraction* and *spectrality* of both of us: 'you' as the *generic* reader and 'me' as the named writer.

The thing (the referent) is relieved (*relevée, aufgehobene*) in the sign: raised, elevated, spiritualised, magnified, embalmed, interiorised, idealised, named since the name accomplishes the sign.¹³

However, post-structuralism has shown us that such an 'encounter' has to continually reposition itself within various contexts, depending on *when* and *by whom* it is read. The same text, the same life, 'mine', will be 'lived' out through the thoughts of others, yet it will deviate and transfigure with(in) each and every reading.

Within the context of my *life*, as contrived through and by discursive strategies, the writing of this thesis can be seen an important event. My name will be inscribed in the performance of not only this dissertation, but

¹¹ Derrida, *Demeure*, page 45.

¹² '... *the rhetoric of borders* ... the lines that delimit the right to absolute property, the right of property to our own life, the proper of our existence, in right the property of our own life, the proper of our existence, in sum, a treatise about tracing the traits as the borderly edges of what in sum *belongs to us [nous revient]*, belonging as much to us as we properly belong to it.' Derrida, *Aporias*, page 3.

¹³ Derrida, *Glas*, page 9.

the larger critical, cultural and theoretical contexts within which it can, and will, be placed. Even after my *death*, if a student decides to pull this text down from some dusty library shelf, the process will happen all over again; the 'moment' of writing will be re-imagined and 'I' will haunt its every articulation. Even though I will no longer exist in the world as a corporeal body, 'I' will still 'exist' as a spectral fiction. Even when I am alive the existence of my physical self is not strictly necessary, as the mechanisms involved in the articulation and understanding of 'me' and my life are only dependent on my existence as *spectre*. We are all writers and readers of fiction, ostensibly writing for, and reading from, others, but always on behalf of ourselves in an attempt to validate our very being-in-the-world.

So what does it entail to write a dissertation? To *place* oneself, or to abide *within* the text and within the context of a particular discipline, or disciplines? *Who* performs its exegesis? Whose voice is 'heard'? Is it one or many voices, one or many narratives and is it the same 'performance' every time?

These may seem impossibly large questions to answer, especially in the opening paragraphs of a thesis on/in art history. I am not sufficiently arrogant to believe that I can, or even want to attempt to, resolve any of them. At this juncture, I only want to indicate how the issues raised through the thinking of these questions are important, indeed fundamental, for an even partial understanding of my project. Furthermore, it will have now become evident that one of my principal arguments is that *any* subject position is unstable, that the pronouns 'I', 'you' and 'we' are always open to a complex system of appropriation and contextualisation - a complicated state of affairs that will be explored, but not repudiated, within this dissertation. There is, therefore, no primary reading of this text, no one 'correct' way of understanding it. I can only ever envisage, indeed welcome, *mis-readings* of my work, as any truths on offer will themselves be spectral.

The text *you* are about to read (to yourself) can be reduced, if needs must, to one name, life and education: *mine*. But what *I* am about to 'give' you, in the name of 'death' and 'art', is not strictly mine to bestow. In researching this thesis I came across the ideas of many theorists, artists and historians, the appropriation of which allowed the concepts I use to function on a variety of different levels, as well as manoeuvring through a variety of disciplines. For this project I have journeyed through subjects as diverse as philosophy, art theory, literary criticism, theology, art history, sociology and anthropology. It is partly because of this complexity of references and ideas that I have only ever been able to access incomplete *traces* that frustratingly lead everywhere yet nowhere. Some of the concepts I use and explore will conflict, making uneasy bed-fellows, butting against each other in an unequal and asymmetrical fashion. Also, it is important to point out that the discourses into which I make a brief foray are too large to subsume into any slick and over-arching argument; indeed, each concept will transform within every new context it is discussed:

In our starting point ... we will dogmatically begin with the axiom according to which no context is absolutely saturable or saturating. No context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness. Therefore the context neither produces nor guarantees impassable borders, thresholds that no step could pass [*trespasser*] ...¹⁴

'What makes ... words effectively transformative is too big to fit into a single mind',¹⁵ or indeed a single context or thesis.

Some of the concepts, words and theories are thereby temporarily *homed* within this dissertation, explicitly called upon and transformed according to the context within which they are discussed. Just as importantly there are others that hover at its temporarily delineated *borders*, never finding a resting place within it. Explicit, implicit, they all aid me in the construction of a rather bizarre version of the world and somehow simulate, with all their imperfections, the 'realities' reproduced within it. Primarily, though in

¹⁴ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 9.

¹⁵ Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, page 28.

relation to art history, the 'subjects' *under* investigation are two very different artists: Mark Rothko and Henri Michaux. Within such an investigation I will touch upon their art, lives and bad habits, as well as question their very existence(s), the penetrability of their borders, singular or multiple. At the same time I will also inquire into differing histories and conflicting philosophies, as well as the particularity and peculiarity of concepts and discursive strategies. To give an overall 'theme' to this thesis however, I would also say it is about the concept of death, a concept which creates a 'space' from which a *spectre* of subjectivity emerges. I will also be looking at how death figures within the discourses that encircle and informed the production and interpretation of mid-twentieth century abstract art. Within a *wider* philosophical context, it is also about the rôle of death in certain *vital* processes - the creation of art and in turn reality, even the composition (and *decomposition*) of our very *own* subjectivities. This then is a rather *disjointed* project in that the concepts I struggle with throughout - death, life, truth, subjectivity etc. - are all large and complex and are appropriated, abused and articulated through, and within, many different discourses. Because of the predilection of this project perpetually to disjoint, it will become impossible to give the words and concepts I use a definite, 'appropriate' meaning or to place them within a coherent discursive or analytical structure. This is especially so within the overlapping but disparate contexts of art theory, history and philosophy which make this dissertation, and my 'position' within it, unceasingly unstable, and *necessarily* inappropriate.

From the outset, therefore, I wish to acquiesce my *place* as source or *origin*. I refuse to try to, indeed cannot, be a conveyor of meaning or truths, nor to give conclusions about what the concepts or processes I discuss *are*, what they have been, or what they are about to become. Instead, my intention is to map out an uneven *terrain*, create a territory within which concepts such as subjectivity, death, the soul and temporality are ruptured, delved into, mutated, even atrophied. Also, because of the unconventional nature of this

project, I will take on many diverse, possibly 'non-academic', attitudes and writing styles. This is not to confuse the reader (although it may) but to constantly *try* to undermine my position as the narrator and creator of this text. The paradox is, however, that in perpetually attempting to remove myself, at every turn I seem to re-entrench and rebuild 'myself' within the rhetoricity of borders.¹⁶

The impossibility of *totally* removing or articulating the subject from/within the text will become more evident as I attempt to unravel the discourses around the artists Rothko and Michaux. The problem of retrieving (reaching) the artist from the inherent complexities of the discursive systems within which they are 'held' will be a recurrent one. It is *imagined*, through various discursive posturings, that it will be *possible* to somehow gain privileged access to the artists in question, *through* the reading of primary texts, letters, opinions and official interpretations of the artist's life and works. Such an appeal works on the premise that the artist in question is *the* primary origin. What I am appealing to through(out) this text, however, is a discursive spectrality or a *hauntological* 'origin' rather than an *ontological* one.

This logic of haunting [is] not merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or thinking of Being (of "to be," assuming that it is a matter of Being in the "to be or not to be," but nothing is less certain). It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensively. How to *comprehend* in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? And the opposition between "to be" and "not to be"?¹⁷

Whilst acknowledging this *hauntology*, I will still be trying to *comprehend* the *spectres* of Rothko and Michaux. Even though these spectres, borne from discourse, can be deconstructed and thereby exposed as *fallacious*, the question I need to ask is, should I then go on to declare them *inauthentic*? Is the 'real' corporeal body the *authentic* signifier for 'being-in-the-world',

¹⁶ There is a multiplicity of borders within the world, of/on my own 'self' and within this dissertation.

¹⁷ Derrida, *The Spectres of Marx*, page 10.

for *existence*?¹⁸ Can these artists *still* 'exist' after death, albeit as phantoms? Can I believe that the events which ended the corporeal existence of Rothko constitute a mere moment of suspension - and which, although *fatal* in *one* sense - did not end his being-in-the-world as a spectral 'soul' or 'presence'? Spectrality, and its relation to the discourse on Rothko will be investigated further in chapter two. In chapter three I will also look at the work of Michaux, an artist radically different from Rothko, in order to demonstrate that the 'soul' or 'presence' *endures* as a spectre *not only after death* but also through the *duration* of the corporeal body. Within chapter three, subjectivity will not be posited as a fully conscious entity moving *evenly* through a constant space-time continuum, but as a spectre which cannot *adequately* cover the unceasing state of disintegration, both of the body and of consciousness, or regulate the inconsistency of experience. I will also argue, by using Michaux as an example, that spectrality can not be separated from corporeality, but is constructed by human beings in order to cover over their (our) varying degrees of decomposition.¹⁹

This conjoining of the spectral and the corporeal is however almost impossible to argue convincingly. If spectrality can't be explained as a *fully* linguistic phenomenon - but one that is inextricably tied into or manifests (partly) from/in the noemic 'unknowable' aspect of the material world - how can I fully question the discursive strategies which proffer an *ontological* basis for subjectivity, expose their concepts as fallacious, establish a *hauntology* without falling into an infinite abyss of arbitrary signification or hitting a phenomenological dead end? It seems that there will always be an *excess*, something that will escape *complete* conceptual capture. Arguing through linguistic and visual structures means that I can *only* ever refer to or signify words and/or images within the same discursive framework(s).

¹⁸ Heidegger's *Being and Time* would be an obvious starting point in tackling this question in that within this text he discusses (and champions) the notion of an 'authentic' existence - as 'being-towards-death'. However, as outlined in my introduction, I have decided against utilising Heidegger's theories in any great depth (although they do get the occasional mention) as they would lead my argument down a different (philosophical) avenue.

¹⁹ In relation to consciousness there is an element of re-composition also involved, however this is (unfortunately) not the case with the corporeal body.

What, it seems I have to offer is only:

... very little, almost nothing ... miss[ing] the hardest, the most resistant, the most irreducible, the othermost of the 'thing itself'... repeat, repeat and repeat again, with neither consciousness nor memory of its *compulsive droning*.²⁰

What I will do in this dissertation is amplify and investigate this 'compulsive droning'. My argument will thereby constitute an *apostrophe*, as an exegesis of multiple and repetitive fictions. Haunting has no residence, no location (dis-location), as the spectre(s) move across and through discursive borders. I will look at what the patchwork of such fictions covers up: the contingent corporeality of existence. I will turn away from the 'living' and call to the absent or the dead, addressing the artists Rothko and Michaux as spectres: 'in memory of...'. This is an interaction that does not occur in the present but is always lost in a fragmented and abyss-mal 'past'. I will come back to this deconstruction of time later, but for now suffice it to say that when 'I' interact with 'you', or 'I' interact with 'Rothko', it will not be the meeting of identical, *present* subjectivities. My 'I' will manifest itself as a fragmentary, spectral 'event' within the wider spectrum of complex social and cultural discourses which are older and wiser than 'us'. Although, in *part*, the concept of the 'soul' will be one of the casualties of this dissertation it will, nevertheless, be maintained as a *figure*, as something that can be presented alongside 'death'. Death, it will be shown, is not a natural and teleological 'process' which maintains the soul *through* and *beyond* the dying of the corporeal body, projecting it into a 'safe' metaphysical space, but is instead a *fiction* without origin. I will argue this originless fiction is covered by a virtual mask, a *face*: a 'soul' presented through the figure of *prosopopeia*. A trope with a hauntological rather than an ontological basis whose 'location' is within the very discursive processes and social rituals that produce it. This leads me to the fictive nature of subjectivity itself, in that it is a prosopopoetic figure that *unifies* death, life and soul through the construction of narratives, presenting 'itself' through linguistic,

²⁰ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, page 81.

hermeneutic and visual devices as a comprehensive and cohesive identity. By uncovering the illusion and fallaciousness of the dichotomy between life and death I will be *constantly* decimating and reinventing the subject; dis- and rearticulating it within each paragraph. This project will thereby constitute many *false* starts, contradictions and repetitions. Yet for the sake of chronology, in order to give the illusion of progress, I will allow it to *begin*. However, in order to do this I will have to outline *again* the complex relationship between the subject (as the pronoun ‘I’, ‘You’, ‘Him’, ‘They’, ‘We’ within *any* linguistic or indeed visual structure) which *believes itself* to be an autonomous and self-knowable entity within a *community* of the *same*; and the construction of the same subjectivity, through and by, social and cultural ‘narratives’.

... we are never *ourselves*, and between us, identical to us, a “self” is never in itself or identical to itself. [The] specular reflection never closes on itself; ... before or outside [the] structure of allegory and prosopopeia which constitutes in advance all “being in us”, “in me”, between us, or between ourselves. The *selbst*, the *soi-même*, the self appears to itself only in ... bereaved allegory, in [the] hallucinatory prosopopeia ...²¹

²¹ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 28.

1.2 Face-ing art

... representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather they are representations of an absence. The paradox at the heart of representation of death is perhaps best conveyed by the figure of *prosopopeia*, that is, the rhetorical trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting.

Etymologically, *prosopopeia* means to make a face (*prosopon + poein*); in this sense we may think of a death mask or *momento mori*, a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which presents it. In a manner analogous to what Nietzsche writes about the function of *Schein* in *The Birth of Tragedy*, such a *prosopopeic* image allows us both to glimpse the interminability of dying in the Apollonian mask of the tragic hero, and redeem us from a nauseating contact with the truth of tragedy, the abyss of the Dionysian ...²²

In relation to the figure of *prosopopeia* we can explore the notion of *faciality* which is a concept that will come up several times during the reading and writing of this thesis, especially in the concluding section. It must be stressed that this is *not* a representation of an actual 'face' but a spectral representation of Being, or Once-Being, which can 'speak', but only through the performativity of linguistic and/or visual structures. This 'face' covers, masks, the fictivity of such structures as well as the tropes and figures that haunt them. As de Man argues:

... it is the figure of *prosopopeia*, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply, and confers upon it the power of speech. Voice *assumes* mouth, eye and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope's name, *prosopon, poiein* to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*). *Prosopopeia* is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name ... is made intelligible and *memorable as a face*. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with the face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration.'²³

Therefore the 'voice' beyond the grave comes in the form of an address, it is directed at the 'self' (where all 'beings' think that any address is for them (and therefore, as memory 'in' them) - it figuratively addresse[s] us, looks at us, describes and prescribes to us, dictates to us in advance, with the voice under [an] initialled signature ...²⁴

This 'deathly voice', one that ensues from beyond the grave, seems to have a

²² Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 73.

²³ de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', page 76.

²⁴ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 26.

resonance of its own; as an *omnipresence*. Although it is a fictive device it always - 'already haunts any said or present voice.'²⁵ Therefore, the ideal and *specular* movement of the self-identical subjectivity, turning towards itself in order to comprehend itself fully, turns into the *spectral* moment through and by the trope of *prosopopeia*. When 'we turn towards him [the dead artist] we address ourselves to him, who addresses himself to us.'²⁶ What comes to *us*, through this tropological movement, is not our own self reflection as a whole, present and knowable entity, but the figure of an animated spectre - one that covers the void both *within* subjectivity and within the discursive structures within which this subjectivity abides.

The memorial *trace* of the now departed 'other' is always *allegorical* in that it covers the *actual* absence of that other. Such traces, because of their (partial and complex) configuration can never be *specular* because of their speciosity, their inability to 'follow through'. They are not consummate enough to reflect our own identical subjectivity back to us, although such affirmation is always *promised* through cultural and discursive mechanisms. We think that any recollections we may have of 'others' are 'interiorised', held *within* our own personal memories and histories as complete and autonomous events/experiences.²⁷ They are, in fact, re-remembered through cultural and social practices (i.e. via the *intimate* experiences of reading, looking and recalling). The memory of others is presented as *constituting part of our own sense of* (both as an individual *and* a communal) *self*, yet such memories, and the people that 'inhabit' them, are discursive *phantasmagoria* presented through the trope of *prosopopeia*. The borders of subjectivity 'are delimited in the way that they are only through this experience of the other, and the other as the other that can die, leaving in me or in us the memory of the other.'²⁸ The 'other' can only cross the border

²⁵ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 28.

²⁶ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 26.

²⁷ What I am arguing here is that we assume that the memory is separate from the event/experience and that we 'hold' it as an independent entity which is then available for recall. However, here I am arguing that we construct that event/experience only through its re-remembering. Therefore we construct the 'other' *through thinking about him or her* (via linguistic and visual reparation). They do not 'exist' otherwise.

²⁸ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 33. My italics.

of subjectivity as memorial traces, re-membered within the wider cultural and social sphere. The 'memory' of the other, and consequently of our sense of self,²⁹ is a rhetorical (culturally derived) device, a *promise of safely* connecting with the other who can then testify to the continuous duration of 'our' Being³⁰ (beyond the physical). We culturally *idealise* the memory of the now deceased other as:

an interiorising idealisation takes itself upon itself the body and voice of the other, the other's visage and person, ideally *and* quasi-literally devouring them. This mimetic interiorisation is not fictive, *it is the origin of fiction*, of apocryphal figuration. It takes place in a body. Or rather, it makes place for a body, a voice, and a soul which, although 'ours' did not exist and had *before* this possibility that one *must* always begin by remembering, and whose trace must be followed.³¹

It is with reference to the figure of prosopopeia that I *aim* to demonstrate how death (as indeed life) can only ever be singularly (if aporetically³²) *mine*. Only through cultural posturing and repetition is it posited as shared and universal (*constituted* as the plurality of *mine* which then becomes *ours*). By utilising the figure of prosopopeia I will show how the memories, interactions and recollections we have of and with other people, within a personal *and* cultural framework, are only the meeting of spectres which address each other through the figural structure of the epitaph. 'Everything we inscribe in the living present of our relationship to others already carries, always, the signature of *memoirs-from-beyond-the-grave*'.³³ The specular (which then becomes *spectral* or *sepulchral*) duplication, of ourselves to ourselves, and to others, *covers* the *aporetic* structure of the

²⁹ When I think of 'me', even within the immediacy of the 'present', I am always using memory and recall. Any sense of 'me' is therefore always mediated through and by discursive strategies and temporal delay.

³⁰ Again, this is an indirect reference to Heidegger's theories in that Being (with a capital 'B') refers to a concept of subjectivity believed to be 'transcendental' and 'universal'.

³¹ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 34-5. My italics.

³² I am arguing here that any 'death' (actual or conceptual) has no *location*. Death in the physical sense happens to everyone as cessation of be subjectivity but no one ever experiences it directly - unlike dying which is the process that leads to death (as a no-place for subjectivity).

³³ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 29.

isolated subject, constructing a *limit of truth* within the borders of cultural narratives. Subjectivity is thereby enclosed and *encircled* by the reassurance of discursive strategy. This enables the subject to fix its gaze on the horizon, reassured that even though there is *something* unknown and deadly ahead it is somehow rendered knowable, universal and shared, made safe through the reassurance of meta-narratives.³⁴ This ‘something’, *figured* as the prosopopoetic ‘face’, is actually beyond the limits of knowledge (as truth).³⁵ Yet, because it is made *visible*, made in the likeness of a universal (if spectral) subjectivity, it becomes ‘known’ and therefore rendered harmless. This rendering then allows death to be mediated and *named* as a future event, thereby consolidating the experience of *now* as a shared present (presence).

... the human subject is simply *the outer limit or threshold* of a field within which it cannot itself figure any more than the eye can figure within the field of its own vision. What finds all of our representations is itself radically unrepresentable, no more a material part of the picture it produces than is a perspective.³⁶

I will be arguing that at the very *core* or *vortex* of this spectral subjectivity is a lacuna, an unknown and unknowable space, which can never be seen, acknowledged or understood, only felt through the viscosity of the decomposing and aging body. Cultural and social narratives attempt to render subjectivity active and progressive rather than ‘passive and impotent. Dying is the sensible passivity of the senescence, the wrinkling of the skin - crispation: the helplessly aging face looking back at you in the mirror.’³⁷ The illusion of preservation or *mummification* has to be preserved at all costs. Time becomes progressive, moving *toward* the ultimate goal of immortality instead of the degenerative chaos of corporeality. Temporality is thereby ‘shared’ and experienced collectively. We can locate *ourselves* and *others* within a stable framework within which we can safely ‘interact’. However:

³⁴ i.e. I do not know what is to *become* of ‘me’ but I am supposed to trust those who do (the Church, the State, psychoanalysts, etc).

³⁵ For further reading on this refer to Derrida’s *Aporias*, especially the first chapter.

³⁶ Eagleton, ‘Self-Undoing Subjects’ in *Rewriting the Self*, page 263. My italics.

³⁷ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 75.

When and where would we be, ourselves, we, in order to say ... 'we' and 'you'? Let us call these questions fictive questions, and recall an evidence of common sense: I can address them - these anguished, but *abstract* and *fleshless* questions - only to an addressee; I can only *destine* them with the precipitative supposition of a *we* by definition and destination, has not yet arrived to itself. Not before, at the earliest, the end and the arrival of this sentence whose very logic and grammar are improbable. For the 'I' that feigns to address these fictive questions *finds itself* comprised and determined in advance by the fact that it to the most suspended 'we' of ... supposed contemporaneity. It is this arrow of this teleiopoiesis that we have been following and waiting for, preceding for a such a long time - the long time of a time that does not belong to time. *A time out of joint.*³⁸

It is this 'time out of joint', *dis-location*, the conflation and interruption of time, to which I will return over and over again within this dissertation: The dissembling of the teleological 'I' *within* a 'time without certain joining or determinable conjunction',³⁹ Instead of embarking on the straight and progressive path of the *telos* I will embark upon that of the *peras*:

The Greek word *peras* -*term* (here, a synonym of the Greek word *terma*) end or limit, extremity - puts us also on the path of *peran*, which means "beyond," on the other side, and even vis-à-vis. It also puts us on the path of *perao*: I penetrate ... I traverse by penetrating, I cross through, I cross over life's term.⁴⁰

³⁸ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, page 77.

³⁹ Derrida, *The Spectres of Marx*, page 18.

⁴⁰ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 7.

1.3 Naming the present (presence)

In cross[ing] over life's term I will transgress the boundary of the self's (as spectre) jurisdiction. Not only the physical boundary that separates the 'self' from other self-contained entities but also that boundary that allows *us* individual rights, space, time and property. The power of the *name* and *signature* will therefore be questioned as *the* signifier that *calls forth* the self as an identifiable and autonomous subjectivity. The name within this context is thereby posited as:

... a *magical incantation*, uttered without many illusions, but as if, having become one with his name in my memory, the departed ... would respond to just the call of his name, as if the impossibility of distinguishing Paul de Man from the name 'Paul de Man' conferred a power of resurrection on the naming itself, or better still, on the apostrophe of the call recalling 'the naked name' as if the uttered name *resuscitated resurrection* ...[this] is the power of the name, particularly the so-called proper name, awakens, calls for, attracts, or makes possible such magic: not only the desire but the experience of hallucination.⁴¹

This again brings into question the concept of time and presence as *present*. The name is used with *semiotic force*, engendering a 'magical incarnation' that can conflate historical 'time' and bring 'back' (or 'forward') into the present that which no longer (or not yet) exists. Derrida, following St. Augustine, posits three 'presents'; the past-present, the present-present, and the future-present, all of which are rhetorically (re)presented so as to culminate in a static and shared perception of *our* experienced 'now'. By being positioned within such a constructed 'present' we can validate our (social and cultural) place within it through shared *memories* of the past and *fantasies* for the future. Such memories and fantasies, however, are not just the jurisdiction of the self, they are collectively shared within a community of the same (ideals, beliefs etc), as the *Zeitgeist*, the Hegelian Spirit. The *name* is a major figure within this process of retrieval and projection, through the recollection and projection of our self and others through the concept of

⁴¹ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 47. My Italics.

historical time, the calling of the name can *magically* re-call the 'presence' as spectre of now departed souls and adorn them with various attributes. The name is also culturally and socially registered as the *signature*, which is always *inscribed* in the future tense as a *mark* of propriety and/or intention and which 'projects' our individual immortality into the future. The *name* and *signature* (as the future and past-presence of the name) can therefore be situated within any time frame and deemed present within the culturally contrived phenomenon of a collective (and individual) past or future 'memory' or 'memory-to-come'.

The *name* and *signature* will be recurrent themes within this thesis. I will argue that the subject(ivity), in approaching the art-object apprehends, through the a culturally contrived 'interaction' with the artist's name (as the mark of the spectre), a moment yet to come; as the promise (by the artist) of overcoming the future event of death.

Art and philosophy, I will argue, buoy each other up as privileged realms of ideas and meaning. Within an never ending dialectics of resurrection they present us with a presence of (culturally) remembered and promised *Being*. Art presents a *visualised* horizon, one in which we can spectrally play out what we were, can and will become. Philosophy 'acts' as the *conceptual* way of comprehending that horizon. However, it limits that horizon (through concepts) whilst still giving the *idea* of a (metaphysical) space beyond. Even as a discourse that is essentially concerned with death, it continues to offer something beyond it, freedom from the corporeal, the mundane.

Traditionally interwoven with religion, philosophy offers a meaning which surpasses meaning, a heaven beyond the empirical, a sublime within the ridiculous. Philosophy, art and religion, metaphysics, aesthetics and the concept of immortality therefore intertwine in complex interdependency that engenders itself within its own rhetoricity. *Death* gives *meaning* to all these institutional discourses in as much as they all offer an empty but seductive message of hope through the creation and 'play' of spectres as a

battle posited as already won against the decomposition of both Being and the corporeal world 'beyond'.

I will also argue throughout this dissertation that *re-presentation*, as constructed through and by a complex weave of rhetorical figuration, is an attempt to cover over the unstable chaotic and unfathomable world. Putting in its 'place' a stable 'knowable' moment of present(ation): one which has an ontological basis. However, as argued above, re-presentation is the constant repetition of an *ideal* present, a *hauntology*, as a constant repetition which:

re-presents a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it, a present whose plenitude would be older than it, absent from it, and rightfully capable of doing without it: the being-present-to-itself of the absolute Logos, *the living present of God*.⁴²

In order to take this argument further I need to look at the notion of the *aporia*. Derrida argues that 'life' only becomes possible through cultural and discursive *displacement* of the unknown otherness that both inhabits subjectivity itself and endures the non-being of the now dead and departed:

We can only live this experience in the form of an *aporia*: the *aporia* of mourning and *prosopopeia*, where the possible remains impossible where faithful interiorisation bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead.⁴³

The *aporetic* therefore 'is'⁴⁴ that which is *beyond* the boundaries of the subjectivity, of truth, of discourse, but paradoxically is necessarily homed within them. This is not a metaphysical space or place, but the difference, the dis-articulated *within*. What is *at stake* here, with(in) the acknowledging of the *aporetic*, is *life* as represented through established and institutional discourses as whole, teleologically driven and known. Consequently, we cannot refer to our own or another's name or history without erecting our own *epitaph*, as that which mourns the loss of the self-identical subjectivity.

⁴² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, page 237.

⁴³ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 35.

⁴⁴ The problem with language is that I have to write that 'the *aporetic is*'. This gives it an identity and ontology which it evidently resists.

Beyond ... preliminary appearance, what is precisely at stake is a tropology of memory in autobiographical discourse as *epitaph*, as the signature of its own epitaph - if something of this sort was possible other than through a figure, trope or fiction. What figure? What fiction? What trope? *Prosopopeia*.⁴⁵

Because this dissertation is written through and by a *named origin*, the figure of *prosopopeia* *inhabits* its every assertion. The fiction of a *present* and *knowable* author is constantly returned and replenished through the creation and reiteration of the *face*. So, as stated earlier, throughout this text I will be constantly attempting to de-face, but will then re-face (my own) subjectivity as one inevitably does when trying to make a statement through the medium of text or through the production of art. Indeed the continual (re)establishing of an identifiable subjectivity seems inescapable when travelling through and by the mechanisms of western discourse(s).

Prosopopeia as a figure 'stands in' for and covers the partiality of memory, of cultural musings on the life and production of a once living being. That which *remains* is illuminated through being placed within discursive stratification. Such illumination *raises* the phantom of presence, bringing the dead back from the past, into the present. Prosopopeia is, therefore:

... the figure of this bereaved memory [and] becomes a sort of (possible and impossible) metonymy, where the part stands for the whole and for *more than* the whole that it exceeds. An allegorical metonymy, too, which says something other than what it says and manifests the other (*allos*) in the open but nocturnal space of the *agora* - in its *plus de lumière: at once no more light, and greater light*.⁴⁶

The metaphor of light will become important within this dissertation, especially when discussing Rothko in chapter two, as it is light which is commonly used as the symbol for the soul, as metaphysical presence deemed to be wholly (or holy) manifest through an illuminated source. (Day)light is also proffered within philosophical discourse, as the constant source of knowledge, of the rational, which has always to be pitted *against* the night;

⁴⁵ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 25.

⁴⁶ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 37. My italics.

the swarming space of darkness the harbours the dangerous and the irrational.

1.4. An even greater light

When I write the word 'death' it is not *strictly* to signify the ending of corporeality, or the many different contexts within which the concept can be 'placed'; *paradoxically* it is both and neither. In the context of this dissertation, as I have already argued, the concept of death becomes multiple and partial; its presence is *felt* on many levels of *existence* but can never be articulated. Its shadow eludes to, effaces, yet enthrals its own definition; its *trace* can be glimpsed, but never fully captured within any system of connotation. This is the multifarious and irascible *nature* of death. It is impossible to write coherently or exhaustively about it, but I must try, even if it means discussing it in ways that will allow it to elude any *exact* definition. Primarily, it is a concept that (paradoxically) *endeavours* to be a condition of both *being* and *non-being* - in that it encompasses the termination of the corporeal but then holds the *essential remainder* of the now departed subject(ivity) 'in abeyance' (*cryptically*). The liturgy that surrounds death however demonstrates that this 'essential remainder' occupies a 'space' beyond the limit of truth and is thus presented as a dangerous ambiguity made safe through the *cleansing* rituals of funerary rites and remembrance.

Death is not the *noema* of a *noesis*. It is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act. Death, or, rather, dying, is by definition ungraspable; it is that which exceeds intentionality and the noetico-noematic correlative structures of phenomenology. There can thus be no phenomenology of dying, because it is a state of affairs about which one could neither have an adequate intention nor find intuitive fulfilment. The ultimate meaning of human finitude is that we cannot find meaningful fulfilment for the finite. In this sense, dying is meaningless and, consequently, the work of mourning is infinite.

Since direct contact with death would demand the death of the person who entered into contact, the only relation that the living can maintain with death is through a representation, an image, a picture of death, whether visual or verbal. And yet, we immediately confront a paradox: namely that the representation of death is not the representation of a presence, an object of perception or intuition - we cannot draw a likeness of death, a portrait, a still life

or whatever.⁴⁷

When one dies, according to some very powerful and longstanding *institutional* discourses, the soul lives on; there is some part of 'me' that remain; maybe it is within the memories of others, old letters, photographs; or maybe the 'I' that is no longer tied to the corporeal is somehow held in abeyance, placed within some metaphysical or heavenly place. Whatever happens, memory, ritual and re-presentation are all conventional methods of somehow holding on, of trying to deface the horror of the cessation of being-in-the-world. Death is always mediated and thereby resisted. What is physically 'untouchable' is somehow discursively 'touched' upon through the spectral appropriation and 'safe' visualisation of the deceased. Death, in this sense, is always mediated. Any direct relationship with it as experience of it would mean one's own death and being caught up within a yet unknown and unknowable ambiguity. 'I' can only ever say 'I am dead' through the mediation of discursive strategy and always *before* the event, however immanent. One can never experience death in its unmediated sense. You would be dead. Indeed you would have ceased to 'be' and could therefore not recount your own experiences. The experience of death therefore is always given on-behalf-of. Discourse always holds us in a state of *mourning* within its perpetual displacement of dying, mortality and corporeality and its constant (re)construction of the 'experiences' of the dead (and of death).

...mourning It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localising the dead (all ontologization, all semanticization - philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical - finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet think it; we are posing here the question of the spectre, to the spectre ...⁴⁸

Whatever the medium, whatever philosophical or theological framework it may be, it is my argument that the positioning of a dead person within such spectral, visual or theoretical contexts constructs a face upon/within which to 'place', or provide a place for, their *magnified* trace. This facing of the

⁴⁷ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 73.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *The Spectres of Marx*, page 9.

now departed other 'masks' and makes safe the void of non-being.

The movement of interiorisation keeps within us the life, thought, body, voice, look or soul of the other, but in forms of those hypomnemata, memoranda, signs or symbols, images or mnemonic representations ... are lacunary fragments, detached and dispersed - only parts of the departed other.⁴⁹

Such 'lacunary fragments' are, however, within the discourses of Western culture, *re-figured* and irradiated as the *promise* of an afterlife, one that can be glimpsed *safely* and at a distance within the contemporaneity of *now*. Whether it is through religion, art, or drugs, the pure state of 'being' is repeatedly posited as *waiting* to be *experienced*, to be illuminated through another vehicle; to transform *Being* through an *altered state of self* without the encumbrance of corporeality. This 'altered state of Being' can be figured within many different contexts, but in this dissertation it will be discussed in relation to the two artists already mentioned, Rothko and Michaux. With regard to Rothko I will argue that his artworks are positioned as the phantasmic presence of a now deceased 'Rothko' occurring through the dirgical repetition, and 'transcending' his suicide. His non-corporeality is thereby denied through the strategies of various discourses and his prosopopoetic *spectre* is then projected onto/into traces of his 'creative moments'. This 'altered state of being' will shift throughout my discussion of Michaux insofar as I will argue that he himself tried to 'die', many times, through the use of drugs. Not die in the conventional sense, where drugs would deprive him of his life, but where he tries to remove himself from the static and 'known' culturally and socially inscribed world, to become even more tied into the 'truth' of his corporeality. In this sense Michaux's 'altered state of being', I will argue, becomes the impossibility of dying.

The concept of death when used within these various contexts will taunt; it will shift, cover its own non-conceptuality by throwing out illusions, come into focus only to slip through the gaps within the text. The concept of death cannot be held within *any* object, discourse, or experienced or described *in-*

⁴⁹ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 37.

itself, ‘... it trembles with an unstable multiplicity as long as there is no context ...’.⁵⁰ Death only becomes a concept when used within a particular context; its comprehensibility is an illusion, which, once removed from *any* context, falls back into its own aporetic and degenerative ‘space’. However, even though the concept of death is vacuous and illusory, I will be arguing that it *acts* as the foundation for meaning. The cultural ideal being: ‘... that historical moment when “life *endures* death and maintains itself in death”’ in order to gain from death ‘*the possibility and the truth of speech.*’⁵¹

Through the duration of this dissertation it will become obvious that death haunts every word, even though it is ambiguous, multiplicitous, permeates every known and unknown border and cannot be ‘contained’ within any *possible* present-past, present-present or present-future.⁵² The present therefore, the now-ness of interaction,⁵³ will not be ‘given’ within this thesis as the transparent and known ‘present’, rumbling towards a mutually satisfactory conclusion, but as the multiplicitous and fragmentary ‘experience’ of a *time out of joint*. This thesis will therefore be made up of a *layering* of *asymmetrical* ‘events’ leading to a multiplicity of *possible* endings (which in themselves will lead onto other, as yet unknown and unstable journeys).

The comparison of the works of Rothko and Michaux will thereby demonstrate the *suspension* of the mono-temporal subjectivity ‘placed’ *between* life as the cultural promise of a future transcendence of death, *and* life as riveted to the multiplicitous, multi-temporality of existence. This *suspension* will be presented within this dissertation as a fundamental *paradox*, yet it will enable me to establish how Rothko’s work *aims* to *hold* the presence of ourselves and others in the present-present by projecting the

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 9.

⁵¹ Blanchot, *La part du feu*, page 324. Quoted in Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 52.

⁵² I am referring here to St. Augustine’s observations on time as outlined on page 28.

⁵³ I use the concept of ‘now-ness’ here as the bringing together of the separate (temporal, historic and physical) interactions; the reading and/or writing or reading this thesis; into the ‘present’. This concept can also be applied to the multiplicitous interactions with(in) any artwork or text.

possibility of experiencing *loss* into the *future-present*. Making our 'lived' experience *meaning-full*. Death, or being-towards-death in this context, is always *here* as a figure that allows the present to *exist* by acknowledging, yet projecting, the inevitability of death into a stable present-future. This acknowledgement of death is then presented the *promise* of its overcoming; allowing subjectivity to exist 'now' through the cultural repetition of a transcendental logic.⁵⁴ This enables the subject to locate itself within a shared temporality; as beings-in-progress, as a beings-towards-a death which is always deferred; or as a being-ahead-of-itself-already-being-in (a universal and institutionally endorsed) metaphysical or heavenly place.

Also within this dissertation, especially in chapter three, I will demonstrate, through the investigation of the work of the French artist/writer Michaux and the theories of his contemporaries, Blanchot, Deleuze and Guattari, that at various junctures throughout history, certain cultural moments have developed which *began* to articulate the subjectivity in crisis, as partial, incomplete and chaotic. Paris in the middle of the twentieth century was one such 'moment'. As Dollimore explains in *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, such events have been commonplace throughout 'history':

... in Augustine's *Confessions* (c. 397 - 401) ... we find one of the most influential precedents for the way in which 'modern' subjectivity is founded in the same sense of crisis which imparts the restless expansionist energy which is the making of civilisation itself. Augustine suggests how individualism was from the beginning energised by an inner dynamic of loss, conflict, doubt, absence and lack, and how this feeds into our culture's obsession with control and expansion - the sense that the identity of everything from self to nation, is under centrifugal and potentially disintegrative pressures which have to be rigorously controlled. This is a kind of control that is always exceeding and breaking down the very order it restlessly quests for, and is forever re-establishing its own rationale even as it undermines it It is this that we have inherited; what we are living through now is not some (post-)modern collapse of Western subjectivity but another development of its enduring dynamic.⁵⁵

There have *always* been moments, throughout history, of dis-articulation,

⁵⁴ As a subject (socially and culturally contrived) you live then you die, but you do not cease to 'be', unlike subjectivity (as sense of self) which does.

⁵⁵ Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, pages 92 - 93.

when established discourses and systems of beliefs could no longer hold subjectivity within their delineated borders.⁵⁶ It is at such times, especially now within the 'post-modern' era, that we cannot be consoled by the comfort of a deferred or transcended death. Instead, we are constantly forewarned of death's immanence by deconstructive theories. It is immediate, we are told, it is everywhere at all times, breaking down the borders of our own subjectivities. Death is thereby multiplicitous, dangerous, we do not know at which moment we will come *across* it or when it will undermine us.

Yes, these warnings turn endlessly. Yes, like searchlights without a coast, they [deconstructive theories] sweep across the dark sky, shut down or disappear at regular intervals and harbour the invisible in their very light. We no longer know against what dangers or abysses we are forewarned. We avoid one, only to be thrown into one of the others.⁵⁷

So in writing about death, by either writing about it as *known*, plotting its position within modernist and post-enlightenment thinking, or as something that is abyss-mal, fatal, and dangerous as forewarned by Derrida and visually articulated by Michaux, I will, throughout this dissertation, be repeatedly questioning what death actually *is*, and why it figured, or dis-figured, so strongly in the abstract art of New York and Paris in the 1950s. This is not an easy subject to write about. Trying to concretise such a concept into the permanence of words I find that I *become* dizzy, constantly going round in circles; the artist - the art object - the viewing subject - discourse - the artist and ad infinitum, to infinite regress. Where do I begin and end? Can I really disregard an ontological (rather than a hauntological) origin as the source of meaning, of truth? Surely it has to be there somewhere. The way in which the complex weave of relationships between the artist-art-viewer is construed means that I have to constantly refer to opaque philosophical concepts in order to explicate myself, make myself understood, heard, to give myself a spectral (therefore a prosopopeiaic) voice. But, somehow, it's not *real* enough. It seems that I am constantly speaking to, and about, my own

⁵⁶ By 'delineated borders' I am referring to the parameters 'dictated' by institutions such as the church or the state.

⁵⁷ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, page 81.

(non)relationship with death: 'I say my name, and it is though I were chanting my own dirge.'⁵⁸ 'Negation is the very work of language and thus when I speak a nothing comes to speak in me.'⁵⁹

So, in order to 'enter' the realm of others, to enter the 'realm' of shared experience, and to break my solitude, I call the artist's *name*. Yet in summoning the presence of Rothko or Michaux I only interact with spectral figures exhumed from partial, material or textual traces of a life once lived, creative gestures once made, a voice once uttered. I can look at their work, texts, photographs, their own writings, but in doing so I only bring forth rhetorical figures, *spectres*, which as it were, *stand in* for the absence of the artist, as a knowable, understandable entity - which, in an *ideal* situation, would be *presented* to you, the reader of this text, for your intellectual and visual consumption. However, we are not caught in *one* homogenised closed or shared culture but many overlapping, estranged, and inhospitable ones: strands, networks, intersections and dispersions. All of which *may* sometimes coincide but only ever partially. As Derrida argues when discussing the laces on Van Gogh's shoes:

Accept here, concerning the truth in painting or in *effigy*, that the interlacing causes a lace to disappear periodically: over under, inside outside, left right, etc. *Effigy and fiction*.⁶⁰

When I discuss the artists, or try and glimpse their presence within the art work, or when I approach the theorists through whose 'wise' words I attempt to encounter the way *forward*, I will constantly (and frustratedly) return to different voices, none of which speak the same language:

Multiple, expandable and protean as it may be, the corpus of a single individual could not be its sole witness, even less contain it. As is the case in any mutation, [the name] is never exempt from repetition.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Blanchot, *La part du feu*, page 43. Quoted in Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 54.

⁵⁹ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 54.

⁶⁰ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, page 31.

⁶¹ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, page 80.

I cannot reach the voice of the artist. Instead, I hear the many voices of art historians, philosophers, modernist and post-modernist theorists, all subsumed under the *name* 'culture'. Voices coming together to raise the spectral vision of Being (for/of us all). Disparate voices distanced by, amongst other things, history, discipline, geography and/or intent. Figured voices of Being. Being figured: there is not just one spectre raised, but many.

So, by taking a deconstructive perspective (initially through Derrida and de Man), I will demonstrate that the *subject* in its *knowable* state is primarily constituted through tropological and figural devices. I shall show that this subject, within a suspended dialectic between brute existence and conceptual illusion, is constantly *dis-* and *re-established*, as it were, within a 'living' death:

... the absolute imminence, the imminence of death [occurs] at every instant. This imminence of a disappearance that is by essence premature seals the union of the possible and the impossible, of fear and desire, and of mortality and immortality, in being-to-death.⁶²

I will also demonstrate how the projection of a figure into the abyss of non-meaning constitutes:

... a substitute, a prosthesis that we put forth in order to represent, replace shelter, or dissimulate ourselves, or so as *to hide something, unavowable* - like a shield.⁶³

By showing how subjectivity constantly looks within the realm of 'truth' for some ontological⁶⁴ foundation, I will demonstrate how, in *constantly* looking for its own origins, producing a figurative 'shield' with which to deflect the threat of non-being, the subject both unravels and establishes itself within each and every *moment*. Life and death cohabit every instance. I will also show that once the prosthesis is removed and the void is uncovered it is

⁶² Derrida, *Aporias*, page 4.

⁶³ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 11.

⁶⁴ In the *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* the etymology of 'ontology' is as follows 'Gr. *on, ontos*, pr.p. of *einai*, to be, *logos*, discourse'. This undermines the premise that an 'ontological foundation' constitutes a metaphysical and essential substructure for Being.

almost instantly (through cultural convention) covered by another. The problem remains: once the subject is staring at its own non-being, how can it still 'exist' as a self-conscious being?

I will, throughout this dissertation, also investigate how the subject supplements the lack of knowledge about its own existence by giving itself and the world meaning through cultural *re-visions*. In *limiting* my own scope of investigation to the visual arts I will argue that the subject, in interacting with such formulaic, contrived and rhetorical entities, establishes the art-object as a privileged vehicle through which it affirms its own autonomous and infinitely abstractable nature.

I will also argue that, because the subject is inherently *aphasic*⁶⁵ as to its fallacious nature, it instinctively denies its 'lack' of autonomy and self knowledge by way of universal 'truth' and thereby re-affirms its identity as *being identical* to that of others. This is, I contend, is the will to *untruth*. Nietzsche argues, within yet another 'pre' post-modernist moment:

... as soon as man finds out how the world is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a true world. Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the only reality, *forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities - but cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it.*⁶⁶

Art-objects are, I contend, created so that the artist/viewer can constantly reaffirm his or her subjectivity and posit him/herself as a socially positioned entity. In creating and re-creating possible worlds and realities, 'placing' them within visual (and linguistic) systems of connotation, the viewing and producing subject can bring forth the illusion of knowledge, of a priori, and indeed a posteriori, truths.

⁶⁵ If you notice I am treating this 'subject' as a concept rather than applying it to my *own* 'being'; this, I think, is important as it shows the impossibility of acknowledging the 'fallacy' of my own being through the very linguistic devices that constitute it.

⁶⁶Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, page 13. Quoted in Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, page 9.

By *naming* (and thereby dis-arming) the *discontiguity* between truths and their rhetorical nature a tentative suture is attempted. The closure of this *gap* within the discursive structure of the art-object is made possible by supplementing its unstable material existence with philosophically mobilised notions of the aesthetic, the metaphysical and/or the 'real'. The perishability, the materiality of the art-object is *embalmed* and thereby displaced within the rhetoricity of the original (artistic) presence. This allows the subject to conceptualise this gap and thereby satiate its own lack to deny its own rhetorical structure with ethereal illusions.

By concentrating on Hegel's master/slave dialectic as the primary figure which dominates post-Enlightenment (Western) thinking, I will argue that the art-object exists primarily as a device through which the (illusory) subject can reflect upon its own stable position within a transient world. The art-object is thereby *endowed* with a metaphysical and mystical *presence* through and by which the subject can abstract its own consciousness, thus positing *itself* as an independent and essentially dualistic entity. Like the object upon which the subject gazes, it is itself made up of a corporeal body yet it believes that it is somehow embalmed by an autonomous subjectivity; a presence or origin from which, and for which, it was created.

Although the rhetorical nature of discourse circulating and supplementing the art-object furnishes the subject with these 'truths', the contingent and rhetorical nature of such truths, the *noemic* existence of the re-presented object, and the perishable materiality of the object itself, means that the subject, like the *original* object or artist, and indeed the art object itself, is precariously positioned; they both balance between life as meaning, and death as non-meaning. The brute materiality of both the world and the body, their propensity for decay is disavowed in the feeble attempt to stabilise knowledge, to produce and procure 'truths' that are fixed and eternal. The acknowledgement of an extraneous *other* space, of decay, aporia, finitude and

death (as non-meaning) could *potentially* unravel the subjects own sense of identity. Kristeva argues that:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful - a certainty of which it is proud holds onto it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.⁶⁷

Death being that to which we are not accustomed, we approach it either as the unaccustomed that astonishes or as the unfamiliar that horrifies. The thought of death does not help us think death, does not give us death as something to think. Death, thought, close to one another to the extent that thinking we die, if dying, we excuse ourselves from thinking: every thought would be mortal; each thought, the last thought.⁶⁸

Following Kristeva, I will argue that it is this terrifying void of non-meaning and non-being that *partly* drives human beings to create cultural systems. This allows them to repeatedly supplement and 'make safe' this excess as that which is 'literally beside himself', and capture life as a whole entity, a *metonymic* presence, for consumption. This presence is both older and greater than 'us', in that it is, the cultural refiguration of 'lacunary fragments', the object-in-itself, that which has no (longer a) voice of its own. As Derrida argues, the memories of departed others (and thereby ourselves), usually re-inscribed into cultural objects, are:

...in turn ... parts of us, included 'in us' in a memory which suddenly seems greater and older than us, 'greater' beyond any quantitative comparisons the figure of this bereaved memory becomes a sort of (possible and impossible) metonymy where the part stands for the whole and for *more than* the whole that it exceeds. An allegorical metonymy too, that says and manifests the other (*allos*) in the open but nocturnal space of the *agora* - in its *plus de lumière*: at once no more light, and *greater light*.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Kristeva, *The Power of Horror*, page 1.

⁶⁸ Blanchot *The Step not Beyond*, page 1.

⁶⁹ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 37. My italics.

This 'memory', the illumination of the 'greater light', I have already argued, is culturally borne. No more light, as the end of 'being', is covered over by offering the continuation of biography after death. This can only be done, however, through the *constant* re-inscription, the creative re-invention of some ontological foundation, the 'place' where souls can congregate waiting to be called into existence; as *Beings* beyond the physical. The partial nature of the cultural artifacts that remain are thereby *individuated*, i.e. made whole through remembrance of the *name*; the *epitaph* or the *effigy*. Such *spectres* can only 'exist' within the realm of the theoretical and the figural.

Narratives, transmitted onto and through cultural objects through the spectre of the artist, shines a knowledgeable light, a light greater than that which emits from being itself, into and onto the viewing subject and the material world that surrounds it.

Death as the lacunary space of non-meaning, that which is beyond the figural, takes us *beyond* Hegel's dialectic, beyond the borders of post-enlightenment truths. By scrutinising the Derridian notions of *force* and *presence* I will circumvent the *limits* of Hegel's main premise and argue against the idea that his dialectical movement captures both the negative and positive aspects of the movement between an autonomous self-knowing subject and a knowable object. I will uncover a tomb *within* discursivity *inside* which the materiality of the subject, and the object upon which it gazes perishes, decays and dies.

I will argue that the 'original' lost but *re-presented* object, that which is beyond the tropological systems within which both the subject and *its* world are inscribed, is at the very core of meaning as force and presence. In being deferred, denied, buried *with-in* (yet *with-out*) discursive mechanisms, the force of presence, the presence of an origin, is indeed an aporetic but forceful space. The force of meaning comes from a void, over which the *spectre* of presence, as origin, is projected. The real noemic object (or once-

subject) as the unwitting site of meaning, is paradoxically meaning-less *in itself*. In itself it is *beyond* signification; the sound, smell and sight of its decomposition covered over by cultural rites and rituals. The negative noemic aspect of the re-presented object cannot be subsumed in a slick, all encompassing dialectical movement, can not be effortlessly neutralised by the positive. The very process of the dialectic necessarily involves the death of the noemic object as a site of non-appropriatable meaning; yet its continuing non-meaningful existence is always embedded within the process. This residual object, inherent within all cultural systems, is therefore covered and denied by offering the viewer the effect of the *aesthetic* and the *real*. However, this deathly residue, the noemic object, the corpse, the aporetic, whatever you want to call it, within whatever theoretical framework you choose, can *momentarily rupture* the discursive manoeuvres which are set to keep it in place. The noise, smell, the abject break through, as:

that which disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite ...[the corpse as] utmost abjection ... it is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. The corpse is intolerable because it shifts the border between life and death into itself.⁷⁰

In a similar vein the *Klang*⁷¹ makes its atonal gesture as one that is without origin, reverberating through, and potentially threatening, all cultural systems, down to the core of 'being' itself. Although appropriated as the sound through which the signification of speech is articulated, it is in-itself without gesture, intention or residence.

⁷⁰ Kristeva, *The Power of Horror*, pages 2 & 4.

⁷¹ Derrida writes about the 'Klang' as a 'ringing, sonorous light reverberating on a stone bell'; it is that which is no longer mute, but not yet speaking (see page 3 *Glas*). I am using this concept as the noise, or the death rattle, which is made when the cadaver disintegrates - that which is covered up through religious ceremonies and social rituals.

1.5 The 'klang' and the silencing of the noisy cadaver

The truth: that you're dead, or that you don't stop dying and that your image, like your name resounds to infinity ... in the "stones" that "say", "familiarily" death upright, the bordel [*le claque*], the sound of bells [*cloches*], the apotheosis, the tomb as pedestal [*socle*], the mausoleum, the prelate's neck [*cou*], the collapse [*dégringolage*] of the Immaculate Conception, and so on, the letters and steps [*marches*] of "glory". For the first and last time, and as an example, here you are as if forewarned by this text of what clacks here - and decomposes the cadaver of the word ...⁷²

The scope of truth, according to *established* theological and philosophical discourses, has no boundaries, it is infinite. These discourses are built on the premise that *any* journey into the 'unknown' has already been undertaken, the work of knowledge has already been carried out *on our behalf*. However, according to Derrida, any realm of truth (and there are many) does have its limits; it is finite, contingent and does not have the capacity to contain or represent everything.⁷³ Truths, according to this theory, are contained within *borders* which can be feasibly transgressed. However such borders offer *vital* protection in that they are '... created by a substitute, a prosthesis that we put forward in order to represent, replace, shelter, or dissimulate ourselves, or so as to hide something unavowable like a shield.'⁷⁴ *Spectres*, as the *manifestations* of this substitution, shield the borders of truth in order to protect subjectivity from confronting something *completely other* to itself; the aporetic⁷⁵. *Spectres* thereby supply us with concepts, through which we acquire knowledge of the metaphysical. The spectral *offers* the infinite to us, *already* and *safely* known. Although major concepts such as the 'aesthetic' and the 'sublime' (for example) are *potentially* transgressive, in that they encompass a 'space' beyond the border of the physical, they are safely

⁷² Derrida, *Glas*, page 3.

⁷³ See Derrida, *Aporias*, chapter 1: 'Finis'.

⁷⁴ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 11.

⁷⁵ The 'place' of aporia is where '... there is no longer any problem. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of itself, as a presentable object or project, as a *protective representative* or a *prosthetic substitute*, as some kind of border still to cross or *behind which to protect oneself*.' Derrida, *Aporias*, page 12. My italics.

retained (as discursive strategies) within the *perimeters of truth*. However it is my contention that such concepts *only* 'exist' *within* the jurisdiction of the spectral and *upon* the border itself. Death is another concept that 'represent[s] the crossing of a border, a voyage between here and the beyond ... *toward* this or that place beyond the grave.'⁷⁶ Death is thereby posited, through established discourses,⁷⁷ as a *crossing*; not between spectrality of truth and the aporetic, but between the physical and the metaphysical.

With cultural platitudes and metaphysical musings we cover up the aporetic space of the unknowable, of the irreducible other, as that which 'exists' *beyond* the borders of truth. We discursively disavow this deathly place by composing figures, spectres, which will protect the borders *between* the known (as truth) and the unknown. These borders provide shelter, a loci within which the universal subject(ivity) can safely abide. The spectres found on the perimeters of truth are given *faces* and *names* which endow them with culturally validated attributes.⁷⁸ The fictitious nature of these spectres is thereby covered over, which then allows them to act as (stable) substitutes for the decomposability of the noemic, material 'world'.

So although I will write in this thesis of particular artists and historical 'moments' it will not be a voyage bound for a destination where resolute answers are to be discovered, of truths that will lead to a redemptive and enlightening moment of 'knowing', but one of equivocal questions; an opening up, a *circulation* around the different levels of discursive strata that surrounds, embalms and entombs the art object; securing its meaning *forcing*, as it were, the cadaver to breath. As Derrida states in the above quote 'you don't stop dying'; *all* subjectivities, culturally induced and maintained occupy a liminal space, not differentiated between 'life' and 'death' in the strict sense.

⁷⁶ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 6.

⁷⁷ Such a crossing is usually marked through and by religious and social rituals, where the now-departed is sent, through the power of incantation, to a safe (and known) 'place'.

⁷⁸ For example 'honour', 'dignity', 'genius', etc.

Although I will be staying within the realm of the 'truth' I will be making a vertical rather than horizontal journey, *below* rather than across, in order to uncover, dis-inter the rotting and noisy corporeality which lies at the foundation of truth. By doing this I will unearth the cadaver which has discursive structures enforced upon it in order for the *Klang* to be covered over with spoken words, imaged realities and written texts. I will argue within the main body of this thesis that this 'Klang' can never be covered completely and momentarily breaks through in the form of *kinesthesia* - the aural aspect of disintegrating materiality; both of the art object and the body of the now deceased artist.

Why use the metaphor of the *noisy cadaver* to discuss the art object? Well, the *forced* opposition between life and death, the living whole body and the rotting corpse, between subject and object, is one which I intend to dissolve, *dis-inter-grate*. The cadaver, which in the case of the art object, is covered by the figure of prosopopeia, offers an eternal 'presence', usually in the name of the artist, yet is, like the artist behind and the viewer in front, perishable, decaying - death thereby occurs, I will argue, within every moment of 'living'.

The concept of death in-itself, as I have already argued, refers to, and is based on *nothing*; it cannot be fixed or placed within a metaphoric relationship of equivalence (as the opposite, but continuation of 'life'). It is used to indicate the 'end' of life, a 'passing on' into the unknown, Heaven or Hell ... to which we can never travel but can receive messages from through the *medium* of art. What I will endeavour to demonstrate however is the impossibility of the possibility of such a passage by indicating the *aporetic* :

...the impossible passage, the refused or denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the non passage, which in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future event [*événement de venue ou d'avenir*], which no longer has the form of the movement that

consists in passing, transversing, or transiting.’⁷⁹

Being, I will argue, is continually trapped within this non-possible passage. Although it is rhetorically promised, as a voyage beyond the empirical, where metaphysical truth will be sought and found. Being is thereby stuck in such a ‘moment’, struck as it were dumb, where life and death enmesh around a disintegrating subjectivity. This dumbness is covered by philosophical discourse, and like the art object before it, is spoken on ‘behalf of’ by such discourses. The philosophical text, therefore, attempts to covers the fall into the abyss (yet at the same time cannot prevent it) by suturing together the multiplicity, the ‘patches’ which constitute the subject and presents/presences it as whole. However, this suture is never complete or stable because the concepts and figures stitched together in order to fix the subjectivity transgress the borders of other disciplines, histories and cultures and therefore remain aporetic in their difference (to themselves and to each other).

I will argue that meanings ‘appropriated’ by the subject from the art-object are *supplemented* by the illusory presence of the aesthetic, metaphysical or the real. Such terminology conceals the real world’s and the conceptual field’s recalcitrance to become a site of meaning. By ‘mimicking’ and reflecting the subject as an autonomous being, the art-object deflects the threat of death; this it does by the *appropriation* of, and *introjection* into, ‘objects’ which otherwise would be beyond the subject’s reach, or at least would decay and die in an abject-ional manner.

In referring back to the first quote of this section, I will argue that the ‘stones’ that ‘say’, on ‘behalf of’, allow, through the figure of prosopopeia, that which does not have a voice to speak. Reconstituting the cadaver of the now dead artist into an autonomous Being, so that it can speak on its own accord, be present-in-the-present; become a Being-in-the-world-now. The truth is, however, that without ‘life’ being constantly inscribed and re-

⁷⁹ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 8.

inscribed within cultural systems, *all* subject(ivity)s would be dead in the social and thereby ‘individuated’ sense - have no meaning for ourselves or indeed others.

I have argued that, by covering the fissure between noemic materiality and rhetoricity and by giving the subject the satisfaction of appropriation, cultural narratives *re-cover* the subject (the abject) and give back the *fantasy of wholeness*. However, the materiality of the subject/object disturbs this fantasy, making it momentary, ensuring that the subject relentlessly strives for more. It is this that allows art to *live*, to come into being, in that its fundamental utility is the *repetitive* disavowal of death.

It has seemed appropriate, so far, for me to adopt an overtly metaphorical ‘style’ throughout this dissertation so that my words can open up spaces; to make gaps which expose the rhetorical nature of the subject and the art object and their consequent discourses, and thereby offer, paradoxically, a theoretical ‘account’ of the unaccountable/aesthetic, even though the thing or being-in-itself cannot be incorporated into such a framework. The form and content of the remainder of this dissertation will have the same rhetorical (and non-essential) style of its subject-matter.

We all wear either proper or *impropria persona* when we write...if we are confronted with different audiences (multiple desires, forces) and if we have different things (forces) to express, doesn't it follow that we need many different masks (folds)?⁸⁰

Also, while theorising the multifarious concept of death, I will keep in mind that:

Tropes allow us to open up places, spaces, if not completely turn them inside out. Yes, it is not a matter to the outside, but being an outsider while inside.⁸¹

By occupying and opening poetic spaces, speaking to other spectres in order

⁸⁰ Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity and the History of Rhetoric*, page 19.

⁸¹ Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity and the History of Rhetoric*, page 19.

to indicate forces, presences, I will endeavour to celebrate the rhetorical nature of the subject without placing it in *strict* opposition to any notion of stability or essentialism. By exploring the rhetorical aspect of both the subject and the art-object I hope to show how aspects of both exceed, but are forever entwined with, their own materiality.

I will take up the position of an ironist,⁸² creating a theoretically open but over determined 'tapestry' which has no final conclusion, just taking another path on the Nietzschean road to a continual (re)beginning; to 'reach', as it were, a place of 'no final vocabulary.'⁸³

⁸² Here I mean ironist in the Hegelian sense where art and language 'presents itself as essentially over determined, and its manner of representation as a duplication and excess'. Hamacher '(The End of Art with the Mask)' in *Hegel After Derrida*, page 107.

⁸³ Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity and The History of Rhetoric*, page 32.

1.6 Hegel: The myth of the self-identical subject

As demonstrated above, a (pre)post-modern argument has run through philosophical discourse for a considerable time, weaving in and out, on the margins. Maverick philosophers have been struggling with the dissemination of the rhetorical subject long before the onslaught of deconstruction. One such philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, argued that human subjectivity, that Cartesian *Cognito* which we *know* to be true, is based on a fundamental fallacy: the fallacy of subject-hood. Nietzsche states that the 'self' '... forgets that this is the case: his lying then is no longer conscious and is founded on age-old habit and it is by *this non-awareness, by this forgetting that he develops a sense of truth.*'⁸⁴ The subject 'knows' itself to be true and regards the world accordingly. The twist in the plot, however, is that the subject, with the help of culture, 'forgets' that its existence is fallacious. This *aphasia* allows the subject to remove itself from its own interiority and look out into the world of objects and other subjects, wrestling from them truths which it can then abstract and utilise for its own purposes. What this subject refuses to acknowledge however is that such truths emanate from a void of nothingness, from de-composing matter ('life' becoming abstracted with 'death' negated and conceptualised as the opposite to life). This movement, between subject and object, attests to the absolute reign of the subject - with all objects being subsumed under its penetrating gaze.

We as subjects, according to Nietzsche, construct such truths about ourselves and world through a process of substitution. We can never appropriate such a world in-itself, even through the immediacy of the senses, therefore we use metaphorical language to 'appropriate' it on our behalf. Nietzsche asks: 'What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymes, anthromorphisms....truths are illusions of which one has *forgotten that they*

⁸⁴ Quoted in de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, page 112.

are illusion.’⁸⁵ Coming from such a deconstructive perspective, one that has not just been realised over the last forty or so years, I contend that we can never fully ‘know’ either ourselves or the world through figural devices, as they are deceptively opaque. We only ever know the devices themselves which are then, through a series of cunning moves, posited as being truths corresponding to the external world. The negative aspect of the world, the noemic sphere of being-in-themselves, is subsumed under this rhetorical scope of truth. However, in this uneasy relationship between a concept and its noemic object, the object is posited as the opposite to the truth it yields to the subject - its recalcitrance thereby ‘becomes’ error. The subject, by describing the world, thinks that it can know it in its entirety; error only being that which can be later corrected and revealed under the shining light of truth.

This notion of the *errorneous* object is necessary in order to define notions of truth. Error, within this dialectic notion of truth, always succumbs to its more powerful opponent:

In the course of its process the Idea creates that illusion (of the other-being), by setting an antithesis to confront it; and its action consists in getting rid of the illusion which it has created. Only out of this error does the truth arise. In this fact lies the reconciliation with error and with finitude. Error or the other-being when superseded is still a necessary dynamic element of truth; for truth can only be where it makes itself its own result.⁸⁶

This notion of truth has a philosophical imperative; as Kant states, without these *unifying truths* the ‘universe must sink into the abyss of nothingness’.⁸⁷

I contend however that these rhetorical devices, tropological systems which posit notions of truth, do not have the ability to close themselves off; to correct the ‘error’ they encounter. They cannot form a totality of meaning.

⁸⁵Quoted in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, preface xxiii.

⁸⁶Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, page 138.

⁸⁷Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Part 1, Chapter 3, Section 6, page 187. Quoted in Jameson, *Postmodernism*, page 248.

There is always an excess which goes beyond the domain of such systems and forms a 'residue'. Such residual matter, according to de Man, inscribes the materiality of the linguistic device, and leaves a trace of non-meaning from which the subject cannot escape. However, I contend that this residue is 'forgotten' by the viewing subject during the 'aesthetic moment'; again here's another space of error which is brought back under the formulaic notion of truth to the safety of reason. The subject 'feels' that it has escaped the confines of the language and burst out into the world full of enigmatic yet appropriatable truths.

The art-object being appropriated by (and within) such rhetorical devices connotes absolute freedom from the noemic world which is a world full of non-penetrable beings-in-themselves. The art-object re-presents a non-representable 'reality' by presenting a spectral 'substitute' instead. The unknown world, the unrepresentable (which includes the corporeality of the subject itself), is therefore posited as error; it becomes necessary only in order to be abolished and re-presented to the subject in an embellished and 'truth'-full manner.

Truth is, therefore, necessarily positive. Any negative aspect has to be overcome and transformed into a positive one. This the subject does, according to Hegel⁸⁸, through a dialectical movement as the fundamental relationship between the subject and its desired object.

Within Hegel's master-slave dialectic the master negates any independent existence of the slave so he can project his own socially-contrived attributes *into* him; the master thereby 'lives' via the slave. This enables the master to abstract his own sense of being; eventually achieving absolute freedom:

Hegel's subject suffers no permanent bout of bad faith or debilitating repression of what is real. Every deception immediately releases *a broader conception of truth* by which it

⁸⁸ However, I will be arguing against Hegel's theory of the division between subject and object in chapter 3.

might be transcended.⁸⁹

Hegel posits a final closure upon the master/slave dialectic, which captures *all* knowledge:

The 'dialectically overcome-entity [the object] is annulled in its contingent (stripped of sense, "senseless") aspect of natural, given ("immediate") entity, but it is preserved in its essential (and meaningful, significant) aspect; *thus mediated by negation*, it is sublimated or raised up to a more "comprehensive" and comprehensible mode of being....⁹⁰

According to Hegel, the subject (as master) first negates the phenomenological world by dialectically overcoming it via the 'work' of the slave and endows it with symbolic 'life'. This the master does via *introjection*. In virtue of the work carried out by the slave on the real world, the master can endow real objects with attributes which will finally enable him to know himself completely. Such attributes constitute the register of substitution: the symbolic. This re-creates the world so that it is full of animated and symbolically re-presented objects. Such objects can then reflect the master's/subject's presence back to him or her. These objects become a 'living' metonymy for death: a sacrifice made in the name of the subject. The real fragmented world is turned, via visual and linguistic representation, into a unified and stable space. The world of the unstable real goes through a process of mortification in order to fix its meaning. The problem with Hegel's dialectic, however, is that once the world is overcome it *becomes* positive to exist totally within the symbolic order: real objects now become symbolically animated with no excess or residue. Within this dialectic, when a real object is re-presented, it 'becomes' positive. The object becomes abstracted and only exists for the aesthetic consumption of the master/subject. The negative aspect of the object has been 'overcome' for the sake of being introduced into the realm of the symbolic. As Hegel argues:

The thing in itself...expresses the object insofar as one abstracts

⁸⁹ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, page 22.

⁹⁰ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, page 15.

from it everything that is for consciousness, from all determination of feeling as well as all distinct thoughts of the object. *It is easy to see what is left, the total abstraction, total emptiness.*⁹¹

The life of the subject/master thereby entwines itself around many actual and potential deaths through and by the services of the slave. The illusion of the re-presented real means the natural world becomes animated with a presence which can be captured and controlled by the subject.

Within Hegel's dialectic the slave works on the world, on behalf of his master, in order to produce abstracted fantasies of absolute truths. Kojève states that as the slave prepares the world for consumption he:

*transforms it [the thing in the world] by work [i.e., he prepares it for consumption, but does not consume it himself]. For the Master, on the other hand, the immediate relation [to the thing] comes into being, through the mediation [i.e. through the work of the Slave who transforms the natural thing, the 'raw material' with a view to its consumption (by the Master)], as pure negation of the object, that is, as Enjoyment.*⁹²

Truths presented to the subject/master via objects for enjoyment are devoid of any *real* physical presence. The master has not had to work on the world himself and therefore can gorge on the fruits of the slave's labour. Such fruits mean that the master can remove his concept of self from any physical bonds, as his relationship to these end-products does not involve *direct* negation of the original object. His own physical labour has not been expended. This means that the master's/subject's negating relationship with the world is always mediated. As a consequence of this '... the life that is won by the lord or master is a life beyond mere [physical] 'life''.⁹³

The master/subject gains *recognition*, affirms his own existence and believes that he knows himself beyond the confines of his corporeal body; his identity is, he believes, separate from his earthly existence.

⁹¹ Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, page 69.

⁹² Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, pages 17-18.

⁹³ Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, page 77.

The fear of not recognising oneself as a subject beyond the realm of the physical engenders the fear of death in that:

Death both appears to consciousness as, and derives its existential reality from, the possibility of an *absolute* refusal of recognition....Death is the “possibility of the impossibility of existence”.⁹⁴

Consciousness can only know itself through being affirmed by another consciousness. As Hegel himself states:

Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it *is* only by being acknowledged or “recognised”.⁹⁵

By projecting his attributes into the other-consciousness (into the ‘consciousness’ of the art object *figured* as and by the artist) and recognising himself ‘reflected’ within it, the subject elevates his knowledge of himself onto a metaphysical level; his identity thereby becoming abstracted (like the already re-presented and abstracted artist). The slave ‘works’ on, destroys, the naturalness of the real objects, and makes them inorganic, spectral; transforms them into abstracted objects. The real objects are re-created by the desires of the master/subject and made to reflect the subject’s ‘immortality’ (where the artist, either dead or alive in the conventional, physical, sense has already made himself immortal through the enforcing of philosophical rhetoric onto the materiality and the formal language of the art work itself). Such objects are re-made into static plastic forms which can yield meanings affirming the subject’s presence within a metaphysical reality, otherwise beyond its reach. In order to deny this possibility of death, the subject needs to ground itself in this notion of truth as an abstracted yet intellectual entity which can allow the subject to construct its own narrative.

Self-consciousness is to attain to a godlike authorship of the world, “a universal formative activity” not “master over some things,

⁹⁴ Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, page 79.

⁹⁵ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, page 230.

but.....over the universal power and the whole of objective being”.⁹⁶

However, as argued earlier, the re-presented presence of the object, like the subject’s own concept of himself, is precarious; slippage is always threatened. The figurative devices used to ‘capture’ the unstable and noemic world always leave a residue which can never be symbolised. This residue is beyond culturally and philosophically induced ‘truths’, yet to break free from the circularity of the subject/object relationship would mean a voyage into the realm of the de-composing cadaver. The art object thereby:

...fill[s] the fracture between a *no longer* and a *not yet*, where what has been extracted from a purely material basis does not yet participate in the pure abstraction.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, page 57.

⁹⁷ Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, page 37.

1.7 The circle (parergon) as frame

Within this section of my thesis I will examine the circularity of Hegelian discourse and the ways in which it places the art object within a dialectical relationship between 'knower' and 'known'. Any object, according to Hegel, is only relational to the subject(ivity) beholding it. The subject is only interested in the object as a vehicle through which the subject gains knowledge of itself and the world. Knowledge, according to Hegel, is abstracted from the material world by the subject which:

... journeys through *a series of its own shapes* as though they were the stations set for it by its own nature, so that it may purify itself for existence as Spirit and achieve, through a completed experience of itself, the awareness of what it is in itself.⁹⁸

What constructs knowledge is the (collective) subject(ivity) as *discourse*; as it surveys and *abstracts* the world around it, it shapes its own image. Claims of validity, as either true or false, are thereby internal to consciousness itself. Consciousness does not relate directly to the object but only indirectly to itself. Therefore, the world does not somehow hide or reveal truths to the inquiring consciousness; its truths are understood and revealed *through* the process of thinking itself. The subject is always present through discursive strategies, as presence: as an original 'I'. According to this theory the phenomenological world is a mere appearance which only 'exists' as the result of the subject(ivity) comporting *towards* it in a certain way.

In self-consciousness, in the concept of the Spirit, consciousness first has its turning point, from which it leaves behind its colorful appearance of the sensible immediacy [*Diesseits*] and the empty night of the supersensible beyond [*Jenseits*] and steps out into the *spiritual daylight of the present*.⁹⁹

Accordingly, the subject(ivity) turns, within the dialectic, from the sensible phenomenological world to the pursuit of knowledge (of itself). Within the

⁹⁸ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* [55:49].

⁹⁹ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* [108-09; 110/01].

illuminated light of day (as spirit) this is the *unity* of the finite and the infinite at a central knowledgeable point: the subjectivity *itself*. The role of the artwork within this scenario is as reparation of an incomplete experience as the subject realises its potentiality and acts upon the object (in this case the artwork) in order to realise itself as fully actual. This is the circularity the discursive systems of thought and knowledge with the subjectivity being at both the beginning and the end of the processes involved. Such discursive systems form a circle which always begins and terminates within the concept of (subjective) presence/essence, performing a slick passage from subjectivity as presence, through representation as an identical presence and back again.

However, Derrida argues that within this dialectic between representation and presence resides the spectre, the fictitiousness of the subject(ivity), borne only through and by discourse.

The phantom in the *centre* from which we *fascinate* Between the outside and the inside, between the external and the internal edge line, the framer and framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified.¹⁰⁰

The trait thus divides in this place where it takes place. The emblem for this *topos* seems undiscoverable; I shall borrow it from the nomenclature of framing: the *passe-partout*. The *passe-partout* which here creates an event must not pass for the master key. You will not be able to pass it from hand to hand like a convenient instrument, a short treatise, a viaticum or even an organon or pocket canon, in short a transcendental pass ...¹⁰¹

In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida points out the deconstruction performed by the circularity of Hegel's epistemology as a journey which constantly, and frustratingly, folds back onto and into itself. Rather than starting or finishing with the subject(ivity), as the ontological base for meaning, what occurs is a tautology - a chain of signifiers which invade and haunt each other. Circles, it seems, encapsulate and contain the viewer, the art-object

¹⁰⁰Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, page 12. In *The Chambers Dictionary* 'Fascinate' is 'to bewitch, enchant or cast the evil eye upon'.

¹⁰¹Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, page 12.

and the artist, all of which are circumscribed by the quest for knowledge, as an experience of truth. Philosophy, especially within its notion of the aesthetic, sets out to create a model, a circular structure within which to investigate and appropriate such an experience. From such an edifice the viewer's eye's are pointed skywards in order to glimpse at the infinite; to make their experience count. The image of the circle is essential when thinking about the relationship of nature to eternity in that it signifies the relation between the part and the whole, the subjectivity and the spiritual as well as the continual movement of time.¹⁰² Circles within circles, all returning as knowledge to the subject(ivity) from which it began.

No doubt art figures one of those productions of mind thanks to which the latter returns to itself, comes back to consciousness and cognizance and comes to its proper place by *returning* to it, in a circle. What is called [*s'appelle*: lit. "calls itself"] mind is that which says to *itself* "come" only to hear itself already saying "come back" The mind is what it is, says what it means, only *by returning*. Retracing its steps in a circle. Retracing its steps in a circle. But art forms only one of those circles in the great circle of the *Geist* or the revenant (this visitor can be called *Gast*, or *ghost*, *guest* or *Gespenst*.¹⁰³

The universe is thereby conceptualised and visualised so that it can be appropriated by the desiring subject as it 'becomes' part of it. It gazes at the stars, or at the infinite depth 'within' an abstract painting, past the materiality of both, in order for discourse to encircle it and bring back a truth; the affirmation of its own pure self-consciousness as knowledge of itself. The artwork acts as a mediator, as a vortex at the very heart of this circular motion which transports the desiring subject out into the concept of infinity and then back to its own (known and stable) presence. Philosophy, with its rich network of concepts and figuration, builds on a structure through which this 'journey' can take place, which is then posited as metaphysical and universal, as Being-beyond the corporeal. It throws the subject over the abyss and constructs a safety-net known as the *aesthetic*, or the *spiritual*, into which the subject can fall. This allows the subject to experience the full force of subjective freedom through philosophical and

¹⁰² See Rockmore, *Hegel's Circular Epistemology*, especially chapter 1.

¹⁰³ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, page 26. My emphasis.

theological figuration. Derrida discusses the circularity of such discourse(s) through the concept of the parergon, or frame by demonstrating how the framing of the artwork, through and by discourse, *attempts* to disregard the materiality of the work or indeed the subjectivity viewing it.

The parergon economise on the the abyss: not only save oneself from falling into the bottomless depths by weaving and folding back the cloth to infinity, textual art of the reprise, multiplication of patches within patches, but also establish the law of reappropriation, formalise the rules which constrain the logic of the abyss and which shuttle between the economic and the aneconomic, the raising [*la relève*] and the fall, the abyssal operation which can only work toward the relève and that in it which regularly reproduces collapse.¹⁰⁴

This dissertation will also question this circular epistemology, especially in relation to the self-identical subject. Within the circle comes repetition and a returning of the same. But what if this is not so? What if the corporeality, the materiality of the body and the world constantly interrupts the Hegelian process of acquiring knowledge, especially through the production and appreciation of art? What if the circle breaks and instead we have a line, or multiple lines, which spin off into infinity, taking the subject with them? What if the parergon fails to break the fall? What if the time it takes to travel around this circle becomes dis-jointed, finite, multiple? The subject disintegrates, grows old never fully knowing itself? Death becoming part of life instead of occurring at the end? What if, instead of being a dualistic consciousness with two parts being identical to one another, we are made of a variety of disparate and ill-matched components, and what if there is an artist that can somehow demonstrate this?

The law of the return supposing that “everything” would come again, seems to take time as completed: the circle out of circulation of all circles; but, in as much as it breaks the ring in the middle, it proposes a time not uncompleted, a time on the contrary, finite, except in the present point that alone we think we hold, and that, lacking introduces rupture into infinity, making us live in a state of perpetual death.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, page 37.

¹⁰⁵ Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, page 12.

1.8 'Force'-ing open the promise of subjectivity

...instead of trying to define the other ("What is he?"), I turn to myself: "What do I want, wanting to know you?" What would happen if I decided to define you as a force and not as a person? And if I were to situate myself as another force confronting yours?¹⁰⁶

If subjectivity does not complete the epistemological circle, what happens when it attempts to reflect its own reality back to itself? What if the spectral vision is not total enough? I will argue that if there is a *force* of being it is not tied into the construction of a self-identical subjectivity but 'exists' both within and beyond it as the *aporetic*. I do this not to posit some kind of metaphysical force, but to allow the corporeality of the body and the semiotic force of language (both visual and linguistic) to emerge.

This 'force', as the very force-of-being, is *both* the 'being' connoted by the individual 'name', as personae within a social and cultural context. But it also manifests itself *beyond* the linguistic and the visual, the aporetic as *klang*: that which *is without* the concept of the self but continues to interrupt it as the droning of corporeality.

... withstand[ing] conception, it plays for the Hegelian logos the role of mute or mad sound, a kind of mechanical automaton that triggers and operates itself without meaning (to say) anything.¹⁰⁷

Encased in a metaphoric tomb, 'protected' by spectres, this force is represented as an ethereal and essential presence *held within*, and made meaningful by being abstracted from the material. I will argue, however, that such a force cannot be made slave to the Hegelian master as it is neither mad nor mute but *klangs* on regardless as the decomposition of the material, the very 'object' upon which the concept rests and extracts (abstracts) its meaning. The logos cannot reach or silence the klang, although it tries to

¹⁰⁶ Roland Barthes, quoted in Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity, and The History of Rhetoric*, page 2.

¹⁰⁷ Derrida, *Glas*, pages 8 & 10.

muffle its sound with the all the might of the metaphysical, as a deafening and universal truth. Interruption always occurs in *trying to think* about death. In this context, death is 'the first experience of an alterity that cannot be reduced to the self occurs in the relation to death, in relation to the ungraspable facticity of death.'¹⁰⁸ Death, as I argued above, is not used here in the sense that it signifies the cessation of the corporeal, but as an aporia, as the unknown space of differentiation which finds its 'home' within the borders of subjectivity itself.

Derrida discusses the transo-empirical dialectic - that which necessitates both figures of the 'transcendental' and the 'empirical'¹⁰⁹ - and how it is displaced, but not reduced, even within deconstructive methodology. He tells us about the 'middle ground' which inhabits the 'space' between the transcendental and the empirical where the subject(ivity) is constantly suspended and from where the spectre emerges. However, it is:

... neither presentable nor reducible to some other instance or history. Therefore exceed[ing] time and space, escaping any attempt to arrest it in a concept, an epoch, a place or an history. As *the condition of the possibility of all marks as well as the condition of their essential contamination*, this 'middle ground' can be neither instituted nor projected as a horizon or end of thinking or action.¹¹⁰

The 'promise' of a continuing historical (teleological) subject resides in the inscription of, and the circular (tautological) relationship between, the transcendental and the empirical. The fictive subject must, however, *disavow* this cultural/rhetorical inscription, which also constitutes the disavowal of any kind of contamination. This also means that the subject has to disavow its *multiple* but *static* position *between* (and yet at the same time *within*) the fictivity of discursive narratives of/on the self, *and* the non-representable corporeality of the material body. Subjectivity believes instead that it progressively moves towards its own self-knowledge. The disavowal, by the

¹⁰⁸ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 82.

¹⁰⁹ The transo-empirical dialectic is one with which the corporeal, as degenerative and finite, is figuratively *embalmed* through its 'relationship' with the infinite.

¹¹⁰ Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political*, page 19. My Italics.

subjectivity of any kind of cultural inscription or of its own corporeality means, as argued above, that the subject is necessarily *aphasic* as to its own fictive nature. However, the paradox remains that it is the rhetorical 'creation' of the fictive subject (as an essential entity) that constitutes it as 'real' in the first place. Neither *totally* transcendental nor totally empirical, but an uneven and unstable combination of the two means, the aphantic subject relies on the constant repetition of the transcendental into the empirical - re-inscribed into/onto the empirical through cultural meaning. However, it is the contamination of the transcendental by the aphantic corporeality of the body which, although terrifying, opens up the middle ground and breaks the circle so that a new territory can be opened up for theoretical exploration. What then is this middle ground?

The middle ground is that which is contained within (yet 'removed' from through figurative substitution) the subject/object, master/slave, mind/body, fact/fiction, transcendental/empirical dichotomies; it is a neutral force which interrupts the smooth operation of the dialectic; the aphantic space of the *klang*:

insofar as it is neither an "apparent or illusory" antinomy, nor a dialectizable contradiction on the Hegelian or Marxist sense, nor even a "transcendental illusion in a dialectic of the Kantian type," but instead an interminable experience.¹¹¹

between the act of producing and the product, something becomes detached, thus giving us a vagabond, nomad subject a residuum ... a third party.¹¹²

So, the approach I intend to take in this dissertation is one that does not work within a strict dialectic, nor indeed one that allows for the negative to be phenomenolized in terms of the Other, i.e. death only ever conceptualised in terms of that which is *not*. As Schlegel maintains, 'It is equally deadly for a mind to have a system or to have none...Therefore, it will have to combine

¹¹¹ Derrida, *Aporias*, page 16.

¹¹² Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity and The History of Rhetoric*, page 16.

both.¹¹³ It is my aim to utilise available theories, whilst also acknowledging their (necessary) rhetoricity, in order to, as argued above, find the *middle ground* within which to investigate the impossibility of articulating the noemic, the aporetic corporeality of being-in-the-world, without the creation of spectres which are culturally (and poetically) contrived in order to cover up this deadly void of non-meaning. Death therefore will be (momentarily) revealed as that which teases the subject, by pointing to a mutual state of non-being; a non-being that cannot be re-inscribed within the polarity of the positive and/or negative, but forever *in between*; within the multiplicity of the *neutral*.

The *neutral* will be the space occupied in the third chapter of this thesis which is concerned with Henri Michaux. I will first demonstrate why French art in the 1950s cannot be subsumed by the Modernist ideal of the self-identical subject(ivity) of both the artist and the viewer. I will utilise the theories of Blanchot, Deleuze and Guattari, in order to 'place' Michaux within the theories of his contemporaries who were *trying* to question and dismantle established systems of belief. By again questioning the strict Hegelian dialectic between subjectivity as 'positive' and object as 'negative', I will demonstrate how Michaux's use of drugs and his appeal to existentialist theories allowed him to visualise, and *imperfectly* articulate, the 'space' of the *naugal*. The *naugal*¹¹⁴ is a nascent 'state'¹¹⁵ which blurs the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical by magnifying the *affectiveness* of the corporeal body within the sensual and capricious world. When it is *within* this *naugality* the remaining subjectivity has *no* 'real' physical, psychological or critical distance. As far as I'm concerned, this allows an investigation into Blanchot's notion of the *plenitude of the void*, and by questioning the aforementioned metaphor of light, argue that Michaux's drawings are those of an *insomniac*, where insomnia becomes the

¹¹³ Quoted in Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity and The History of Rhetoric*, page 35. My italics.

¹¹⁴ The notion of the *naugal* will be discussed in more depth in chapter three.

¹¹⁵ This nascent 'state' of the *naugal* is often reduced to/by the derisory notion of the *hallucinogenic*.

figure through which to *visualise* the *decomposition* of the subject/object opposition. This decomposition, I will later argue, allows the diminished sense of 'self' to witness different temporal speeds and spatial dimensions, and to question the accepted time/space continuum posited through institutionalised philosophical and cultural discourses. By again questioning the Modernist assumptions upon and within which abstract art from the mid-twentieth century was constructed and critically approached, accepted and validated, I will demonstrate how Michaux's drawings can show us a new, multiplicitous and uneven perspective through which to view his art. This will also demonstrate how his art, and the theories which informed it, reveal a post-modern *impetus* at the same time as a certain kind of predominantly formal Modernist reading was *supposed* to have a monopoly on all types of artistic interpretation and production.

Chapter 2:

Painting as Autobiography:

Rothko, Death and Prosopopeia

Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved. It preserves and is preserved in itself (*quid juris?*), although actually it lasts no longer than its support and materials - stone, canvas, chemical color, and so on (*quid facti?*).¹¹⁶

... do what is necessary; speak to the spectre ...¹¹⁷

2.1 Where to Begin?

Where to start with Rothko? Criticism, biography, words? Or the paintings, the canvases, material objects? Can they be separated, or are they forever enmeshed in each other's rhetoricity? What about the artist himself, his being-in-the-world, his impulse to create? In order to start dealing with these rather complex issues I'll start at a beginning, *the* beginning, the essential foundation of life, of philosophy even - the first premise of existence: the transcendental subject, that which, according to dominant philosophical rhetoric, pre- and super-cedes the materiality of the body.

Given that this transcendental subject is so riddled with inconsistencies and that the philosophical texts I read give conflicting accounts of what subjectivity 'is', or 'isn't', I will begin with a poem, given that it somehow seems congruous to slip into the poetic, the aporetic; a poem by Paul Celan:

Came if there
 came a man
 came a man to the world, today, with
 the patriarchs'
 light beard: he could,
 if he spoke of this
 time, he
 could
 only babble and babble
 ever-ever
 more more.¹¹⁸

Why have I chosen this poem? Indeed why choose a poem at all? It seems somehow superfluous to the requirements of writing about an artist

¹¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 163.

¹¹⁷ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, page 11.

¹¹⁸ Paul Celan in *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, page 69.

especially this one; why not start with hard facts, none of this ambiguous meshing together of cultural elements, why not keep it simple, clear and concise - rigorous? Well, because the *reduction* of Rothko to either his works or his life is not what this thesis is about; its about *expansion*, exploding the myth into many disparate and unconnected parts. Disinter-connecting. So why not humour me and let's consider the poem, because it could have been written about Rothko, his position as an artist situated within the Modernist episteme, and the impossibility of his possibility as a posturing transcendental subject. Yet it could also tell us about the inability of his paintings to 'speak' about the transient material world around them, or even about the fleeting conditions of their creation - their becoming. The silence of Rothko and his paintings is the impossible articulation of their own decomposing materiality. The sound of heavy paint being applied to already loaded canvases by heavy hands, smudged, smeared, rubbed; different hues and smells, different times and locations, are forever lost within the inchoate, atemporal babble. Noise. Klang.¹¹⁹ The infinite babble of time, the babble of dying and decaying; that which is covered by words; history and criticism. The disparate experiences of one Modernist patriarch, and the objects that are his legacy, are collected, revised and reduced to the visual; arranged to create order; mummified and codified within a body of mute canvases and a handful of carefully chosen, recyclable words. All babble becomes stratified, covered, named as the same within the tape-loop of discourse. In the case of Rothko, the overarching concept¹²⁰ with which to silence the babble is *death*: repeatedly articulated and then dis-articulated, entombed within the philosophical spectre of magical 'living presences'; Rothko's transcendental presence situated within silenced painted canvases. Canvases *working* within Hegel's master/slave dialectic, the *Enlightenment* concept of the Spirit, of consciousness, the immaterial entity that is carried over from material body to material body, from Rothko to his canvases - labouring on regardless. *Visioned* within the mark of the name - the

¹¹⁹ Derrida's notion of 'Klang' is discussed at length in chapter 1.

¹²⁰ Although 'death' in itself is not a concept it is 'conceptualised' in order to be understood, through its rituals, descriptions and depictions. This is in order to keep it safe - which is impossible as it is beyond such conceptualisation.

brushstroke. These strokes, *once* applied by Rothko within the inchoate and multifarious flow of 'time' lose their place within the babble; they are lifted up, collapsed into the rhetoric of the name, then opened up into the field of discourse. This enables the encroachment of the verbal - onto the name, the name of Rothko-deceased - onto the visual; he who works on after death, in order to present us with the idea of the suffering subject that transcends the 'human condition' - mortality.

Derrida argues that work, the painful act of producing, is:

... that which makes for a work, for an *oeuvre*, indeed that which works - and works to open: *opus* and *opening*, *oeuvre* and *overture*: the work or labor of the *oeuvre* insofar as it engenders, produces, and *brings to light*, but also labor or travail as suffering, as the enduring of force, as the pain of the one who gives. Of the one who gives birth, who brings to the light of day and gives something to be seen, who enables or empowers, who gives the force to know and to be able to be seen - and all these are powers of the image, the pain of what is given and of the one who takes the pains to help us see, read, think.¹²¹

Rothko's *oeuvre*; the collection of pain-fully marked canvases constitutes the body of work which holds and somehow contains the traces of 'Rothko'; it is 'given' as individual suffering opened up, made visible. However, the canvases that work on his behalf can only do so as deaf and dumb objects hanging within a museum; with a parental authority, an artistic discourse, speaking on their behalf, repetitively reworked, reworded, rewound. 'One's own proper sublime glorious body is gathered into an organless vocable. And is signed in a monogram the gallery speaks, writes. On its legendary walls ...'.¹²² Each brushstroke 'concentrates' the message, spoken in Rothko's name, which seems to be saying: "I'm dead; I have suffered and died; listen as my voice, my being, remains my words reverberate around the hallowed walls of this institution, emanating from the strokes that were borne from

¹²¹ Derrida, 'By Force of Mourning', page 171. My italics.

¹²² Derrida, *Glas*, page 8.

my will to conquer death."¹²³ The work/labour which marks the coming into being of Rothko's canvases also constitutes the bringing into being of 'Rothko'; this is 'given' as the light of being, the shimmering translucent paint which presents a 'trademark' of authenticity, marks his presence as an animating force. This obscures his not-being-anymore within the illuminating rhetoric of transcendentalism. Yet there is a fatal misalignment between the transcendental subject as a philosophical entity and the positing of such a presence within Rothko's work, within the brushstroke; underneath the literal interpretation of his oeuvre is a lacuna - a void¹²⁴ beneath the rhetoric. The light, the illuminating 'force' of Rothko that can only ever cover up what is in excess of discourse, what escapes the word (and the world); the babble, the noise of death, of the incessant decaying of brute materiality. The philosophical rhetoric that enables Rothko's canvases to 'speak' of his death, his suffering, of his once productive life covers up the very inability to speak of such things; for we can not intuit the death of

¹²³ In the Rothko Room at Tate Modern we are informed that 'The metaphor of the window ... appropriate to *Black on Maroon*, a painting from the Seagram Mural series ... [constitutes] a nebulous, hovering rectangular 'opening' [which] seems to give onto either infinity or nothingness. Rothko sometimes described his paintings as 'facades' also as 'dramas', ambiguous words which leave open to question exactly what the works might reveal or conceal Rothko himself constantly understood his abstract forms to be charged with symbolic meaning. It has been shown that the compositions of the more fragmented abstract forms of the late 1940s ... are based on Renaissance religious paintings, and Rothko never abandoned a complex sense of his paintings as anthropomorphic describing them as 'organisms' and *associating their formal properties with human presence* the sombre colours used by Rothko ... *are deeply evocative of sadness and loss.*' (This is also reprinted in *Tate Modern the Handbook*, page 218, my italics.) It is the constant repetition of the name Rothko, and its incessant association of 'presence', 'anthropomorphism', 'sadness' and 'loss' that allows the institutional display of Rothko's works to take on these 'attributes'.

¹²⁴ I say 'void', however this connotes a 'lack' or nothingness - however this void or space is that which escapes being stratified and conceptualised by language - and therefore is in excess, which (contradictorily) contains all material objects - plenitude.

Rothko, or break the muteness of decomposing canvases,¹²⁵ or reverse his no longer being-in-the-world. We can possibly *describe* his life and his suicide, think, or say it as words: 'Rothko's dead - he chose to die by his own hand'; we can try and read his paintings through his depression and untimely demise; but ultimately it is an impossible non-passage between thought and experience, between discourse and babble. As Simon Critchley argues:

Death is not the *noema* of a *noesis*. It is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of the intentional act. Death, or, rather, dying, is by definition ungraspable; *it is that which exceeds intentionality and the noetico-noematic correlative structures of phenomenology*. There can be thus be no phenomenology of dying, because it is a state of affairs about which one could neither have an adequate intention nor find intuitive fulfilment. The ultimate meaning of human finitude is that we cannot find meaningful fulfilment for the finite. In this sense, dying is meaningless and consequently, the work of mourning is infinite.

Since direct contact with death would demand the death of the person who entered into contact, the only relation that the living can maintain with death is *through a representation, an image, a picture of death, whether visual or verbal*. And yet, we immediately confront a paradox: namely, that the representation of death is not the representation of presence, an object of perception or intuition - we cannot draw a likeness of death, a portrait, a still life, or whatever. Thus, representations of death are *misrepresentations*, or rather they are representations of an absence. The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is perhaps best conveyed by the figure of *prosopopeia*, that is, the rhetorical trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting. Etymologically, *prosopopeia* means to take a *face* (*prosopon + poein*); in this sense we might think of a *death mask* or *memento mori*, a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face that withdraws behind the form which presents it.¹²⁶

So how can 'Rothko' be represented in-death or as 'death', if in doing so the

¹²⁵ In *Mark Rothko*, page 192, Dana Cranmer states that: 'In the 1950's, Rothko continued to experiment with the physical components of the paint mixture. He added unbound powdered pigments and whole eggs to his paint formula and often diluted the paint film with solvent, so much that the effect of the binding element in the paint mixture was compromised; the pigment particles were almost disassociated from the paint film, barely clinging to the surface. Rothko ignored the limits of physical coherence to achieve a translucency unique to his paintings. Light penetrated the attenuated paint film, striking the individual pigment particles and bouncing back to suffuse the surface and engulf the viewer in an aura of color. These films, brushed one on top of another, have an opalescent quality. Light seems to emanate from within the paint film itself. Physically these surfaces are extremely delicate if not ephemeral. Similar to works composed of pastel, they are brittle and crack or powder easily. They are readily effected by light and humidity, sometimes fading or otherwise altering in appearance.'

¹²⁶ Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, page 73. My italics.

representation of 'Rothko' constitutes his/its own and the viewers' destruction? For, as Critchley asserts, *direct contact with death would demand the death of the person who entered into contact*, thereby the viewer can only access Rothko's death via the figure of prosopopeia, the death mask covering and speaking above the babble - the safe 'crossing over' the abyss which separates knowing and not knowing, being and non-being; creating a re-vision of Rothko through the myth of the transcendental subjectivity which traverses the materiality of his own physical demise into the abode [*demure*¹²⁷] of the remains of his own creativity; his work. It is the placing of Rothko into this safe space, this abode, that place which can be accessed via discursive (linguistic) strategies but never physically 'entered' into, that allows the figure of prosopopeia to gather its spectral momentum; its force-of-being. And although this, or a similar, assertion could be made about many artists, Rothko as a victim of his own rhetoric constitutes, as it were, a special case.

¹²⁷ Derrida, in *Demure: Fiction and Testimony*, page 16, asserts that 'I will attempt to speak of this necessary but impossible abidance [*demeurance*] of the abode [*demeure*]. How can one decide what remains abidingly [*à demeure*]?' How is one to hear the term - the noun or the verb, the adverbial phrases "*abode* [*la demeure*]," "that which *abides* [*ce qui demeure*]," "that which holds *abidingly* [*ce qui se tient à demeure*]," "that by which one must *abide* [*ce qui met en demeure*]?" It is the impossibility of this abode, and the often implicit ways of speaking and writing about it in relation to Rothko and his work, that will become one of the main issues examined in this chapter.

2.2 The face of Rothko

According to Critchley's argument Rothko's face (*poein* - that which represents his once-being-in-the-world) as a *truth*, as a connotation of his once-being-in the world, is a mere mask, a death mask that conceals the 'spacings, blanks [and] discontinuities',¹²⁸ that in *effect* destroys representation. Looking at a photograph of Rothko (figure 1) we see a face, the face of Rothko, yet this is not the same as the 'face'; the intermediate, reciprocating, inter-face that withdraws behind the forms within (without¹²⁹) the canvas, and finds its abode there. The transcendental spectre of Rothko, philosophically contrived, is projected into the forms he once created, *worked on*; consciousness re-materialised within another body. However, consciousness cannot take on any form in-itself; it is de-structured, paradoxically within a (philosophical) structure, as an immanent¹³⁰ and immaterial entity. The contradictory nature of the assertion that something is both within, yet cannot be contained by - is in excess of - a material entity, constitutes an aporia, the babble that escapes the structure of the visual, or indeed the linguistic. It is the aporetic that unravels the face, the faciality of the prosopopoetic figure. It is the 'face' of Rothko that inter-acts with the viewer, as the inter-face of philosophical rhetoric, as the (re)vision of the transcendental subject. This inter-action is never stable; it can both construct and destruct within the same moment. The constant re-establishing of the name of Rothko has to be put in place in order to reassure the viewer of his or her own transcendental subjectivity through and by the positing of the prosopopoetic figure. This paradox is dealt with in many different ways, yet all are within the same tape-loop of discourse, *trying* to explain, aiming to convince, that which is ultimately beyond the structure of significance.

¹²⁸ Kristeva also argues that death cannot be represented only imprinted 'by spacings, blanks, discontinuities the destruction of representation.' Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, page 30.

¹²⁹ I say 'without' because the figure of Rothko cannot be contain within the materiality of the canvas, only contrived to be within it.

¹³⁰ In the *Chambers Dictionary* the etymology of 'imminent' is '*imminens, -entis, from in upon, and minere to project*'.

Through art history, criticism, biography, all who try and rationalise Rothko's paintings in relation to his life and death will come to an impasse which is then super-imposed on the name that survives, continues to live. Death (babble) denied, then re-established as a *concept*, will always be something which will never be understood, only experienced.¹³¹

Taking an initial and brief foray into the discourse on (in) Rothko, I will cite a quote by Charles Harrison who suggests that a painting by Rothko '... evokes the life-size figure of a portrait.' As soon as he makes such an assertion he qualifies it writing that:

I do not mean to suggest that the abstract forms ... are derived from some originally readable likeness to a person On the contrary. It is not a remote suggestion of likeness that evokes the figure genre, nor even any evident reference to a pertinent style; what are evoked are rather *specific types of effect unprecedented in earlier abstract painting*, but familiar from the experience of certain life-sized figure paintings - *portraits and self-portraits among them* ... evok[ing] the life-size standing figure ... comparable in *qualitative* terms to the effects achieved by some painters in pictures of single or at least isolated figures.¹³²

The assertion that Rothko's painting somehow constitutes an (almost) self-portrait, comparable it seems in qualitative terms to earlier modes of portraiture and self-portraiture, is one that one comes across repeatedly in the writings on Rothko and his work. Another example of when James Breslin in Mark Rothko's biography compares one of Rothko's early self-portraits (figure 2) with one of his later abstract works (figure 3). It seems that in calling upon the 'quality' of Rothko's paintings Harrison amongst others, relies on the overwhelming premise that somehow Rothko's oeuvre constitutes the manifestation of his transposable, transportable, transcendental consciousness.¹³³ Portraiture as a genre has always supposed a 'likeness' to the sitter, or in this case the artist. Abstract art does not differ

¹³¹ However, the paradox is that once death is 'experienced' individually, as a subject, the subject no longer exists.

¹³² Charles Harrison, 'Disorder and Insensitivity: the Concept of Experience in Abstract Expressionist Painting', pages 115-118.

¹³³ Therefore a paradox emerges in that Rothko's persona is individual and thereby 'unique' but his consciousness is identical to everyone else's in that it is universal and transcendental.

in this preconception; likeness is reduced to essence; synecdoche as the effect that connotes the whole, like Rothko's breath leaving a mist on the windowpane. As Rothko himself states:

There is ... a profound reason for the persistence of the word 'portrait' because the real essence of the great portraiture of all time is the artist's eternal interest in the human figure, characters and emotions - in short in the human drama Today the artist is no longer constrained by the limitations that all of man's experience is expressed by his outward appearance. Freed from the need of describing a particular person, the possibilities are endless. The whole of man's experience becomes his model ...¹³⁴

We are, it seems, forever imprisoned within obscure philosophical [poetic] terminology - 'human drama', 'eternal', 'essence'. Nevertheless when portraiture is used in this context it enables us to explore Rothko's medium as vehicle through which he can 'presence' his once 'being-in-the-world' through the rhetoricity of artistic discourse. Leo Bersani, in discussing Rothko's late paintings asserts that:

His work's specular repetitions and erasure of forms - what we have interpreted as its projected return to unreadable surfaces of sameness - *are themselves the result of a man's work of particular, inescapably form-giving movements of his body*, and the lines and forms and differences we do after all see in these paintings remind us that it is impossible to eliminate every sign of those delineating traces that result from our gestures. Rothko's work is all the greater for its willingness to let us see those traces, its willingness to nourish the critical discriminations that it will also seduce us into renouncing. For what it represents is not the end of difference - the unrepresentable, in any case - but rather *the drama of individuation*, the tracing and erasing of those boundaries without which there would be no phenomenal world, no individual life.¹³⁵

According to Bersani the boundaries, between the inner and outer worlds, are traced and erased both within the production and viewing of Rothko's canvases. Rothko's body moves and thereby gives form, gives life, to his work; the form is individuated through the traces of Rothko's corporeality.

¹³⁴ Excerpt from notes taken at a lecture by Mark Rothko at the Pratt Institute. Published in an article by Dore Ashton in *Cimaise* December 1958. Reprinted in *Mark Rothko*, Tate Publishing, pg 87.

¹³⁵ Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, page 144.

His canvases, according to this theory, constitutes a self-effacing self-portraiture. Brian O'Doherty, in discussing Rothko's oeuvre shortly after his suicide, also explores this idea that his canvases should be seen and understood as portraits by utilising the concept of the 'glance' and its established iconography within portraiture. He argues that:

Glances ... meet the spectators eye [which then] ... reestablish[es] the surface. A portrait that looks at us, despite an angled or rotated figure, immediately announces the plane, an intimacy, a surface, however incidentals may interrupt that surface ... Extended comparisons could be made here - between the atmospheric vagueness [of Rembrandt's late self-portraits] and Rothko's atmosphere, between the golden lights and indeterminately brushed surfaces. Need we go any further to find precedents for this frontality in Rothko's art? ... Frontality is established absolutely when the surface holds absolutely. It conjures up the image of the static viewer, with no opportunity to go sideways.¹³⁶

Here O'Doherty deftly traverses the incongruity of concepts in order, it seems, to forge a relationship between the 'glance' of the painting and that of the viewer, both holding each other within an monogenic exchange. A dialectic is thereby set up between the viewer and the figure of Rothko, the later constituting the 'intimacy' of the painting's surface. O'Doherty also places Rothko within an established genealogy of portraiture¹³⁷ which in turn gives his theory a certain institutional 'truth' value. The crux of this argument, the problem that I keep returning to, then, is: 'How can Rothko be figured in this manner?' I will argue that the primary motif is that of the face (*prosopon + poein*), specifically the eyes - the organs of vision. Not a represented face, its features and orifices neatly arranged in a physiological manner, but the ambiguous awareness of 'self' which locates itself *behind* the face; *that* which 'senses' both itself and the world without recourse to its own materiality. The eyes thereby are the signifieds of 'being', the windows to the soul, through which we are able to view the world and move amongst it, meeting other 'souls'; eye-to-eye, face-to-face, interacting with other beings-in-the-world. Interaction through the primary sense of sight, connection with other identical beings, that vehicle that is located within

¹³⁶ O'Doherty, 'Rothko', page 38.

¹³⁷ From Rembrandt to Rothko, in one slick move.

the face.

Look at the canvas, move towards it, exchange glances, does it stir your soul? The movement is not actually physical or even actually spatial, but sensual, imaginary, locking onto the sense of 'being' which is connoted through the trace, the brushstroke, the eye, consciousness, leading the hand into action. A comparison of this idea can be made with one of Barnett Newman's, who argues in relation to his own work that he:

... was concerned constantly in doing a painting that would move in its totality as you see it. You look at it and you see it. And if you don't, there's nothing to walk into. It's not a window leading you into a situation where you walk through some either interior or exterior world from which you then come to a conclusion. *The beginning and end are there at once.* Otherwise, a painter is a kind of choreographer of space, and he creates a kind of dance of elements, and it becomes a narrative art instead of a visual art. When you see a person for the first time, you have an immediate impact. You don't have to really start looking at details. *It's a total reaction in which the entire personality of a person and your own personality make contact.* To my mind that's almost a *metaphysical event.* If you have to stand there examining the eyelashes and all that sort of thing, it becomes a cosmetic situation in which you remove yourself from the experience.¹³⁸

O'Doherty concurs with the same premise: 'Rothko's figure ... set at an exact human scale and suffering a distraction between the tragic and the transcendental, has a paradigm in the picture. Or more truly, a physiognomy, a face.' A face which once experienced:

... leaves no real image of what was perceived. There is an intimation of a glance or a stare, and a *feeling*. Features are not remembered only the sense of a perfect regard This brings us easily to the language of the mystics, and to the durable conceit of the "face of God", presumably the ultimate stare. After their transports, the mystics similarly cannot describe what they have seen. The intensity of the experience forestalls memory. They are left with a vague image and an intense conviction.¹³⁹

Such arguments have a philosophical premise, represented in and by a

¹³⁸ Barnett Newman in Emile De Antonio and Mitch Tuchman *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the Modern Art Scene 1940 -1970*. Aberville Press: New York 1972, page 71. My italics.

¹³⁹ O'Doherty, 'Rothko', page 38.

metaphor that I used a moment ago and which has the face or would have the face as the location where the soul can be 'seen'. Sight is deemed the vehicle through which the soul can escape into the (idealised) world, where the boundary between inner and outer worlds collapse. Hegel mused: 'If we ask ourselves now in which particular organ the soul appears as such in its entirety we shall at once point to the eye. For in the eye the soul concentrates itself ... which is the source of soul-life, and reveals spirit.'¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, quoted in Derrida 'Violence and Metaphysics', page 99.

2.3 Outing the inside

Is my death possible? ... It is well known that there is one word that remains absolutely unassignable or unassigning with respect to its concept and to its thingness, it is the word "death" - it is possible to attribute to the noun "death", and above all to the expression "my death", a concept or reality that would constitute the object of an indisputably determining experience. Yet the syntagm "My death" ... relates the possible to the impossible [and] can be figured flashing a sort of indicator-light (a light at a border) installed at the custom booth, between all ... borders ... between the areas of knowledge or the disciplines, and finally, between conceptual determinations. A light flashes at every border, where it is awake and watches [*ça veille*]. One can always see there is always a watchman [*du veilleur*] or a nightlight [*de la veilleuse*].'¹⁴¹

In March 1999 I went to Paris to visit Rothko. It was his long awaited retrospective. His work was on display and I was eager to interact with it. After queuing for over a hour at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris I managed to get in to the exhibition. Copious notes, bland commentary ensued. I looked for Rothko, but all I saw was old paint on even older canvases. I was determined not to 'give' myself over to the rhetoric. But as I moved from canvas to canvas one of them fixed me with its gaze and made me realise that my thesis might actually convince. It was *Red, Orange, Orange on Red* (Figure 4). Looking back at my notes I notice that my initial reaction was that it seemed as though Rothko is 'looking out from inside - the framing device is put on last (rather than first as is usual) thereby the colour does not "float". Almost an exact reversal of the painting beside it'.

Looking at *Red, Orange, Orange on Red*, I could almost imagine inhabiting Rothko's *abode*. I was staring back at me staring at him. Oh dear, I was falling for it. It seemed as if I was viewing my own viewing position, 'within' the inter-action - the dialectic - between Rothko and myself, from the *other*-side. I was confused. The distance between my 'inner' world and that (once) inhabited by Rothko had *somehow* been bridged. How could this happen? For me to inhabit the space of a dead man would constitute me experiencing my

¹⁴¹ Derrida, *Aporias*, pp 21-24.

own death - the dissolution of my own being. At the same time it seemed necessary for me to experience the other-inner, in order to confirm my own interiority. Life has to always experience death, albeit in a spectral and thereby circumspect 'form'; consciousness always has to vacillate between the two philosophically contrived states of 'being' and 'non-being': yet always hovers above the abyss - the aporetic.

Pure life would be death. The absolute exposition of an inside to the outside destroys it immediately. But *it cannot be absolutely shut away safely either*. Every inside exposes a face to danger, without which it would be already dead. During one of the first American expeditions to the moon, a careless astronaut pointed his camera at the sun, which immediately burned out its cells. The camera cannot tolerate the source of purity of which its only *raison d'être* is to capture and relay. This [is the] lunar drama of reflected light, of a burning that leaves only ash, of the sun and death that cannot be looked at directly ...¹⁴²

Derrida, in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, tries to understand the implication of experiencing an-other's interiority from the outside by using the metaphor of the *crypt*. The dead Rothko can *only* exist in 'me' or between me and *Red, Orange, Orange on Red*. The 'form' contained within the surface of the canvas constitutes the 'content' of Rothko's interiority. By engaging with this canvas I assimilate him (in)to myself and annul him as other or his experiences as foreign. Rothko, according to this theory, has died¹⁴³ so that he can become part of me. He not only continues to introject and animate his canvases, but he is also incorporated into my sense of self, *my me*.

'Incorporation forms the crypt: hidden under the inside which it thus supports, outside without really being outside I am here, in the crypt.'¹⁴⁴ It seems that by confirming my own sense of interiority, by inhabiting Rothko's, I also bridge the dialectic between life and death. However, according to Derrida, this is impossible as the impossibility of the possible (or the possibility of the impossible). The bridging of life and death is possible only through acts of philosophical construction which 'safely' efface the

¹⁴² Bennington, *Derrida*, pages 137-8.

¹⁴³ What I mean by this is that the corporeal Rothko does not have to be alive in order for his persona to 'live' within his work, or indeed be incorporated into my own sense of self.

¹⁴⁴ Bennington, *Derrida*, pp 147.

threat of the aporetic. The move from my viewing position to that of Rothko's is only possible through and by metaphor and displacement. It is necessary for me to view Rothko's work as a confirmation of my 'life' as opposed to his 'death' but in effect this can only be done by lifting myself above and denying the materiality of the canvas - that which constitutes the border, the boundary, between his subjectivity and mine. But is this possible, can I separate the content of 'Rothko' from the 'form' contained within his work? As far as Derrida is concerned, this is the impossibility of the aporetic because what is in the form is the content and what the content 'is' is the form. Neither exists without the other for they are both theoretical fictions which contaminate and subvert each other at the same time that they constitute the possibility of each other's 'existence'. For me to respect the aporetic structure I would not be able to write about his 'form' as separate from the 'content' of his paintings - or indeed discuss his work in relation to his life at all. By describing my experience of Rothko's painting the rhetoric of artistic discourse demands the construction of certain philosophical oppositions; and in constructing them I misrepresent and deny the aporetic. Experience is contaminated by its own description and vice versa. My writing about Rothko and the traces left by *him* on the surface of his canvases *present*, to each other and to you, our 'presence' as autonomous subjectivities. 'Presence' is inscribed within our articulations. However we are both 'dead' insofar as our traces and inscriptions need neither of us. Rothko and I *haunt* the forms through which we articulate our selves; as presences.¹⁴⁵ According to the Freudian concept of the 'primal horde', the father is more powerful an effect after absence; the 'other' always haunts the dialectic as the spectre of the outside, the unknown, the non-conceptual, the aporetic. This is how I could occupy Rothko's abode. It would be necessary for me to do so as the 'other' constitutes the putative 'present' sign: Both me as a viewer and Rothko as the artist constitute the conditions of each other's possibility as well as the conditions of each other's impossibility. The dialectic between life and death can only be constructed by effacing certain

¹⁴⁵ I would like to thank Paul Bowman for discussing this section with me and offering a clarity which was not, up to that point, attained.

impossibilities about what it 'represents' or 'includes'. To include and to excavate. Any exclusion would excavate something which would subvert or invalidate the logic of the dialectic. The excluded, the aporetic, haunts, threatens, but also promises, in a *sense*. Its expulsion is necessary for the constitution of the internal systematicity of a conceptual order, but that is a violence which is unethical in the first instance, and will always return; it is, in a sense, repressed. The aporia is another name for the kinds of impasses one encounters when trying to construct a philosophical system of coherence, and we can only understand 'Rothko' through such philosophical systems. Artistic discourse is built on such rhetorical devices. My experience of Rothko's canvases is constituted and made possible by such discourses, which, it seems, contradict and antagonise each other. I rely on tried and trusted academic-philosophical rhetoric to understand what I am looking at and why. Then there is my 'appreciation' of his work - the way I intuit the effects of his canvases, which is also shrouded in notions of the 'aesthetic', 'presence', 'universality', etc. Nevertheless, as argued previously, Rothko's work cannot be contained by and within such concepts. It is 'understood' within, and yet still exists without, the tape-loop. I am, it seems, forever in the grip of institutionalised contingency. Rothko's canvases constitute 'presences' which, given the clout of philosophical conceptuality, are validated under the auspices of academic traditions and myths. But 'nothing' is there. The spectre is projected through discursive tropes and institutionalised traces. All that is left is canvas and paint. Can you hear the babble? Neither 'Rothko' or his work can be comprehended completely or apodictically; the experience of his canvases exceeds their rhetoricity - the babble breaks through.

My seeing and being seen by *Red, Orange, Orange on Red* (figure 4) put all the other canvases into perspective, in that it allowed me to deconstruct the space inhabited by Rothko. As far as I am aware it is the only canvas that reverses the viewing position in this manner; it is the one which 'exposes' Rothko as a sham. As I walked around the gallery the other canvases

'promised' the same spectral moment, but then blocked my entry into this 'space' - the virtual abode inhabited by a dead man. It's not as if I had to see *Red, Orange, Orange on Red* before I understood the rest of his work, but what I realised then was that we think that controlled reflection on deconstructive method will protect us from the follies of our modernist forefathers, that we will never again fall into the rhetoric, the rhetoric of our own 'being'. How was it that Rothko preempted me with this one painting? 'Enabled' me, as it were, to imagine myself within his position of immateriality (immortality)? Although I did not see Rothko, I sensed something which I imagined as him. The only way I could do this was through the structures of philosophical rhetoric - yet at the same time it seemed 'real', the spectre of Rothko convinces, contrives, and at the end of the day even the most cynical succumb; as we all want to validate our own sense of individuated consciousness.

2.4. Seeing the Light

LIGHTING: The light, whether natural or artificial, should not be too strong: the pictures have their own inner light ...¹⁴⁶

Another aspect of his work that intrigued me was the translucent quality of his paint, his use of white. White light. Although he did not always use white paint he would always use a lighter hue, or play with the surface to create a tension between matt and reflective surfaces; both of which give the 'effect' of light.¹⁴⁷ (figures 7 and 8). The correlation of the idea of 'light' with that of 'existence' is deeply entwined within the history of Western thought. Religious, Scientific and Philosophical discourses all utilise, in some form or another, the metaphor of light to connote reason, 'being' (the soul), the metaphysical, the spiritual and the transcendental. We also use the metaphor of light in our everyday usage, which is not unconnected with such discourses: 'Seeing the light', 'shedding light on...', 'light of the world', 'to bring to light', 'going towards the light', 'light of my life', etc. Although we use commonly use such terms it is important to note that fundamental to this tradition is an *image* of light (either visual or verbal) as an invisible medium that opens up to a knowable world. Light is a metaphor for seeing the invisible in the visible, or seeing things in an intelligible form that holds all that exists together but is itself devoid of sensible qualities; for example the body and soul. Such a claim has its roots in Ancient Greek philosophy, for it is by means of this metaphor of light that the philosopher Plato implies a *natural* relation between existence and truth, or a concept of reality based on an original self-presentation of 'being' which can be clarified through vision. 'Seeing the light' is reaching understanding of something. Seeing the light is theory, religion and philosophy.

¹⁴⁶ Notes drafted by Rothko and sent by the Museum of Modern Art New York. Reprinted in *Mark Rothko*, Tate Publishing, pg 88.

¹⁴⁷ In the *Mark Rothko* Catalogue by Anfam (pages 522&525] he states that on *Mural Section 4* the inscription is 'upper left "MARK ROTHKO/[deleted]: 1958/1959" lower left [inverted]: "1958"'. On *Mural Section 7* he states that the inscription is 'lower centre [inverted]: MARK ROTHKO/1959"'. Given more time and space I would like to have expanded on this 'writing' of the signature onto the canvas and then erasing it - as effacing and defacing 'Rothko'.

Derrida argues that 'light' constitutes a metaphor for philosophical language itself. Philosophical reasoning is thereby dependent on metaphysics:

'Metaphor ... is included by metaphysics as that which must be carried off to a horizon or proper ground, and which must finish by rediscovering its truth.'¹⁴⁸ For Derrida then, light is the concept-metaphor by means of which 'truth' can be made to appear or become present to consciousness. The light is conceived in terms of the sun:

The sun ... provide[s] a [remarkable] example of sensory Being such that it can always disappear, keep out of sight, not to be present. The very opposition of appearing and disappearing, the entire lexicon of the *phainesthai*, of *aletheia*, etc., of day and night, of the visible and the invisible, of the present and the absent - all this is possible only under the sun. Insofar as it structures the metaphorical space of philosophy, the sun represents what is natural in philosophical language.¹⁴⁹

The structure of the metaphoric space *inscribed* by the light of the sun, according to Derrida, is a *specular circle* or *heliotrope*. The movement of the heliotrope is simultaneously a movement *towards* the sun; always expecting its arrival; and the turning movement *of* the sun.¹⁵⁰ There is always a turning movement/moment, within which the sun turns *itself*. The viewer also turns *towards* the sun in order to obtain light/truth. The sun is believed to be an exemplary natural object, *entirely* sensible or perceivable. Paradoxically, however, the sunlight of heliocentrism is always artificial. The heliotrope is the paradigmatic metaphor, or *model* of the sensory sun. Being sensory however, the sun is something whose *presence* cannot be mastered and is always improperly known. Equivocally then the sun is always metaphorical yet is representative of all that is most natural in philosophical language: 'what is most natural in nature bears within itself the means to emerge from itself; it accommodates itself to "artificial light".'¹⁵¹ Derrida states that is through this metaphor we make things sensible; that is, *both* accessible to the senses, and sensible in an abstract sense.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pg 268.

¹⁴⁹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pg 251.

¹⁵⁰ Derrida *Margins of Philosophy*, pg 251.

¹⁵¹ Derrida *Margins of Philosophy*, pg 251.

¹⁵² Derrida *Margins of Philosophy*, pg 209.

Yellow and Blue [Yellow, Blue and Orange] (figures 9 and 10) is an example of a Rothko painting where the white-light is barely perceptible yet still manages to escape from under the weight of the blue (bottom middle); the transcendental, it seems, never fails to escape; turning towards the viewer in order to manifest itself. The light is always there, on/in every canvas, receding, emerging, projecting out of the forms; Rothko, it seems, is always already-present, albeit partially hidden, and awaiting your arrival. The mystery seems to be how, or when, will he turn and show himself to you, make himself 'real'. Or will he always just allude to his presence? What a tease. This 'presence' presumes an autonomous will. Whether the eyes are closed, half shut or wide open - the face is always *there*, immaterial yet animated. It *seems* as if it is a matter of choice. Rothko chooses whether he will turn and 'present' (presence) himself, a choice made with his controlled application of the paint; a choice made with reference to the philosophical ideal of his own consciousness. As argued previously, light has clear philosophical connotations in relation to sight and the soul. 'Sight ... possesses a purely ideal relation to objects by means of light, a material which is at the same time immaterial ...'.¹⁵³

Sight as a partially immaterial 'entity' seems to move away from the location of the eyes and face when it navigates the surfaces upon which it finally rests: silent one-to-one communication, between vision and the visible. The other senses are deemed secondary to sight. Covering distances, encompassing great vistas, sight allows transgression, movement from the material body to the vast surfaces of the appropriated object, or coincidence with other sites of sight, other consciousnesses. Seeing is also silent - do you know that I am looking at you within the geometry of gazes?

The privileging of sight leads to violence both to the viewing subject and the viewed art object. Sight silences, makes mute the babble; noise is covered, entombed. Indeed, within Hegel's master/slave dialectic once the two

¹⁵³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, quoted in Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', page 99.

consciousnesses have acknowledged each other by sight, there ensues a struggle until death - a silencing of the other and getting him to work on *my* behalf. As Derrida explains: 'Violence, then, would be the solitude of a mute glance, of a face without speech, *the abstraction of seeing*.'¹⁵⁴

In relation to Rothko's multiforms, the abstraction of seeing constitutes the abstracting of the already abstract. How can we make sense of this contradiction? The abstracted face of Rothko manifested as light/sight on the surface of the canvas is hidden behind that which is already abstracted in form: the inter-faced. The viewer eagerly acknowledges this face, as a 'being' that can see, and thereby recognises, through the meeting of abstracted gazes, another being, albeit one impossibly 'contained' within the materiality of the canvas. The way that this impossibility becomes possible is that this face is *also* beyond the canvas, as the *light* of being, the philosophical mark of consciousness. As discussed previously, the heliotrope can keep out of sight; be not yet present, yet it will always return and show itself - that is the spectral motion of the sun. In engaging with this eventual meeting of gazes as the promise of (philosophical) truth, the viewer abstracts his or her own consciousness, makes it mutual within the very moment/movement of acknowledgement - made possible through the immateriality, but the *reality*, of sight. Discourse locks into that moment, articulates it, makes it 'real', 'authentic'. It gives a name to Rothko's face: the brushstroke, the form, and gives an 'experience' to the moment: the aesthetic; mute, contemplative, collapsed space, connections made through immaterial matter - sight and soul. Light has always had such connotations, the light of God, Apollo, the Rational; religious, philosophical, the light illuminates that which will always speak and write the 'Name':

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the *light of men*.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', page 99.

¹⁵⁵ *Holy Bible*, St. John Chapter 1: 1 - 4. My italics.

2.5 Stepping out with Rothko - onto the tape loop

In an attempt to understand the violent discourses that circulate Rothko's work, bring forth the light, it is necessary to get onto the tape-loop, acknowledge my muteness, mouth and write words which, though they are not mine, seem at times as if they're of me.

<Play>

He [Rothko] never abandoned the intoxication of muted radiances, and their atmospheric as well as hazy outlines *remained a constant mark of his individuality*. The air and its gaseous fumes delineated even his rectangles, and thus, somehow, he succeeded in alluring to the harnessed heat of purposive action. *Glimpsing them from without*, he lifted the veils which hover before the opened furnace door, and their coloured flames were hiding the Greek fires of the imagination. As a rule, he reproduced an arrangement of bipartite and balanced chromatic values - *almost as if counterexposing a celestial and a terrestrial world*.¹⁵⁶

...it is the paintings borders ... that evidence an *insubstantiality* - sometimes through their very narrowness, sometimes through the *ghostly fragility of surface* that was achieved by dry-brushing a thin layer of color over another white or light tone¹⁵⁷

I don't stand a chance do I? A will-less will. Rhetoric gone mad. What on earth is being *said*? Confused, contradictory, the tape-loop makes words, gives accounts, but can't really say anything transparent, meaningful.

These are *motionless pictures*; but despite the repetition of the horizontal - line or rectangle they are *not pictures of rest*. The floating shapes convey no sense of relaxation. Nor is there a hint of how they came to be, *nothing that suggests the action of the artist (pace Action Painting)*, either through gesture or direction or impasto, *nothing that defines the imposition of the will*, either through an exact edge or a precise measurement. And *yet in the unrelenting frontality of these pictures*, their constant

¹⁵⁶ Kennedy, 'Mark Rothko', page 47. My italics.

¹⁵⁷ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, page 184. My italics.

Only one person knows, and he's busy shining out of his canvases, being transcendental - playing hide and seek, facing and de-facing.

It seems that Rothko's paintings always 'represent the death of', are always 'beyond' or 'reactionary', 'on the border of', are always 'bigger' 'heavier' than other paintings.

symmetry, and simplicity, *there is the immediate conviction of an enormous will*. At close range this will is mitigated. The rectangles terminate softly and irregularly, their sizes and intervals obey no commensurate rhythm, their symmetrical placing is approximate, their uniform surfaces are not quite as smooth and even. And lacking all traces in the process of their making, *they are divorced from the will that created them. They are thus at once enormously wilful and yet unrelated to a formulating will*. Apparently unprovoked in the making, *they seem removed and indifferent to examination, yet they entice us to discover what is intention, what is chance.*¹⁵⁸

Faced with Rothko's later paintings ... one feels oneself unbearably hemmed-in by *forces* buffeting one's every nerve, imagines the gravity of one's body to be multiplied as if some weight borne on one's shoulders were grinding one into the ground; one feels oneself rising against these pressures, riding them, carried away into exhilaration and release; *pain and serenity become indistinguishable*. This complex of feelings is familiar enough in the experience of tragic art, but tempered and complicated by other appeals to *the senses and intellect and imagination* - involvement in a specific type of human situation; *the re-creation of familiar elements of reality in a way that makes them seem more real than life...*¹⁵⁹

These paintings are *beyond* poetry as they are *beyond* picture-making.

...violence and serenity are reconciled and fused - this is what makes Rothko's a tragic art. ... a Rothko is awe-aspiring as a cathedral is, not as a mountain is: the effect of its scale is not to make us feel puny beside a sublime vastness. *It has a scale transcendent enough to command, accessible enough to reassure.*

...[Rothko's work] pushes the medium to extreme limits where there is¹⁶⁰

<Pause>

Taking these words out of their context - philosophical, theoretical - and

¹⁵⁸ Goldwater, 'Reflection on the Rothko Exhibition' in *Mark Rothko 1903 - 1970*, pg 34. My italics.

¹⁵⁹ Sylvester, 'Rothko', in *Mark Rothko 1903 - 1970*, pg 36. My italics.

¹⁶⁰ Sylvester, 'Rothko' in *Mark Rothko 1903 - 1970*, pg 37. My italics.

making them stand for themselves seems somehow cruel, violent even. Nevertheless there are clues of their own undoing within them, as accounts of Rothko's work that really don't have anything to say. In a desperate attempt to cover up the incoherent babble, make sense of what on earth is going on, words are regurgitated, 'sublime vastness', words that only articulate the inarticulatable - Death uncovered by theory, and thereby covered by structures of rhetoric is entombed therein.

It seems, as I am finding out to my cost, that in writing about Rothko's painting there is a perverse difficulty; any attempt to write clearly, truthfully about his work, leads to a disillusionment in one's own ability to comprehend and articulate. The poet John Ashbury remarks that he:

... had produced a text [on Rothko] containing the words "shades snapped down against the day", "Rembrandt," "Dominican," "poverty," "Spinoza," and "the all-importance of fine distinctions." After having put this paper aside for a few days and come back to it I was infuriated by the inadequacy and silliness of what I had written. *Rothko ... seems to eliminate criticism.*¹⁶¹

Oh boy.

<Play>

An idea that is irreducible, to what?
deletions, subtractions ... verbosity that
seems to say a great deal but fails to
signify. Aiming to make all equal
within a calculation; size up; pare
down, getting to the naked 'idea'.
Making *equivalent*, through the
'dialectic', Rothko the philosophically
induced being *with* the 'work'

Rosenberg states that Rothko's paintings were 'based on the idea of one idea. That was an aspiration toward an aesthetic essence, which ... [Rothko] sought to attain ... by *rationaly calculating what was irreducible in painting.*' Therefore Rothko was, according to Rosenberg employed in a 'Marathon of deletions ... acts of subtraction ... reductionist aesthetics ... the acts of purging and the like.'¹⁶²

Writing on a picture of of Casper David Friedrich's, Eric Heller called it romantic, not for its theme "but because of the opposites

¹⁶¹ Ashbery, 'Paris Notes,' in *Art International*, [25 February 1963], page 73.

¹⁶² Rosenberg, 'The Art World: Rothko', in *The New Yorker* [28 March 1970], pages 90 - 95. My italics.

that come together in it; the vital and the abstract, the appetite of the soul and

a geometrical design, the submission to rational order, an ecstasy and a definition". How clearly this applies to Rothko! Romanticism and avant-gardism persisted longer in the visual arts than any other. And at its end, an artist could occur who can paint the pictures Schelling and Hegel could intimate but not visualise. Hegel foresaw the obsolescence of the imagination and art unless, as Heller points out, quoting Hegel, "it miraculously rises above historical necessity and creates 'out of its own pure self' something which he called 'absolute art'. Is Rothko the artist Hegel predicted?"¹⁶³

<Pause>

carried out within/by 'his' brushstrokes. 'Rothko' is both *created* by, and *is* the creator of the light here, thereby providing the the 'ontological basis' for his own being. However the corporeal Rothko, now decomposed, collapses, falls back into the tomb which then snaps down its lid like

shade 'down against the day'. The abyss, the tomb, is thereby *enveloped* by the tape-loop. According to Rosenberg, Rothko 'calculates what is irreducible'; yet as Derrida argues, when there are two irreducible and unequal 'entities' (ontological and hauntological 'origins') within the dialectic, each:

... envelop(e)(s) or sheath(es), incalculably reverses, turns inside out, replaces, remarks, overlaps [*recoupe*] the other. The incalculable of what remained calculates itself, elaborates all the *coups* [strokes, blows, etc.], twists or scaffolds them in silence ... the infinite circulation of general equivalence ...¹⁶⁴ Being assures, guards, assimilates interiorizes, idealizes, relieves the fall [*chute*] into the monument. There the fall maintains, embalms, and mummifies itself, monumemorizes and names itself - falls (to the tomb(stone)) [*tombe*]. Therefore, but as a fall, it erects itself there.¹⁶⁵

Rothko epitomises, to some, the unification of being and transcendence, 'pure self' and 'absolute art', mind and body, life and death. But the distance between such concepts cannot be breached, except through language, even then it will contain a moment of its own deconstruction, its failed 'recovery' [*recoupvrement*]. 'Rothko': as the name, mummifies *itself* in the brushstroke and becomes, at the same time, an empty but meaning-full gesture. The dialectic, as the interaction between two equal, calculable entities - being and origin - fails, falls; it collapses under the weight of its own rhetoric.

¹⁶³ O'Doherty, 'Rothko', page 30.

¹⁶⁴ Derrida, *Glas*, page 1.

¹⁶⁵ Derrida, *Glas*, page 1.

There is *no* equivalence between the man Rothko who becomes lost within the babble of decay and disorder, and the figure 'Rothko' who inhabits his brushstrokes, as the 'origin' of artistic labour. The 'moment' of creation becomes superimposed onto (into) the brushstroke as the in(tro)jection of the transcendental subject; even though the movement between the two is not a passage between two stable entities. The moment within which the brushstroke is executed, belongs within the babble, a dead meaningless gesture where the transcendental subject constitutes a precise knowable moment (movement) within a teleological framework of calculatable (historical) time. As Derrida tells us: 'With the *telos* can also be found the cliff [*I'a-pic*]. Where one can get a foothold or fall (to the tomb).'¹⁶⁶

Get onto the tape-loop or die.

<Rewind>

<Forward>

Time to <Pause>

Let me return to my *own* memories, let me share them with you.
Remembering my *first* ever encounter with a 'Rothko' in 1990.

Stood nervously in front of this vast canvas, *Light Red Over Black* (figure 11), eager to say the right thing, I was asked by my then tutor¹⁶⁷ "How does it make you feel?". I concentrated on the image, moved toward it, tried to understand what it was 'about' and replied that 'I want to put my fist through the black rectangle, have I said the right thing?' Silence - '... I know you by hearsay'¹⁶⁸. There is still silence when I approach Rothko's canvases, mute and somehow conspiratorial. However, I now know a great deal more about 'Rothko'. But only by 'hearsay' voiced through texts about him and images of

¹⁶⁶ Derrida, *Glas*, page 6.

¹⁶⁷ My tutor at that moment was Charles Harrison who I am now citing and critiquing in this chapter.

¹⁶⁸ Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, page 65.

him, filtered through cultural discourse, placed upon the tape-loop. Since that first time, Rothko's work has intrigued yet baffled me to the point that I was initially resistant to discussing him in relation to my thesis. Such an *obvious* choice for a post-graduate writing a PhD on art and death, I've been repeatedly told; an absolute *gift*. In an attempt to analyse my reticence in explaining Rothko's work I stop at an impasse. To write a survey of the literature about Rothko would only imprison my words within Rothko scholarship.¹⁶⁹ Instead I want to place an unknown 'uncontainable other' on the tape loop, rupture the circulation of clichéd words, already mouthed by bigger and better critics than myself. Instead of coming *blankly* back to the name Rothko, back to the themes of mortality, death, resurrection, transcendentalism, I want to undermine these concepts, show them up for the charlatans they are, and how within the superficiality they weave, the delicate persona of the artist is born. However, it seems that even with this insight, whilst working through deconstructing the spectre of Rothko, he still stands there like a modernist monolith, haunting my critical thoughts. I find myself babbling, constantly taunting and teasing his material absence. 'Come on, Mark, if you think you're hard enough', I chant. 'Let me at the painting, let me remove the black, the block, show yourself, you wimp - afraid to speak on your own behalf?' Obsessively, I still need to know what these paintings mean, what they ultimately signify, and there is only one voice that can tell me. I can't just let them 'be'. So, at what point do I stop the tape-loop, cut through it, stop listening, look, and finally see, feel, imagine, then understand. I stand in front of his work again, where I am told that it is important to set aside the theory and work with the materiality of the work (another repetitive piece of advice); but the colour is immense, the brush

¹⁶⁹ As Adrian Rifkin deftly puts it on page 5 of *Ingres Then and Now*: 'If this little genealogy is a matter of hazard rather than of Ingres scholarship, nonetheless it tells us something of the fabric of the archive, of its strangeness and dreamlike character. It alerts us to how, in Michel Foucault's terms, the concept of an author is a notion, one that we need, but that we must also try and set aside. For if we allow this notion to be invaded by its other, by an uncontainable otherness, its specific form might then be newly figured'.

strokes subtle, the effect stultifying.¹⁷⁰ The silence of the glance.

The most effective element of Rothko's canvases, we've been repeatedly told, is his use of colour. He is often referred to as a 'Colour Field Painter' or a 'Colourist' as though that explains, codifies and encapsulates his work. Rothko himself, however, dismissed this reductive understanding of his paintings¹⁷¹ by stating that:

I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom ... And if you, as you say, are moved only by [the painting's] colour relationships, then you miss the point.¹⁷²

Colour has been seen as an important vehicle through which to access the ideas feelings and thoughts of 'Rothko'. In often simplistic metaphors the dark colours are taken to come in place of depression, anxiety, earth, the body; the light colours come in place of hope, reascendence, the immateriality of the soul. In a complicated interweaving of concepts, and often protracted leaps of the imagination, the persona of 'Rothko' takes his first breath in the name of colour. Greenberg, when discussing Rothko's work, effused that '[colour] breath[es] from the canvas with an enveloping effect, which is intensified by the largeness of the picture.'¹⁷³

The tape loop nooses regardless. A presenter on a recent radio programme enthused about:

<Play>

...Mark Rothko, after Matisse the greatest

¹⁷⁰ Stultifying here is used here as the dulling of the senses, as they become almost bland in their uniformity. When this happen there is no differentiation between stillness and observation, where the later becomes a non-activity. This in turn leads to the inability to make meaning of the colour which envelopes you. Rather like a rabbit staring into the headlights.

¹⁷¹ When I am repeatedly told by friends and acquaintances that 'I bought a Rothko print because it matches my living-room wall' it signifies the absolute death of 'Rothko' and all his transcendental posturings. It also reduces his work to bland blocks of colour - the thing he feared the most.

¹⁷² Rodman, *Conversations With Artists*, pg 94.

¹⁷³ Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting', in *Partisan Review* (Spring 1955), page 193.

colourist of the 20th century. A painter whose work seems so simple at first glance, with their rectangular blocks of paint, stacked up one on top of another, but whose blurred edges make them float and gently jostle before the eye and whose layered application of thin washes of orange, or blood red, or even a brooding maroon seem to light up the whole room and suggest a myriad of different ways of seeing and feeling....there was always a sense of anxiety about Rothko himself and his paintings which gradually shifted from vibrant eye-assaulting colours towards darkness'.¹⁷⁴

<Pause>

Colour itself is problematic in that it can be named but never pinned down to an exact hue or 'essence'. Rothko's colour modulates and reflects, escaping being categorised, slipping into the babble. The first thing most people notice about Rothko's pictures is their vast expanses of colour, the way the paint has been applied, the opacity of the washes. And it seems that Rothko's titles also enable the viewer to give an exact reference to the colours he used on particular canvases: *Light Red Over Black; Henna and Green/Green and Red on Tangerine; Red and Yellow [Yellow, Orange, Red on Orange]*: A myriad of colour combinations, an ocular feast. Yet what do such titles tell us? How can we fix such colours to less ambiguous meanings? Again the argument slips into another aporetic moment. Stephen Melville argues:

Colour ... seem[s] bottomlessly resistant to nomination, attaching itself absolutely to its own specificity and the surfaces on which it has or finds its visibility, even as it also appears subject to endless alteration arising through its juxtaposition with other colours. Subjective and objective, physically fixed and culturally constructed, absolutely proper and endlessly displaced, colour can appear as an unthinkable scandal. The story of colour and its theory within the history of art is a history of oscillations between its reduction to charm or ornament and its valorisation as the radical truth of painting. From these oscillations other vibrations are repeatedly set in motion that touch and disturb matters as purely art-historical as the complex inter-locking borders among and within the individual arts and as culturally far-reachingThis movement of colour in painting is a movement in or out of

¹⁷⁴ Radio 3 programme 'Rothko: Light Red Over Black', aired 29.08.00 9:30p.m.

Death has no colour, and neither does 'Rothko'. His spectrality hides within obscure philosophical concepts; the materiality and density of the colours he applied onto his canvases escape into non-referentiality; circling back onto and into themselves - a movement out into conceptual construction (colour as metaphor) then back into deconstruction, as the unravelling of colour as meaning. Repeating and changing - the same but always different.

Image removed

It is, in its own way, reassuring that the canvases of the man known as 'Mark Rothko' are as repetitive as the critique that encircles them - post 1949 his 'classic' rectangular motif emerges and becomes known as the Rothko style - multiforms. Yet canvases and discourse are not co-joined within this repetition, they are different - two different circles of repetition - giving every-thing but no-thing at the same time. (Giving the prosopopoetic figure of 'Rothko' but not giving the corporeal Rothko). Geoffrey Bennington argues that difference within the same 'object' (or indeed 'subject') constitutes being 'absolutely different, [in that] it must differ from absolutely everything, including itself'.¹⁷⁶ Thereby, 'Rothko'/Rothko are the same in that they are both essentially different from each other. 'Rothko', the transcendental persona, is posited as the same as, and indeed equivalent

¹⁷⁵ Mellville, 'Colour has not yet been named: objectivity in deconstruction', in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts, Art Media and Architecture*, page 45.

¹⁷⁶ Bennington, 'Inter' in *Post-Theory*, pg 104.

to, Rothko the man - but the two can never be identical or indeed equal. This is why there is an inability to *pin* a meaning onto his canvas; it is the way in which explanation always floats above and adjacent to the materiality of his work, never absorbed, always repelling - always making critique seem somehow superfluous to the 'experience' of his canvases. Many on the tape-loop have tried, writing wordy accounts of his paintings, yet it seems inevitable that they will never hit the spot - the point of no return; time to get off. Words always return, constantly circulating within a *strangling* discourse; strategies of not saying anything but at the same time saying everything over and over again - repetition, words, covering the babble; that which has no(n) sense.

Standing in front of the work can't help me in my quest to understand, so again I return to my accomplice Derrida - as though in acknowledging the abyss I can avoid falling into it. In *The Truth in Painting* Derrida describes discourse as existing *on* the frame, as 'on the *limit* between the inside and the outside of the art object'.¹⁷⁷ The *Parergon* is the 'frame', the 'limit', the 'border', which constitutes discourse, and the *ergon* what's 'inside'; the materiality of that which cannot be articulated - babble. The space between the two is liminal, inarticulatable, imperceptible. *Parergon* entombs *ergon*, it supplements, envelopes, but can never penetrate; *ergon remains* as the block. Returning to view of the art object, in an attempt to acquire the 'appropriate' stance of Kantian disinterestedness, I remember:

If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer to its representation of it to the Object by means of understanding with view to cognition, but by means of the imagination ... we refer the representation to the Subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure.¹⁷⁸

Yet the block is in place; the materiality of the object cannot be reached in-itself. As Derrida states:

¹⁷⁷ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, page 45.

¹⁷⁸ Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [First Moment], page 8.

the pleasure [of an art object] presupposes not the disappearance pure and simple, but the neutralisation, not simply the putting to death but the *mise en crypte* [entombment/encrypting] of all that exists in as much as it exists ... an inexistent or anexistent subjectivity arising on the crypt of the empirical subject and its whole world.¹⁷⁹

The materiality of both Rothko and his canvases are thereby neutralised, encrypted - in order to become meaning-full.

Time to <Play> again?

The paradox is that we speak beyond Rothko's work but not necessarily look beyond it. Rothko's face is inscribed in his work once a word is uttered; the privileging of the verbal over the visual. Let us, as O'Doherty suggests, look for a word that will conjoin (by conjuring¹⁸⁰) the disparities between word and image, between concept and materiality; look for a word that will silence the babble once and for all. We need to look for the word - *death*? - but within the image - how? I will begin with the *proper* name 'Rothko'; the name and the concept 'death' becoming synonymous with each other; the meaning which circulates around the objects that he left behind, which he still, it seems, inhabits as a name, as a figure, as that which exists within yet

Jean Richepin wrote a short story about a writer whose first work, a poem, was so overwhelming his friends thought it should be at least a novel or a play. For years he worked, revised, came back to his circle for further advise and reassurance until his life was consumed and the unfinished work had become mythical. Finally he pared off thousands of words, refining and refining, until on his death bed he had reduced his life work, his magnum opus, to one word-but died before he could utter it to his friends bending over him. Perhaps he was writing an essay about Rothko. If one had heard that one word, one might perfectly understand Rothko's art. At that point art becomes alchemy and criticisms give way to perfect apprehension.

Can we go beyond this and imagine a civilisation in which only one word is spoken-that functions for everything? A civilisation in which language has vanished except for this one word, capable of inflections, since it can mean anything. A

¹⁷⁹ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, page 45.

¹⁸⁰ In *The Chambers Dictionary* conjure means to 'call or summon by a sacred name ... to compel (a spirit) by incarnations'.

beyond - living but ultimately dead.

civilisation where no one has a face until this word inscribes it? Rothko's art utters a single word, insistently.¹⁸¹

<Pause>

Let's stop this wordy procrastination, and get to the point. I propose that Rothko's paintings act as (auto)biography, not only in a literary sense but also in a visual sense: within a doubled, spectral moment/movement. The paintings are as silent as the man himself. Like monoliths they present in their obstinate materiality. They are audacious enough not to speak to us directly. Nevertheless, many voices speak on 'behalf' of their creator, Rothko, who, alas, is now no-more, dead, departed, decomposing. They conjoin as one; the voice, it seems, comes 'from' the paintings and speaks in Rothko's name; they have his inflections, 'reveal' his thoughts, his behaviour, and constitute his *persona*. This voice speaks as if it inhabited his life, shared the events which through a teleological progression of time, composed, destroyed, and in the end resurrected the figure which encapsulates [encrypts] his work. And yet with the 'resurrection' of 'Rothko' came a spectre that was, and still is, bigger than either the man or his oeuvre. The same but different. Let's go back, circle back to the first chapter of this thesis, repeat the moment where reference was made to Derrida, whilst at the same time implicitly referring back to the Critchley quote in this section¹⁸² - another text, another ally - yet the same figure: *prosopopeia*:

... the figure of bereaved memory [which] becomes a sort of (possible and impossible) metonymy, where the part stands for the whole and for *more than* the whole that it exceeds. An allegorical metonymy, too, which says something other than what it says and manifests the other (*allos*) in the open but nocturnal space of the *agora* - in its *plus de lumière: at once no more light, and greater light*.¹⁸³

That which is no more seems to return, circling back through the event of death, the death of Rothko, and comes towards us, as though through the

¹⁸¹ O'Doherty, 'Rothko', *Art International*, 114 (Oct 1970), pages 30-49.

¹⁸² Which shows that the tape-loop is not only a metaphor for the discourse on Rothko, but can 'stand-in' for any discursive structure in this case philosophical.

¹⁸³ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 37. My italics.

brushstrokes, the canvas; through the light, the translucence of the paint, the reflective surface, brighter and more magnificent than before his earthly demise. 'Rothko' becomes philosophically (well) endowed, potent. The light, however, is a 'nocturnal light'. The material becomes distant and thereby made immaterial by and through the discursive deployment of death; but like the moonbeam, promises the origin of a source.

The primary source of the prosopopoetic figure is culturally and linguistically contrived through the genre of (auto)biography. However I need to clarify that I am not going to argue that Rothko's paintings act merely as a visual *correspondence* to the literary genre of (auto)biography, only that Rothko's paintings and (auto)biography implicitly postulate the metaphor of light as their origin. Although they produce different material results (word/image) they both reference the same philosophical/theological context.

For the next section of this chapter I will closely follow the theories of de Man, whose questions about the (auto)biographical project will inform my own. De Man asks whether (auto)biography:

depend[s] on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject (realistic) picture on its model? We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we suggest with equal justice, *that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?* And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, *does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity?*¹⁸⁴

The determining reference of (auto)biography will then constitute the main problematic within the remainder of this chapter: whether the correlation between 'Rothko' and Rothko is a reference determined by the figuration of

¹⁸⁴ de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', page 69.

the artist within discourse and not the material referent (body); whether Rothko did or did not create his own persona; or whether the correspondence between life and art(ist) is rhetorically induced. Throughout this section I will be arguing that Rothko's work constitutes an ongoing autobiographical event which engages with the project of creating, recreating and preserving Rothko; with every re-imagined brush stroke, every musing over, or writing about his canvases, every curious glance or determined stare of the viewer within the gallery space. As Christie and Orton argue 'Each critic, each art historian constructs a different biography, a different Rothko'.¹⁸⁵ This argument could be expanded to include every spectator; anyone who been caught before the paintings, who has ever mused about the 'meanings' hidden within his work. Every gesture of the paint brush that constitutes Rothko's creative moment(s) repeats itself again and again with every viewing of his work or reading of his history. The discourses that intersect with and are dispersed by his work are caught within a spectral (cultural) re-vision of Rothko. Double spectre - body and mind, canvas and consciousness. The underlying assertion of this argument is that enmeshed within Rothko's history is his own undoing; his persona - constituting a self-effacing, de-facing, de-materialising auto-biography - may seem a little, well, odd By working through the figure of prosopopeia and using de Man's notion of autobiography (as a de-facement) I aim to demonstrate how 'Rothko' is not a physical body once in the world constituting, as it were, a point of origin, a chain of discrete events from birth to death, but is a complex weave of figuration(s) which can be selected from many different *cultural* points; all having threads which both attract and repel each other, giving other sets of meanings, references, differences, yet which are forced back to the prosopopoetic figure of Rothko - a looming figure within a figure, a supra-figure, enhanced, *illuminated*; that which contains 'life' yet repels 'death', needs both shifting and empty signifieds in order, as it were, to 'be'. Projected back into the canvases he once manipulated - *ergon* - re-figured yet silenced by their sheer material weightiness. *Paragon* stops at

¹⁸⁵ Christie and Orton, 'Writing on a Text of Life', reprinted in *Avant Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, page 305.

the frame, beyond lies babble. Life, as face/sight, needs to be superimposed onto these canvases. How? By giving them 'back' the life that once created them - so that they can interact with the viewer, affirm their being. Rothko, deceased, never stops the cultural posturing; bring on the transcendental signifier. I will argue that 'life' and 'death' are neither states of 'being'-Rothko, nor points of painterly action. Rather, 'life' and 'death' constitute 'being' or 'non-being' only in the cultural, linguistic sense, not in the actual material sense. The materiality of the corporeal is *erratic* and noisy, its movement always vacillating between being and non-being; disrupting the opposition by fracturing it into many unequal, unrelated and varied points which are lost forever within the realm of babble. Neither consciousness or brute materiality. Master or slave, Cognito or non-cognito; all philosophically induced binaries, constantly reminding you to 'mind the gap'.

The gap between the dialectic between being and non-being is covered by a superimposed (safe) passage, a *name*; someone who has passed on, over. The gap between is infinite, abyss-mal, deathly in the failure to connote. No transcendental origin to break the fall. The gap is beyond space, yet has no space of its own, we cannot think of it, comprehend, understand - it is death. It is liminal, a border frame upon which the dialectic plays its game whilst teetering on the edge of oblivion. This constant dialectic is never a straight, or equal passage, as we are led to believe, life/death, Rothko/'Rothko' - polar opposites that constitute each other, two sides of the same man. Instead, they constantly attract and repel each other, from tape-loop to canvas, spiralling off into the cultural and social milieu; encircled and contained by the name 'Rothko'; sent back home to their supposed 'origin'; the conjured moment of becoming. They then rupture again, repeat the process, come back, repeat ad infinitum - eternally return, the same but different. The name of 'Rothko' is as unstable as the very materials he used in order to articulate his own being on canvas. So even if the canvases did constitute their own meaning, and declare their own origin 'Rothko'(which I am not for one moment arguing

that they do), such 'capture' could only ever partial and momentary, before the unruly jumble of references break free of the circle, fail to signify, signify to excess; always the same name, never the same 'body'. Same but different - always taking a last gasp of life, on the verge of death before resuscitation; back into the Rothko Room, Mark¹⁸⁶ - you're not dead yet. The reader, the viewer the critic, the historian, me, you; we keep Rothko breathing. By looking at his work, reading his life, even if once, twice, three times removed from his paintings, ad infinitum, we call Rothko, ask him to speak to us; yet we fail to notice that behind the materiality of the word, canvas and brush stroke lie many voices and faces all of which are blind and mute - mannequins. They say 'original' things in front of Rothko's work, yet are mouthing each other's words. They create their own sense of 'self' on the back of each other. One huge cultural speaking and writing machine which grinds on regardless, creating, re-creating, obliterating, reviving. A collaboration without conspiracy - to conspire would be to acknowledge the blandness of each others words; words re-jumbled, re-worked, which have no energy with which to fulfil the promise of resurrection, the promise of a revealed origin. Are my words original, new? Absolutely not. I will fall into the same trap as everybody else. Philosophy does not offer the release from Plato's cave. Within the post-modern episteme, seeing the phantoms for what they are does not constitute the truth. Acknowledging the abyss doesn't break the fall. I am driven to continue, aim in a direction I know will never be completed, Rothko will never take up the challenge, be shown. Only the processes which constitute his manifestation will be glimpsed, momentarily. So what's the point? The point of no return, constantly circling within circles, eternal return, to the same point, the same but always different, its location, 'Rothko', always deferred. The ultimate violence is not being allowed to die. 'Rothko' is thereby located somewhere within a cultural colossus, everywhere yet nowhere - omnipresent within the presence of his canvases. Living yet dead - oscillating between the two, a safe passage

promised but not delivered. But what is the point? Where is it, and at what

¹⁸⁶ I'm here referring to the re-opening of the Rothko Room at Tate Modern; this was such a monumental event that it was a metaphor for the resurrection of the Tate as an international and universal 'happening'.

point do you manage to stop and get off the tape-loop and see the difference within the repetition? The substratum that ruptures the monotone. Will Rothko finally be allowed to die, his canvases perish, if we stop the tape? Tape off the Rothko Room.

In an attempt to give it one last shot, stop the dialectic until we drop (off), we approach Rothko's work yet again, read the words once more, refigure, regroup, revive. Breath, you bastard. Don't you dare die until I finish this chapter.

2.6 Biography

When it comes to Rothko, there is no avoiding James E B Breslin's magisterial tome *Mark Rothko*. But even Breslin admits defeat:

<Play>

And however 'prematurely entombed' he may be, his canvases are seen, felt, imagined and consequently understood as:

... any kind of writing about his work -by critics curators, or even by Rothko himself - fixes the artist in a "premature entombment"¹⁸⁷

Much of Breslin's biography is like this. In conflating Rothko's life with his art, and trying to revive him in order to give his book 'life', Breslin remains on the tape-loop, not daring to get off, look down. Yet in fairness to Breslin, how can anyone do any differently? How can one write Rothko into a deconstructed mode of (non)being without removing him from the ontological plinth which Modernist discourse has made for him?

Living presences, as powerful, warm, and life-sustaining and *silent* as the sun, Rothko's new paintings were at once independent of, and yet closely identified with, their passionately self-assertive creator.¹⁸⁸

'When he arrived at his classic format around 1950, Rothko, as if feeling *an inner spirit not fully incarnated in his body*, began to create paintings which no longer represented the body (or any other identifiable objects) because they were themselves organisms, idealised bodies which could - "without embarrassment" - *incarnate his living spirit*.'¹⁸⁹

Within his multiforms 'Rothko wanted to be understood; he wanted to be *recognised*, to be *seen*, in the deepest sense.'¹⁹⁰

Breslin writes about the distant space

In the closing years of the 1940's, Rothko

¹⁸⁷ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 276.

¹⁸⁸ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 276.

¹⁸⁹ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 276. My Italics.

¹⁹⁰ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 247.

in Rothko's paintings as something like '*solitude or death*'. This is the space or abode within which Rothko's '*spirit*' lurks, which is 'beyond transcendental longings' because it is still individuated, still part of the dialectic between life and death'.¹⁹² In allowing Rothko to occupy this liminal space between life and death he collapses the opposition - straddles and occupies the two poles. Rothko himself describes this 'movement' when painting his canvases:

entered a period of intense, painful, yet exhilarated search, no longer trying to concretise his symbols but trying to concretise his *work* by eliminating symbols and *realising* them through thinly painted areas of color that seemed to *pulse with an inner life of their own*.¹⁹¹

Rothko's reductions are about removing the "obstacles" between painter and work, between work and viewer; they are about ending separation, removing the "obstacles" to a more *immediate communication* about being "understood".¹⁹³

"One begins by sparring with his insides with one leg in the normal world," he went on. "Then you are caught up in a frenzy that brings you to the edge of madness, *as far as you can go without ever coming back*. The *return* is a series of dazed weeks during which you are only *half alive*."¹⁹⁴

<Pause>

Rothko, it seems, goes to the edge and back, moves back and forth from death to life within the process of creating his forms, ma(r)king his canvases. He 'realises' his own transcendental longings, the ability to transfer from pure consciousness to occupy his own creations. "Art is of the Spirit," Rothko had written in "The Scribble Book." ... Max Weber, had also praised the power of art to make "*dead or indifferent matter the very adobe*"¹⁹⁵ of spirit."¹⁹⁶

<Play> (again)

¹⁹¹ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 233. My italics.

¹⁹² Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 238-9. My italics.

¹⁹³ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 246-7.

¹⁹⁴ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 233. My italics.

¹⁹⁵ In the *Chambers Dictionary* 'Adobe' is defined as 'a house made from [sun dried] bricks'.

¹⁹⁶ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 244.

... Rothko splits viewing into an intimate, loving quickening gaze that comes close to fusing with its object and a cold, unconsciously hostile look that kills. He has now begun to think of the shapes in his work as living "organisms,"¹⁹⁷

... multiple colored shapes with open spaces between them allow differing sides, independent parts of the self, to coexist in a "life unity." The *self* is a "multiform."¹⁹⁸

Rothko let his inner vision emerge on the canvas, materialising it ... in expansive patches of color, *as if paint itself could speak*, could provide a language of the deep psyche.¹⁹⁹

<Pause>

In the chapter entitled 'An Art That Lives and Breaths', Breslin describes Rothko's *Untitled* (figure 3) as the painting which marks Rothko's progression into multiforms. As already mentioned, in one passage he compares this painting with an earlier self-portrait (figure 2).

<Play>

In *Untitled* (1948)... the two large red circular splotches above the centre resemble eyes, the horizontal red smear below them the mouth, the white above hair, the white below a nose, and the yellow oval to the right an ear The untitled painting of 1948, in fact, transforms - by *transcendentalizing* - Rothko's Self Portrait of the mid 1930's In [*Untitled*] imposing size is suggested, but the body looks weightless and buoyant - *on the verge of disembodiment*. The pink areas within and around the body may be a kind of *luminous flesh* or they may be ground color, in front of which features such as the eyes and mouth hover. The body's boundaries are thus indeterminate, and its solidarity doubtful, for it can be seen either as covered with a veil of pink flesh or an open containing empty spaces that invite us to look inside ...[at] a boneless "figure" ... composed of soft, rounded, warm, sensuous shapes that occupy a mysterious, shifting space ... Stable yet precarious, *Untitled* (1948) does not delineate a human figure or anything else substantial, but *evokes a kind of spiritualised human presence* which looks as though it has

¹⁹⁷Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 234.

¹⁹⁸Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 238.

¹⁹⁹Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 236. My italics.

either just come together or is about to come apart ... Colors break through, glow through, slip around the edges or, like the ghostly gray shapes within the rosy pink in the upper right corner, they *persist as shadowy presences* ... the paintings colorful surface [then] may be viewed as a construction, one which covers but does not entirely conceal something distant and impenetrable, something resistant to transcendental longings, something that just is - like solitude or *death*.²⁰⁰

Mobilising the figure, making it breath

again, but how? And whose figure?

The use of the third person pronoun

'one' explicitly places Rothko in the

frame. Breathing, stretching arms,

Rothko cites his own art as a metaphor

for himself. However in making

himself 'human' he also allows it to be

a shared 'experience'. Deep breath.

Life. Thank God. I thought I'd reached

the end of the tape. Don't want to drop

off into the abyss just yet. Cheers,

Mark.

For me the great achievements of the centuries in which the artist accepted the probable and familiar as his subjects were the pictures of the single human figure - *alone in a moment of utter immobility*.

But the solitary figure could not raise its limbs in a single gesture that might indicate its concern with the fact of mortality and an insatiable appetite for ubiquitous experience in face of this fact. Nor could the solitude be overcome....form[ing] a tableau vivant of human incommunicability.

I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of *ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again.*²⁰¹

<Pause>

In appropriating other voices I turn to Blanchot who, in *The Step Not Beyond*, refers obliquely to the perpetrators of modernist discourse, knowing that '... according to the law of the return - that only the name, the event, the figure of death, would give, at the moment of disappearing in it, a right to presence: this is why they said they were immortal.'²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 237-9. My italics.

²⁰¹ From *Possibilities*, No.1 Winter 1947/8, printed in *Mark Rothko* page 84.

²⁰² Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, page 12.

'Rothko' resurrects 'himself' as the figure of the universal being, his art pre- and post- supposes his death, and consequently his transcendental; his forms carry, via the prosopopoetic, the promise of an immaterial consciousness through the philosophical metaphor of light. Rothko's light, however bright, can not dazzle me into submission, believe in his transcendental subjectivity through which I can confirm my own. Girding my loins with deconstructive analysis I aim to show that the prosopopoetic figure can not illuminate the realm of knowledge; although it *is* visible as a metaphor, as a mask, form, it cannot deliver what it promises. When recently entering the Rothko Room at Tate Modern I remembered again what Derrida says about the prosopopoetic figure and how it constitutes 'An allegorical metonymy ... which says something other than what it says and manifests the other (*allos*) in the open but nocturnal space of the *agora* - in its *plus de lumière: at once no more light, and greater light.*'²⁰³ And Blanchot: 'The room was dark, not that it was obscure: the light was almost too visible, it did not illuminate.'²⁰⁴

The light undoes its own rhetoricity, the prosopopoetic figure dazzles us, through the lens of discursive blatherings, but it cannot hold its own, cannot keep Rothko within his abode (adobe); presence becomes irretrievable absence, which in turn cannot be mourned or articulated, as it falls back into the babble. This is too hard to take. It is easy to be seduced and it seems that I can only survive my viewing of his works if I take that leap of faith and believe somehow that Rothko can, and will, interact with my transcendental consciousness; as my own undoing is the possibility that I too am constituted by the same rhetorical structures as 'Rothko'. This impossibility of my own unravelling means that I still have to call 'Rothko', knowing that the answer will not be his, or mine, but will be empty words and concepts, transcribed within the annals of philosophical and cultural history.

"You will come again." - "I will come again." - "You won't come again." - "When you speak like that, I understand what it means: I

²⁰³ Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, page 37. My italics.

²⁰⁴ Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, page 13.

am here by the way of return, thus I am not here: and I understand that this would be in the past, in a time so ancient that there has never been a present to correspond to it, that you have been here.” - But I am here, you see that.” - “Yes, he said seriously, I am here on the condition that I forget that I’m here, remembering it one time, forgetting it another time, and just the same letting memory, forgetfulness, unfold themselves, close themselves back up, without anyone who remembers, who forgets.”²⁰⁵

I write, I read, I remember, I fall; I look for Rothko, I forget, and then I return.

²⁰⁵Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, page 17.

2.7 Working Through the Problems of (Auto)Biography with Paul de Man: 'Confer[ring] Anthromorphic Attributes Upon a Stone'.

In the throes of delusion, and within the confines of this section, I will begin an intellectual debate with a dead man - a ghostly presence. I will try and silence his distant yet incessant voice constantly reminding me what his works are *actually* about, referring me back *his* canvases, the forms, the subjectivity inherent in his shapes, the colour. Read any account of Rothko's work and you'll hear his 'voice', reverberating in the numerous quotations, speaking on his behalf. It *seems* that in order to discuss Rothko's abstract paintings you have always to deal with the artist's intentions - if you don't, what do you have left? His works are deemed so intrinsically 'personal', that if you remove 'Rothko' you remove the very ontological basis for his work. When discussing the importance given to the artists' own words by art historians' Kosuth warns us that:

Beneath the often condescending special status such texts are given (used, like art works are, *as nature* for the historians and critics to make culture from) there lies a kind of *philosophical unease*, as though Dracula may awaken, daylight or not, a professional stake through his heart or not; and ravage their countryside.²⁰⁶

So, what are we art historians doing when we allow Rothko a voice, what exactly are we trying to 'hide'? Let me repeat the statements by Mark Rothko

<Play>

I paint large pictures because I want to create a state of intimacy. *A large picture is an immediate transaction; it takes you in.*²⁰⁷

I would like to say something about large pictures, and perhaps touch on some of the points made by the people who are looking for a

²⁰⁶ Kosuth, *The Play of the Unsayable*, page 68. My italics.

²⁰⁷ Taken from Lecture given by Mark Rothko (1958) printed in *Mark Rothko*, page 87.

spiritual basis for communion.

I paint very large pictures....[because] I want to be very *intimate* and *human*...you paint a larger picture, *you are in it.* ²⁰⁸

I would sooner confer anthropomorphic attributes upon a stone, than dehumanise the slightest possibility of consciousness. ²⁰⁹

<Pause>

OK Rothko: these 'statements'; your intention was to figure consciousness in your work; to engage the viewer in some kind of consummate relationship between you and me/us, but you're dead now. So what have you to say about that?

According to Anna Chave, fundamental binaries are brought together in and by Rothko's work, 'giving' the viewer a comprehensive and consummate interaction with another consciousness - a shared 'experience' of birth and death, the polarities which mark the beginning

<Play>

...abstract figures could do (at the least) a double symbolic duty, that is, even where the symbols involved were opposing ones, such as birth and death. Rothko's image-sign enabled him to elide or dismantle such conventional binaries and present them not as polar opposites but as interconnected two sides of the same process or phenomenon.' ²¹⁰

<Pause>

and end of life. A physical and psychical state of consciousness, self knowledge and being, enveloped by two states of non-being. Rothko, you're so clever, a genius even. However, in being so clever, in stating your intentions so clearly, you've left yourself wide open. You've encroached onto another discipline - philosophy. I understand that you were influenced by the writings of Nietzsche. Good choice. Nevertheless, your philosophical machinations may be your undoing. Why? Because, as Kosuth pointed out:

The modernist project began as a process in which the self conceptualisation of a practice shifted not to see not just its own

²⁰⁸ From *Interiors* (May 1951) printed in *Mark Rothko*, page 85.

²⁰⁹ Mark Rothko, 'Personal Statement' [1945] printed in *Mark Rothko*, page 82.

²¹⁰ Chave, *Rothko Subjects in Abstraction*, pages 160-61.

limits, but institutionalise those limits as a form of self-knowledge. It is here that the practice of art took on a philosophical aspect....²¹¹

In trying to undo Rothko with his own philosophical terminology I appropriate Derrida who in 'Plato's Pharmacy', gives me the theoretical ammunition I need - *the pharmakon* - a 'drug', whose effect like that of the artwork, gives a:

spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination can be alternately or simultaneously - beneficent or maleficent. The *pharmakon* would be a substance - with all that a word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis already paving the way for alchemy....an *anti substance*....[operating] through seduction.²¹²

So you see Rothko, that which can give life can also take it away; it just depends on how you administer the *pharmakon*. Although I can look at your abstract work as producing a dialectical 'movement' between the polarities of life and death, delivering a shared human experience, I can also look at it as a rhetorical device that attempts to seduce and bewitch the viewer into believing that the ontological basis for your paintings is your 'voice'; a self-referentiality to the *name* Rothko. You were once a live, breathing being, but now you're just the ghost of a residual intelligence. Your ontological substance is anti-substance - in effect you dissolve yourself through the very act of bewitching the viewer. Your existence depends on your non-existence. Although your *pharmakon*-ical devices can, in effect, 'substitute the breathless sign for the living voice', you are based on alchemy; just an illusion. As Derrida states 'The *pharmakon* produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth.'²¹³ Your voice gives the illusion of speaking philosophical truths, imbuing your artistic form with life-giving powers. However, I know you're just a sham.

Your paintings, it seems, always reiterate and repeat the same theme: myth; martyrdom; mortality; and death. As you state yourself, your work has '[a]

²¹¹ Kosuth, *The Play of the Unsayable*, page 68.

²¹² Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', page 429.

²¹³ Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', page 437.

clear preoccupation with death,' and that '[a]ll art deals with intimations of mortality'.²¹⁴ This philosophical preoccupation, coupled up with your own troubled personal history and your eventual suicide, leads to a 'doubling', an *over-determination* of the subject of life and death in the viewing/interpretation of your work. Your paintings are usually life-size, your 'forms' correspond to the dimensions of the human figure, visualising it's demise and eventual resurrection. You give it *large* to the viewer Rothko. No chance of escape; message heard, loud and clear . Size, it seems, is everything.

Your life-giving 'forms' usually consist of four rectangular shapes incorporating a long thin light strip (usually at the top of the paintings). According to Chave this strip represents the resurrection of human consciousness after death. It's a figurative device which allows you, 'Rothko', to be 'placed' within your own work; figured within the materiality of the painting, as the 'trace' of your own 'inner' preoccupations. Rothko, you seem to have recreated yourself as an omnipresent 'presence': a Christ-like figure; a figure who magically redeems and restores your own 'subjectivity' for all to witness. By constantly repeating the form of the 'risen martyr', in your work, and by having your 'voice' constantly reiterated in the discourses about, and around, such a theme, you, the figure of Rothko, have become over-determined. Your 'persona' gives the painting an authorial voice; which, because of the circumstances surrounding your life and suicide, becomes a dismembered (and therefore strangely distant) voice; emitting from that unknown and feared other-space; the space of death. Looking at your work Rothko, I feel connected with your creative consciousness, your life and death, sharing one pure subjective moment. Or do I? Remember my initial response to your work: my fists are clenched.

We are supposed to feel very sad in front of this painting (figure 12), Rothko.

²¹⁴ Taken from Lecture given by Mark Rothko (1958) printed in *Mark Rothko*, page 87.

Does this mean that I, the viewing subject, necessarily engages with you, the spectre of Rothko, as a presence or form-less form (a voice from within form) connecting to your existential despair - the claustrophobia of being stuck within the babble? Does your suicide preempt any consideration of your work? It seems that you still 'exist' as a dismembered voice, even after your physical demise. Your paintings are viewed as living (prophetic) testaments to your enduring existential angst. The forms within them seem to act as a physical surrogate for the troubled psyche that is now absent. Whenever I address you Rothko, I always imagine myself stood in front of one of your paintings. So, I ask how can I move beyond this eternal return to Rothko's authorial voice, beyond this modernist idiom? What about Rothko's ability to bring together, within his abstract forms, the dialectic between life and death? Straddling the fierce gap between two polar opposites? What about Plato's *pharmakon*, that anti-substance which seduces, drugs the viewer into believing that she or he is interacting with the eternal consciousness of Rothko?

<Play>

[One of] a series of sombre paintings in tones of black and grey. These airless, lightless, nearly colourless paintings - the familiar floating rectangles reduced to two, their light quenched, their atmospheric ground removed.....have come to be known as the black paintings" probably as much because of the psychological responses they tend to evoke as the literal colour of the darkest parts of the canvases. Because they were dark paintings and because they were the last paintings of Rothko's career, there has been a tendency to connect them with the mood of despair used to explain his suicide'.²¹⁵

Rothko's 'earlier 'classic' pictures suffused with expansive, translucent atmosphere ... are tragic, because they evoke the sensual world and its dissolution into spirit (and/or death) As Robert Rosenblum remarked they pit, 'Rothko the monk' against 'Rothko, the voluptuary'. The choice is between two goods - the true essence of tragic drama. ... [therefore] No longer did the awareness of death give rise to an urge for life; now both were barely endurable. Rothko's growing anguish caused him to darken his palette. The atmosphere in most of his pictures turns oppressive, *making it difficult figuratively to breath and stretch.*'²¹⁶

<Pause>

²¹⁵ Antin, 'Biography', page 42.

²¹⁶ Sandler, 'Mark Rothko' in in *Mark Rothko 1903 - 1970*, pg 16.

The notion of alchemy as the ability to interject 'being' into mute matter is also present in Breslin's biography. The colours Rothko used were 'created' by him, by hand. The pigments were ground and mixed in order to get just the right hue for his multiforms. But, as argued above, Rothko didn't want to be known merely as a colourist, or a colour-field painter. He came from a long line of pharmacists, alchemists; the ability to create something magical, healing, or indeed lethal, was in his blood. This talent, along with his interest in philosophical (and theological²¹⁷) texts, 'allows' Breslin to construct a correlation between the two. He argues that Rothko's ability with the pestle and mortar was, and still is, synonymous with that of breaking down or 'pulverising' the distinction between concepts: between life and death.

Preoccupations with death, with the 'ability' to make his own colours, make them his, individuated within the process of alchemy, working within the space of the pharmacy, or indeed within the transcendental. As Clare Pajczkowska argues:

<Play>

To "pulverise [finite associations] is to "crush, grind, into a powder or dust", an activity familiar to Rothko, who in the late forties was grinding his own pigments with a pestle and mortar. ... This way he could ... *create his own colours*; and he could engage in an activity familiar to him from his boyhood in a turn-of-the-century Russian *pharmacy* where Jacob Rothkowitz ground his prescriptions in a mortar and pestle.²¹⁸

<Pause>

In the art, early science or magic of alchemy, the image is employed as an explanatory tool or diagram instructing us how to follow the alchemists' search for immutable truth, by turning *base matter* into the pure gold of the sublime. The mass of the Philosopher's Stone was thought to have the power of transmutation and that of prolonging human life indefinitely.²¹⁹

So can we smash the Philosopher's Stone (the epitaph)? Can we deconstruct

Rothko's abstract work, with a short swift blow to the 'subjectivity' that

²¹⁷According to Breslin, in *Mark Rothko*, Page 18, Rothko as a Russian Orthodox Jew '...[and as] the "chosen son" [was] subject to a strict, tedious regime, possibly starting as early as the age of three, of reading instruction, prayer, translation of Hebrew texts and rote memorisation of Talmudic law.'

²¹⁸Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, page 247. My Italics.

²¹⁹Pajczkowska, 'Art as a Symptom of Not Dying', pages 75-6.

created it? Does the constant loop of the tape mean that we can never remove his 'voice', and what does that tell us about our own subjectivity when viewing such a work? What about the seductive, entrancing qualities of his work, will they thwart our deconstructive advances - stop us in our stride? Is the *pharmakon* too strong to resist?

Can I go beyond the dialectic of life and death and somehow access the unsignifiable/unsayable aspect of Rothko's artistic form? Can I access the babble? If I do, what will I find? Will I be able to articulate it? Is it necessary for it to be reinscribed in artistic discourse for it to be translated and understood? Return to the tape-loop? If I find the spectre of absence emerging and interjecting itself into the materiality of the form; will it again become presence or 'being' existing beyond the materiality of the art-work yet also inhabiting it? Will Rothko's spectre ever be removed? And if I do remove this figure of introjection, this figure of another subjectivity, will I then move over to the space of death, of non-subjectivity? Over to Kosuth again:

As we *name art* we name the world, and make visible the self. *The language of information* - even in its most philosophical form - is incapable of such *descriptions*: the self and the world, within the realm of such language, shares no empirical moment.²²⁰

According to Kosuth, any interpretation is forced upon the art-object; a philosophical 'perception' which is not about the art-work in-itself, but about the perception of the world and the self, not of the artist, but of the viewer. Any message the art-work 'offers' is not about the lost moment of artistic creation or intention but about the need of the viewer to understand him or herself in relation to the world which it surveys. The viewer that beholds Rothko's paintings is unwittingly engaging with the cultural and linguistic structures that hold his or her subjectivity 'together'.

What is it about us, as art historians and theoreticians, that seeks 'meaning'

²²⁰Kosuth, *The Play of the Unsayable*, page 67.

within the domain of the dead, a domain which will offer, but never deliver, signification? We seek meanings from the spectre of the artist, we try and interact with the inaccessible. We 'begin' the journey 'into' the painting, but we are thwarted: by the inanimate materiality of the art-object (as the materiality of Rothko - now dead) and because we can never 'experience' the death of another. We try to prolong Rothko's life by giving a transcendental origin to his 'voice'. But in effect by deferring his death we are, in effect, deferring our own. Heidegger states that:

The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just 'there alongside'.... When someone has died, his Being-no-longer-in-the world...*is still a Being...in the sense of the Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more of a corporeal Thing which we encounter.... The end of the entity qua Dasein is the beginning of the same entity qua something present-at-end.*²²¹

We ask Rothko's work to 'talk' about life and death without acknowledging that it is our own desiring voice that we hear. We give this disembodied voice a canvas, a mouth, one that has been created by the hand that now exists 'elsewhere'. Rothko has made the passage between life and death; a passage which up to this moment has been experientially denied to us. However the 'voice' can never deliver that 'experience', it can only reiterate and repeat the same philosophical rhetoric. Like a stuck record it can never go beyond the phonic sound, the surface of the paint; it can never allow us to visit a space which will obliterate our very being.

As discussed in chapter 1, de Man calls this 'voice' *prosopopeia* - a figure which 'acts' as the subject(ivity) of (auto)biography, through which, the name of the dead artist takes on a personality, gives the paintings' their characteristic form, speaks on after, and about, death. This structure remains, like the subject, tropological, but is presented (through philosophical discourse) as being transcendental.

²²¹ Quoted in Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, page 69.

It is this 'transcendental' remainder of 'Rothko', his Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more, that I will now explore.

Rothko's voice is heard once more, lifted from the tape-loop:

OK Rothko, so your paintings are meant <Play>

to 'live' for all their preoccupations
with death - being within non-being -
formlessness within form - animating

For me the great achievements of the centuries in which the artist accepted the probable and familiar as his subjects were the pictures of the single human figure - *alone in a moment of utter immobility.*

the mute figure who, up to the moment
of your introjection can only ever see.

But the solitary figure could not raise its limbs in a single gesture that might indicate its concern with the fact of mortality and an insatiable appetite for ubiquitous experience in face of this fact. Nor could the solitude be overcomeform[ing] a tableau vivant of human incommunicability.

You give it a voice: your voice. What a sociable chap you are. It's good to talk -

talk about yourself in relation to your
work. Olney states that, within
autobiography, the *impulse* is to move

I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of *ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again.*²²²

from mute material to animated

<Pause>

consciousness, and back again, within the dialectic. It is to know oneself as both individuated and universal, as *face*: '...man explores the universe continually for laws and forms not of his own making, but what, in the end, he always finds in his own face: a sort of ubiquitous, inescapable man-in-the-moon which, if he will, he can recognise as his own mirror-image.'²²³

Olney also states that:

The Self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it now is before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we "know" the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorising.²²⁴

²²² From *Possibilities* No.1 Winter 1947/8 printed in *Mark Rothko*, page 84.

²²³ Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, pg 4.

²²⁴ Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, pp 30-31.

We do not ever 'see' the self. We only *realise* the metaphor and believe it to be ours alone; individualisation through a universalising metaphor. What is it then that constitutes the artist 'Rothko' or indeed the 'viewer' - 'me', 'us'?

De Man argues that the metaphor of 'being' will always slip *between* the material and the transcendental rather than cross between the two in a slick dialectic. In Derridian terms there is no crossing between *ergon* and *paragon*. You can not transgress the frame, only teeter on the edge. Don't look down. Any voice can only 'exist' in a safe space, a space that is not in excess of the dialectic. The voice's 'origin' can only be found within a tropological abyss, within the babble, never reaching being or non-being - existence or non-existence - only covering the gap.

Because we 'project' our inner 'voice' *out* through tropological figuration we place ourselves *into* language. We need to disguise our lack of 'being' beyond any linguistic system by convincing ourselves that we can attain complete self-knowledge and self-reflexivity - deny the gap. But we need other 'beings' in order to attain this. Writing, creating, putting objects into the world enables us to do this, 'reach' out not only out to other people, but back into ourselves.

This semiotically induced 'Rothko' comes to us with the 'ability' to reach *into us*, the viewing subject, and confirm our interiority, our sense of self. This force within the image, according to Derrida, 'sees, as if it were seeing as much as seen.'²²⁵ The subject 'knows' that it has been acknowledged; our own image of ourselves confirmed through the 'eyes' of another autonomous being. As Derrida states: 'the force of the image has to do less with the fact that one sees something in it than with the fact that one is seen there in it. The image sees more than it is seen. The images looks at us.'²²⁶ The corporeal Rothko does not have to exist in order to have a 'voice'; what is important to

²²⁵ Derrida, *By Force of Mourning*, page 177.

²²⁶ Derrida, *By Force of Mourning*, page 188.

the subject viewing his work is the subjective mirroring of its own self-perception through the artist's eyes, the confirmation of its own interiority by 'recognising' the face of Rothko. Rothko's abstract painting, and the discourse that wraps itself around the image, acts as a substitute for another-consciousness, one that can be interrogated and 'known'. The signification of the image does not come from Rothko as the foundational or original object, but from its imaginal transfiguration *within* the subject as text/metaphor. This means that the ontological foundation of any image (including Rothko's) is *phantasmatic*. The power, the force of the art-object comes from the exchange between the artist Rothko, who is absent, and the semiotic alterity that takes his place. According to de Man this semiotic alterity:

belong[s] to a simple mode of referentiality, of representation and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but their *deviations from reality* remain rooted in a *single subject* whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his *proper name*.²²⁷

The artistic figure of Rothko, his re-presented inner-life is presented through and by his artistic and philosophical endeavour, enveloped by his *proper name*. The 'figuration' of his life, displayed within the idiom of his painting, becomes theoretically impossible to disengage from the figure of his artistic persona. This dialectic between Rothko as a figure and a once-corporeal body collapses, covering up the gap beneath, allowing 'Rothko' to remain as the ontological foundation of his work. Here, as Derrida states, the dialectics is the passage between:

(1) *antidotes (alexipharmaka)* which can be either human or divine and (2) *problems (problemata)*: what stands before one - obstacles, shelters, armours, shields, defences. Leaving antidotes aside, The Stranger pursues the division of the *problemata*, which can function either as armaments or fences. The *fences (phragmata)* are screens or protections (*alexeteria*) against storm or heat; these *protections* can be housings or coverings; *coverings* can be spread below (like rugs) or wrapped around etc. The process of division goes on through the different techniques of manufacturing these wraps until it reaches the woven garment

²²⁷ de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement' page 80.

and the art of weaving; the *problematic* space of protection.²²⁸

The materiality of Rothko's work houses and protects his dialectical machinations. His paintings are deemed highly 'personal' yet only manifest their 'being' when articulated within a discursive environment, blurring and obliterating the definition between outer/inner, enabling the protective dialectic to weave its spell. The notion of inner/outer experience has been manipulated in order to produce the metaphor, substituting the external painting for the inner 'Rothko'. Time and personal history have been conflated into one single artistic expression/name, which then inscribes itself as a universal 'expression' of heightened consciousness, an essential being which becomes what Derrida calls a *Cryptogram*: that which takes shelter in a crypt.

According to de Man, however, it is impossible for autobiographical statements to reveal reliable self-knowledge. Instead, they demonstrate the 'impossibility of closure and totalisation' (*the impossibility of coming into being*). As far as de Man is concerned this is due to the fact all textual systems - into which we create illusions of self-knowledge - are based purely on a complex series of tropological substitutions which are asymmetrical, numerous and excessive to any protective dialectic. This frightening and exposed excess, that which exists beyond the dialectic of life and death, between viewer and dead artist, thereby generates a 'force', a phantasmic noise which does not form any coherent words - babble. As Derrida argues, 'the effect of the image would stem from the fantastic force of the spectre, and from the supplement of *force*; and *the increase becomes fantastic at the very heart of lack*.'²²⁹ Rothko's 'voice' increases in volume not from his ontological presence but because it 'exists' in a space beyond that of the dialectic, beyond the symmetrical positioning of life and death. His spectre rises from the very heart of excess as lack.

²²⁸ Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', page 442.

²²⁹ Derrida, *By Force of Mourning*, page 182.

The private thoughts and intentions spoken through the 'voice' of Rothko, taken as essentially 'human', are always *articulated* through tropological substitution as infinitely knowable - thereby moving from trope to trope in an never-ending loop of reference. As viewing subjects, however, we cannot allow ourselves to believe that this referentiality can move us beyond the dialectic of life and death. In doing so we move ourselves into the same unstable deathly space. As Derrida argues:

This substitution, which thus functions as a pure play of traces or supplements or, again, operates within the order of the pure signifier which no reality, no absolutely external reference, no transcendental signified, can come to limit, bound or control: this substitution, which could be judged as "mad" since it can go on infinitely in the element of the linguistic permutation of substitutes, of substitutes for substitutes: this unleashed chain is nevertheless not lacking in violence.²³⁰

Violence, that is, to subjectivity.

De Man demonstrates that the meanings effected via autobiographical statements are not based on a personal situation, or event, located in history but are an aspect of the *moment of viewing*. In approaching Rothko's work we are relying, not on Rothko's own experience, but on its linguistic/artistic substitution, circulating within an endless tropological structure; the tape-loop. This unending tropological movement constitutes *all* understanding; it does not end with the authorial 'voice' but moves beyond into infinite regress. Therefore, de Man reveals the specular moment between artist and viewer as one within which both 'parties' confirm and undermine each other's fictivity.

By emphasising autobiography's insistence on the *subject, proper name, memory, birth, eros and death* - and on the *doubleness of the specular moment* - de Man shows how the fiction of autobiography openly declares its cognitive and tropological constitution, yet also shows how it almost seems to escape from the coercions of that system. Rothko, like any other perpetrator

²³⁰ Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', page 434.

of (auto)biography, is obsessed with the need to 'move from cognition to resolution and then to action'. 'Rothko', as a 'proper name' and a 'signature' of authenticity within a tropological system, posits its philosophical and artistic actions as interchangeable. It operates (impossibly) within the tropological system of the name, and moves from ontological identity to contractual promise, delivering 'Rothko' to the viewing subject. This constitutes a *transcendental authority* - the artist 'Rothko' having the authorial clout to deliver his own philosophically couched 'life' as a knowable entity.

The 'form' of the painting has projected onto (into) it, the figure of this authoritative 'being'. The artistic 'signature', the proper name of Rothko, delivers the 'life' of that artist to the viewer. This authoritative 'being' thereby displaces the tropological nature of the artistic text, and takes on the illusion of transcendentality.

The autobiographical components in Rothko's work stand 'in memorium' as a testament to his being a 'being-in-the-world'. His abstract work becomes, in effect, an epitaph, and, what's more, an epitaph written by Rothko himself; the discourse that circulates around his work is 'sustained beyond and in spite of deprivation'. Any interpretations of his work will maintain the transcendental authority of Rothko's signature. The myths and concepts he used (of death and mortality, of portraiture) become tropological figures which manifest as Rothko's own 'poetic self'; a self that will forever be poetic.

This self, because of its rhetorical/tropological nature, can sustain the death of the corporeal Rothko - restoring and repeating itself time and time again through its proper name, and through the 'voice' of artistic discourse. The distance between Rothko who is contained within a corporeal body and 'Rothko' which constitutes transcendental authority is converted and closed via a series of tropological transformations that 'leave the negativity of the

initial relationship (or lack of relationship) intact' - this allows for the 'movement' between death or life to life and death.

For de Man the large overarching metaphor for this entire tropological system is *the sun in motion*. According to Breslin, Rothko alighted on the same metaphor for the affect/effect of his painting:

Rothko, it seems, wanted his own presence, his own being, to radiate from his canvases. Within this system of metaphors, the sun becomes more than a mere natural object - relayed

<Play>

...he wanted a *presence*, so that when you turned your back to the painting, you would *feel that presence* the way you feel the sun on your back.²³¹

<Pause>

by the trope of light, the sun becomes a figure of knowledge, the emblem of 'the mind with absolute sovereignty upon itself'.²³²

Knowledge and mind imply language and account for the relationship set up between the sun and the text of the epitaph. Epitaphs, like canvases, *work* at being 'open to the day' with the sun *looking* 'down upon the stone'. The sun (as the knowledgeable eye) becomes the organ that reads the text of the epitaph. However, the epitaph can consist only of 'the naked name' (or proper name). As the epitaph is read by the sun the stone becomes a *speaking stone* in that it acquires a *voice*. And thus: 'the speaking stone counterbalance[es] the seeing sun. The tropological system passes, sun to eye to language as name and voice'.²³³

The name 'Rothko' calls up his spectre, which in itself is a empty prosopopoetic figure. 'Rothko' thereby constitutes a '... fiction of an *apostrophe* to an absent, [a] deceased or voiceless entity which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech'.²³⁴

Prosopopeia 'gives' Rothko's paintings a face - which in turn sees and

²³¹ Quoted in Breslin 'Out of the body: Mark Rothko's paintings', page 47.

²³² Wordsworth '3rd Essay' quoted in de Man 'Autobiography as de-facement', page 75.

²³³ de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', page 75.

²³⁴ de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', page 70.

speaks. This is the trope of autobiography, by which, Rothko's 'being' is made as intelligible and memorable as a name carved upon the stone of the epitaph, or a mural on a gallery wall. De Man argues however, that although prosopopeia gives the artistic medium a face, in the same tropological movement it also defaces. It is a metaphor which both figures and disfigures. It supplants life as visage, but does so onto a foundation-less origin, a *hauntological* 'origin'.

De Man argues that in terms of style and narrative prosopopeia is also the figure of delicate translation. The gradual transformations that occur in 'reading' the text/image happen in such a way that 'feelings [that] seem opposite to each other have another and finer connection than that of contrast'.²³⁵ The fear of non-being, the infinite signification that opens up the gap between life and death, is matched and 'silenced' by the tropological affirmation of life - a movement that proceeds in a dialectical motion, through a series of (seemingly) seamless and gliding displacements. As Derrida has pointed out: 'the *magic* of writing and painting is like a cosmetic concealing the dead under the appearance of the living ... it makes the corpse presentable.'²³⁶

Rothko's canvases can again be posited as a 'bewitching' entity which conceal the un-representable void: *that which does not contain life*. This happens through the figurative framework of substitution and replacement, the excess of which leaves a material trace which does not conform to Rothko's life/death dialectic. Through the figure of prosopopeia, however, this excess is denied and forgotten, it remains unspoken. It is as if this excessive art-object can hypnotise the viewing subject into a kind of aphasic trance. We have been bewitched by the *pharmakon*.

De Man argues that: 'the latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the death speak the symmetrical structure of the trope implies by

²³⁵ de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', page 76.

²³⁶ Derrida, *Disseminations*, page 142.

the same token that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death. The surmise of the “pause Traveller!” [or in our case “Stop in front of this painting!”] thus acquires a sinister connotation that is not only the prefiguration of one’s own mortality but our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead’.²³⁷ This is the space beyond the dialectic which undermines and underlies *all* tropological systems. The inscription of prosopopeia into the cognitive, solar system of self-knowledge however removes this threat of the fictivity of the self, veils its deadly and rhetorical nature and ‘replaces’ it with the voice of a once-living being; one who has transcendental authority to speak on its own behalf. The loss of this being would be too much to bear for the viewing subject who has an incessant need to reaffirm itself in the eyes of this authority. By covering this lack, the figure of prosopopeia lures the subject into the image, via the fiction of address. However, once it interpellates the viewer, it cannot fully deliver a ‘force’ of being. Instead, the silence is broken only by the constant and unearthly repetition of the authorial (in this case Rothko’s) voice. A repetition whose foundation lies in the domain of philosophical and artistic rhetoric.

The language of restoration, of resurrection, works ‘unremittingly and *noiselessly*’ to the extent that, according to de Man, when we use language to deliver meaning ‘...we all are deaf and mute - not silent, which implies the possible manifestation of sound at our own will, but silent as a picture, that is to say eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness’.²³⁸ We can never speak for our inner-selves, we have to use tropes to speak on *our behalf*. Rothko’s voice therefore never speaks to us, or of himself, his paintings only reiterate socially contrived, philosophical, idioms. Death therefore ‘is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (prosopopeia of the name and the voice) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores.’²³⁹ We listen to Rothko’s voice whilst looking at his images, in order to restore a

²³⁷ de Man, ‘Autobiography as de-facement’, page 78.

²³⁸ de Man, ‘Autobiography as de-facement’, page 80.

²³⁹ de Man, ‘Autobiography as de-facement’, page 72.

'knowledge' of the inner-self. But what we get instead are stock answers to an indominatable problem. So, what's this problem? Well, it's this: If we deconstruct and dismantle, and thereby 'remove', Rothko's voice we will be struck dumb when we approach his paintings. The dialogue stops and we end up undifferentiated. And if we don't, then we are forever stuck within a tropological system which will offer us the route to transcendence but only deliver us metaphysical cliches. What would be left if Rothko's voice was removed? Would the unlettered epitaph leave the sun suspended in nothingness? Would our own passage into language and self knowledge (however facile) also be suspended?

Jonathan Dollimore argues that:

It is ironic that, far from being the critical act of demystification which it [post-modernism] often aspires to be, the explanatory model at work here - from unity, fullness and freedom to disunity, crisis and fragmentation - echoes, often unawares and in secular form, one of the founding myths of Western-European culture, and of Western subjectivity, namely the Fall. We repeat this Fall narrative imagining it as the narrative of the ending of something, whereas in fact it is *the narrative of its continuation*.²⁴⁰

A continuation! Is that good or bad? I'm confused, I need the *pharmakon*, Jacques. It seems that Rothko's voice will eternally return, theoretically unravelled but never fully silenced, whilst ever I stand in front of his paintings and mutter the name Rothko under my breath. The spectre of Rothko 'reemerging' with any attempt to interpret his work. Or do I just resign myself and join him in the abyss of post-modernism, having now to observe ourselves, as ghosts - operating on a level of nothingness. Or, by falling apart, do I inadvertently reconstruct myself?

Here's Derrida again:

Anamesic dialectics, as the repetition of the *eidos* [the interjected idol/mask] cannot be distinguished from self-knowledge and self-

²⁴⁰ Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, page 91.

mastery. Those are the best forms of exorcism that can be applied against the terrors of the child faced with death and the quackery of the bogeymen. Philosophy consists of offering reassurance to children. That is, if one prefers to take them out of childhood, or of forgetting about the child, or, inversely, by the same token, of speaking first and foremost for the little boy within us, of teaching him to speak - to dialogue - by displacing his fear or his desire.²⁴¹

You see, Rothko, when I address you, I'm actually facing (and de-facing) my own non-being: that which blocks my understanding of your work.

Summary

In this chapter I have further explored the concept of *origin* through the theories of de Man and Derrida. Given that I argue that the subject is constituted through and by rhetorical structures and is therefore only ever partial and protean, the problematic which will be woven throughout the remainder of my thesis is this: Where does subjectivity, life and death, exist begin and end - i.e. what constitutes origin? In trying to understand this dilemma I have engaged primarily with the work of, and discourses circulating around, Mark Rothko. 'Beginning' with the biographical statements on Rothko, where the moment of his death (the end) is present from the start of the text, I have explored how the themes of mortality, and overcoming (death), constitute the interpretative framework for Rothko's paintings. Such themes, I have argued, that are constantly *repeated* through interpretations of his work and life, validate the illusion that his paintings come and speak to us from a 'deathly' yet individuated place. It has been the purpose of this chapter to reveal how interpretations of Rothko's life and work constantly return to Rothko's deathly preoccupations in order to perpetually resurrect the figure of Rothko, and thereby cover the lack of an ontological or essential origin. I have argued that in articulating death as a universal and surmountable entity, the paintings of Rothko are offered to us as epitaphic receptacles for his transcendental subjectivity. By utilising de Man's notion of *prosopopeia* and Derrida's theory of the *pharmakon* I have

²⁴¹Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', page 442.

unpacked the philosophical precepts used by Rothko and his critics, to show how the spectre of the artistic figure does not rely on the corporeal existence or preoccupations of Rothko but on his tropological (and partial) substitution. A substitution which has no beginning or end, but is constantly renewed, reframed and reconfigured within discursive structures. What 'interacts' with the viewing subject, I have argued, is not an identical autonomous subjectivity, but a rhetorically induced and vacillating substitute; with the artistic signature in this case the name 'Rothko', acting as the underpinning of his still-being-in-the-world (as origin). What are articulated by Rothko's paintings are the preoccupations of the modernist idiom within which he operated: the obsessions of a society which could not face the fiction of its own realities.

Chapter 3

Michaux's Insomnia : The Plenitude of the Void

3. 1 Uncoordinated leaps through Modernist discourse

If thought searches, it is less in the manner of someone who possesses a method than that of a dog that seems to be making uncoordinated leaps.²⁴¹

Michaux's (*First*) *Mescaline Painting* (Figure 13) is a small oil painting, approximately 18 x 14 cm in size. Applied to unprepared wood, the oil paint seeps into the grain making the colours and forms ambiguous and ill-defined. It is difficult to ascertain what it is a painting of; neither figurative or abstract it seems to evoke rather than describe or represent. On first viewing it seems akin to a murky, gaseous universe or an imaginary planetscape. Faces come forward only to fade into the background. This image is not static, it will not cohere either as subject matter or as surface matter. The colours Michaux applied seem unearthly even though he used mainly earthy browns and yellows.

... the colors used by Michaux are, in general, seldom conclusively asserted. Prissy pinks, brownish and olive-greenish tints, celadons, pale turquoises, saffron yellows, glints rather than sources of light, and in truth not very straightforward, rather cowardly, almost sickly - these all do their part to send the gaze into a state of indecision, a perceptible wavering between well-being and uneasiness, always irresponsible.²⁴²

Does this image resemble an endopsychic²⁴³ or external 'vision'? How do you begin to write about an image like this? This particular image was found in a rather flimsy catalogue,²⁴⁴ nothing is written about it which will guide us to its meaning, what it is about, how it fits into the artistic discourse of its day. All I can find out about it, gleaned from the most basic of information, is that it is the very first oil painting executed by Michaux after he had taken the drug mescaline in 1954. Full stop.

²⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 55.

²⁴² Rodari, 'L'Homme de Plume' in *Untitled Passages* by Henri Michaux, page 180.

²⁴³ An endopsychic image would be of an internal 'experience' which is then taken as 'psychic' or 'psychedelic'.

²⁴⁴ Catalogue of the *Henri Michaux* exhibition held at the Whitechapel Gallery, 1999.

Though there are several things written about Michaux's literary importance, and are many things written about his use of drugs, it is very difficult to apply them to his drawings and paintings without sounding rather unorthodox, quirky even. I have read as much about Michaux and as much of his literary output as possible, including his poetry and writings about him: there is a short section in about Michaux's use of mescaline in Malcolm Bowie's biography *Michaux*²⁴⁵ the occasional, if sustained, mention in Sadie Plant's *Writing on Drugs*,²⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*,²⁴⁷ and David Boothroyd's article 'Deconstruction and Drugs: A Philosophical/Literary Cocktail.'²⁴⁸ Occasionally his drawings get mentioned in the popular press, for example in Adrian Searle's 1999 (*Guardian*) article 'Who needs drugs, when you can paint like this?'.²⁴⁹ However, the most comprehensive guide to his drawings came out only months before the completion of this thesis, a catalogue²⁵⁰ written to coincide with an exhibition of his work held at the Drawing Centre in New York, from October to December 2000. It would seem that an increased interest in Michaux's drawings and paintings is beginning. However, because there is as yet no substantial published discourse about his drawings it is difficult to know where to place them within already established frameworks of understanding the artistic production from this period.

Also any mention of Michaux's use of drugs and their effect(s) on his work is usually brief and fractured, embarrassed even. Often used to give the prose a certain philosophical playfulness, wrestling concepts from their 'safe' ground in an attempt, it seems, to evoke some kind of obscure and transgressive 'reality'. A reality, it is believed, that Michaux experienced himself but we that can only *begin* to imagine by confronting his images. To fully engage with these images would, it seems, be admitting to taking drugs

²⁴⁵ Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A Study of his Literary Works*, pages 151 - 170.

²⁴⁶ Plant, *Writing on Drugs*, pages 138, 145-8, 157-8, 189, 193, 202.

²⁴⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pages 283, 285, 286.

²⁴⁸ Searle, 'Deconstruction and Drugs: A Philosophical/Literary Cocktail' in *The Guardian*, February 23rd, 1999.

²⁴⁹ Boothroyd, 'Deconstruction and Drugs: A Philosophical/Literary Cocktail' in *Deconstruction: A Users Guide*, pages 49 - 62.

²⁵⁰ *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, edited by Catherine de Zegher.

yourself, even if you never did inhale. Michaux and drugs, according to divergent speculations, are constantly entangled in a kind of frenzied and chiasmatic coupling which somehow, it is argued, exceeds safe (philosophical) territory, projecting and visualising the act 'into' some dangerous other-space, a 'space' which 'exists' (paradoxically) within and without the intimate brute viscerality of their encounter. Yet such an encounter can only be approached from a distance by a sober public, never experienced full-force in the same way that Michaux experienced it.

Michaux's words were devices and techniques for extending and exploring the worlds opened by his drugs. 'Perhaps Michaux has never tried to express anything' wrote Octavia Paz. 'All his efforts have been directed at reaching that zone, by definition indescribable and incommunicable, in which meanings disappear. A centre at once completely empty and completely full, a total vacuum and a total plenitude.'²⁵¹

Michaux himself is not free of blame in positing this ambiguous 'space'. He wrote various books on the subject, including *The Space Within*, *The Distant Interior*, *Infinite Turbulence* and *Life Among the Folds*.²⁵² These texts poetically evoke and trace the effects of mescaline in an attempt to demonstrate how it radically altered his sense of 'self' and 'reality'; (dis)²⁵³ articulating how it transmuted his relationship with 'normal' time, space and speed; and placed him(self) within some 'other' 'meaning-less' zone.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Plant, *Writing on Drugs*, page 146.

²⁵² Selections from all these works can be found in *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology 1927 - 1984*, selected, translated and presented by David Ball.

²⁵³ I say '(dis)articulating' because once the 'self' is dislocated through the use of drugs it loses the ability to articulate itself. It could be argued, however, as I do many times in this thesis, that there is never such a thing as a fully articulate 'self'; the 'self' only leaves traces within a multitude of often contradictory signifiers.

²⁵⁴ Another way that this can be theoretically thought through is by utilising de Man's notion of 'irony' (see *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Temporality*, pages 208 - 228]; it is within Michaux's search for an 'authentic' self that he 'trips' and falls into an indeterminate 'space'. De Man argues that there is an ironic twofold self which '... comes into being only at the expense of his empirical self ... [yet] ... Nature can at all times treat him as though he were a thing and remind him of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even in the smallest particle of nature into something human.' This happens when the self in question trips and falls, closing the distance between himself and 'nature'. Later he argues that 'The whole process (of the fall) happens at an unsettling speed.' This, I would argue, is the point at which Michaux becomes dis-located into a non-space through his use of drugs, the point at which he becomes 'non-human'.

But for the duration of this chapter I want to concentrate on the drawings, even though his writing will encroach into my understanding of them.

Throughout the 1950s Michaux produced a series of drawings which attempt to visually map his use of mescaline. Entitled *Dessin Mescalinién*, and in the late 60s *Dessin de réagrégation*, these are images *through* which he traced, and re-traced, memories of his drug-induced experiences. Michaux had broken the 'law',²⁵⁵ put his life at risk, all for his 'art', and he didn't, it seems, give a damn. By representing his experiences he believed that he was in pursuit of something *real*, if dangerous and precarious - experiencing and re-experiencing the 'authentic' space which lays *beyond* the conventional use of the symbolic.²⁵⁶ But how can such experiencing and re-experiencing be re-presented: as something will surely escape one's ability to represent and, indeed, one's understanding? How can we begin to talk about such individual, ambiguous, excessive and intimate moments?

We can begin by thinking about drugs, as substances which radically alter the taker's state(s) of consciousness. Constantly coalescing with the already exhausted exploration of 'death' as a cultural taboo, taking or experimenting with drugs seems to be one of the last social and cultural 'unmentionables' that's always getting mentioned either in relation to its transgressive nature or its ability to facilitate excesses in behaviour and experience. One way or another, we are told, follow the *line* of drugs and it'll lead you to 'death'; either as the physical cessation of the functional body and/or as the aporetic 'other' space of the indescribable. And once 'there' there is no way back;

even by trying to re-trace the erratic marks left on paper by the artist on

²⁵⁵ When I say 'law' here I am not only referring to the law as proclaimed through institutions such as the judicial system, but also Aristotle's three laws of thought: The Law of Identity: A is A: Everything is itself.

The Law of Noncontradiction: Nothing can be both A and not-A.

The Law of Excluded Middle: Everything is either A or not-A.

(*An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* by J. Hospers, page 108.)

This law denies any notion of deviance, of difference or of leakage (say of concepts) where something can be both A and -A.

²⁵⁶ This idea of articulating something beyond that inscribed within the cultural framework of articulation is paradoxical in that Michaux uses the conventional medium of drawing to articulate this 'authentic space' - which, as I have already argued, is *both* within yet without its articulation(s), (see previous footnote).

drugs: Michaux. So, what's the point of going any further if all you get is gaps and fissures; a confusing flux of useless information leading to the void which escapes being known or experienced? Can we obtain anything else from Michaux's drawings apart from the oblique and unrealisable traces he left behind? To reiterate Deleuze's now famous question: 'How do you get out of a black hole?'²⁵⁷ Why look at the work of a strung-out Belgian/French artist who, until recently, only played the part of a stagehand at the pantomime known as Modernist art history?²⁵⁸ Is understanding or discussing his work that important when there are other, more 'worthy' and straight forward, artists to write about, ones whose work is already placed within established frameworks of interpretation? I was once told of the general apathy amongst art historians when it comes to writing about artists such as Michaux. It seems that 'the French do not write about that period and the Americans do not care.'²⁵⁹ '[Michaux's] place in world literature and art [is] secure, but difficult to define. Michaux [stands] alone.'²⁶⁰ Even if we try to position Michaux's art in relation to that of his contemporaries it is difficult. The task seems enormous given the lack of theoretical texts, or indeed art historical accounts, on this artist and his work. When he is mentioned it is always in order to 'define' his work in relation to what it is *not*, in effect keeping it always-undefined.

²⁵⁷ Deleuze asks 'How do you get out from a black hole?' quoted in *Angelaki*, volume 5 number 2 August 2000, page 32.

²⁵⁸ Greenberg never mentions Michaux, although he does mention his contemporaries Dubuffet and Fautrier on several occasions. When discussing mid-twentieth-century French art he splits the artists into two 'camps': those who followed Picasso and those who followed Klee. Both Dubuffet and Fautrier are associated with the latter. An example of the derisory way Greenberg mentions such artists is:

'... the two main tendencies of the European version of painterly abstraction, which ... emerged during the war. In Europe, too, painterly abstraction presses towards the three dimensional; but if one tendency leans, like our "homeless representation," towards the three-dimensionality of illusion, the other leans towards the literal three-dimensionality of piled-on paint, and for its part could be called "furtive bas-relief" For the rest, painterly abstraction in Europe has likewise degenerated into an affair largely of mannerisms, whether those of "furtive bas-relief" or those of "homeless representation". And there, too, a vast quantity of abstract art that is bad because mannered is relieved, within the orbit of the mannerisms, only by felicitous minor art.' (Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957 - 1969*. Page 125.)

²⁵⁹ Personal communication with Serge Guilbaut 28/11/98.

²⁶⁰ Ball, Introduction to *Darkness Moves* (by Henri Michaux), page ix.

As Michaux's [art] practice remains unclassifiable, it seems to escape a connection to the Abstract Expressionists as much as to the Surrealist Movement.²⁶¹

I want to write about Michaux's mescaline drawings without falling into the fatigued phraseology of modernist hyperbole, without reducing his drawings to notions of expression, 'originality' or as attempts to convey some kind of metaphysical idea or meaning. This, however, is a difficult task, especially given that Michaux executed these drawings when modernism, as *the* framework for understanding modern art, was at its zenith (1954 - 57) and because, as a value system, it seems to consume all work of 'worth' produced during that particular period. Nevertheless, even though it would seem folly, indeed indigent, to incorporate Michaux's work into this homogenised framework of explanation, it is difficult not to slip back into the modernist, primarily Kantian, understanding of form as related to, yet *divisible from* matter, as well as reduce perception to re-presentation, as the impossibility of reaching, through representation the noemic, the 'in-itselfness' of the thing itself, painting or object.²⁶² According to Kant the objective appreciation art objects leads to its *abstraction, idealisation and reduction*, to its formal 'qualities', thereby leaving the existence of the object-itself obsolete and largely unnecessary. Once the object has caused an 'aesthetic' sensation in the viewer it can be discarded, because the important elements have been extracted and placed within frameworks of appreciation and interpretation.

This Kantian legacy will be discussed in a later section of this thesis, although it would be impossible to dispel in a few short sentences the modernist legacy, given the plethora of considerable intellects already engaged in such a project. Michaux's drawings, however, compel one to

²⁶¹ de Zegher, 'Adventure of Ink' in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 169.

²⁶² I am referring here to Husserl's notion of the noema as the object intended by consciousness as solely 'being' for consciousness. However such an object 'is' only for-itself in all its phenomenological and essential attributes. Consciousness can only ever possess its conceptual, linguistic and/or visual 'equivalent'.

attempt to construct a deviation, another way of approaching the work²⁶³ even if it means going beyond the confines of 'safe' philosophical analysis. This I will do by examining the theories of certain mid-twentieth century French philosophers, primarily Blanchot and Deleuze and Guattari. This will allow an investigation into what seem to have been the effects of drugs on Michaux's consciousness, and consequently examine any repercussions on/of his work. In turn I will posit perception and re-presentation as *indivisible from* matter, form and image and not as secondary articulations of them. Accordingly it will be argued that perception, matter, image and form all constitute the same *zone of indeterminacy*, where concepts relentlessly blur into and contaminate each other and the distance between subject and object, artist, work and viewer, collapses into a mass of infinite and incomplete connections. This will not close off a reading of Michaux's work but open it up to numerable possibilities.

* * * * *

Maybe the reason why many art historians/theoreticians have ignored Michaux, or refuse to form a systematic approach to his work, is because he has, until recently, been seen primarily as a writer and not an artist, or maybe its because his work is so difficult to define and categorise. Even though I have already indicated the absence of a modernist explanation of his work, it seems essential, given the theoretical basis of this thesis, to deconstruct Michaux and his approach to, and interpretation of, his work; but there seems to be no initial basis from which to begin. When approaching a modernist work for example, one can begin by looking at the body of criticism, the discourse that informed the production and reception of that work. With Michaux there are only his drawings, and his writing; there is no substantial discourse from which to start. I would argue, nevertheless that Michaux's work constitutes another pre-post modern moment, as outlined in chapter 1. Through Michaux's writing it is possible to

²⁶³ Although I am concentrating on the artist Michaux in this chapter I could have discussed the work of many other artists in this way, including those subsumed under 'modernist' practices/theory.

trace how he attempted to unravel, question and fragment himself; the impulse to deconstruct is evident in numerous passages. For example, in one poem, written after taking drugs, he describes himself as a:

Faceless Force

Matrix of forms and rampart against forms
In a space a faceless eye is watching
with an unchanging eye
without budging, without eyelid
without tiring

Call to order
Call to return
Call to abolish²⁶⁴

Michaux, in this poem demonstrates the problem of maintaining a *vital* sense of 'self' while at the same time trying to unravel and disseminate it(self). In chapter 1 I suggested that I would find a *middle path* between 'All' or 'Nothing',²⁶⁵ (either absolute presence, as the metaphysical and ontological point of origin, or absolute absence as the void beyond representation). In this chapter I will argue that Michaux's drawings can aid me in negotiating, albeit theoretically, such an approach.

Deconstruction, like taking drugs '... has often been made an object of abuse for its alleged irresponsibility, its 'nihilism'. It has, nonetheless, always recognised the importance, even the necessity, of 'abuse' in another sense: as a tactic in its strategic underminings, loosening, erosions, subversions and (one might add and add ...) its 'et ceteras'. All of which are abusive in the conventional sense, from the perspective of those orthodoxies, authorities, institutions, etc., which underwrite the 'truth' about *everything*.'²⁶⁶

Instead of analysing Michaux's work in order to articulate 'loss' or a 'void' maybe we can outline how his drawings constitute an abusive reaction or retaliation against the rigidity of 'truth' one that does not *totally* disseminate

²⁶⁴ Michaux, in *Darkness Moves*, (ed. David Ball), page 238.

²⁶⁵ This is, according to Blanchot, a pseudo-dialectic '... that knows not an infinite number of mediated and graduated positions, but only two: All or Nothing ... to abolish the world absolutely in order to put in place an absolute absence of the world and thereby to substitute for real, functional objects a series of imaginary, absent objects.' (Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, page 107).

²⁶⁶ Boothroyd 'Deconstruction and Drugs: A Philosophical/Literary Cocktail' in *Deconstruction: A Users Guide*, pg 45.

the subject(ivity) 'behind' Michaux's work. As Maurice Blanchot, a friend of Michaux, explains:

If Henri Michaux's inventions strike us as so close to us and speak directly to our fate, even though they do not seem to implicate us at all, it is first of all because they symbolise this general condition of our destiny, namely, *that it can only discover a meaning in its attempts to escape from this meaning and indeed from all possible meaning altogether* - so that the sheer gratuitousness of his fictions and sometimes of his language is what matters to us most.²⁶⁷

Maybe Michaux was trying to compile or discover his *own* truth by pushing it beyond the boundaries of what was, and still is, 'acceptable'. But he should not be punished for that. The pursuit of truth, albeit futile, is not the problem here. It is when it is re-presented through art, as the final redemptive act, in the way of Michaux's American contemporaries, that the 'truth' becomes encased in its own rhetoricity, its own philosophical crypt. Then interpretation becomes self-referential and cannot break out of the confines of its own language.

It seems that Michaux's mescaline drawings repel explanation within any kind of 'authorised' exegesis, and that his 'irresponsible' abuse of drugs, and the irreverence of his drawings has scuppered several avenues of investigation. Maybe it's time to concentrate not so much on mourning the loss of Michaux but on letting his drawings infiltrate and rupture any *formulaic*²⁶⁸ interpretation of his work, so that I can deconstruct his drawings *just enough to trace* a moment of sensual overload - a moment of excess without *memory* or origin. Conventional²⁶⁹ interpretation and art histories could construct a *memory* for Michaux's work but to do so would exclude a crucial element in/of his drawings. Any reading of Michaux's drawings will not be easy, as without the coherence of sequential thought or the recollections of an original (re-membering) artist, events and conceptual development becomes *multiple, excessive* and difficult to follow. Michaux

²⁶⁷ Blanchot, *Henri Michaux ou le refus de l'enfermement*, pages 61-62. Reprinted in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 169. My italics.

²⁶⁸ 'Formulaic' here is referring to either a *strict* modernist approach to Michaux's work, or an approach which would deconstruct it into *oblivion*.

²⁶⁹ By 'conventional' I mean a biographical and/or genealogical approach.

himself tried to articulate the ways in which excess manifests itself when trying to work through such confusion:

I begin to write almost without realising it, without thinking, busy transmitting these words I don't recognise, although they are highly significant: 'Too much! Too much! You're giving me too much.'²⁷⁰

Because the deconstructive impetus undermines any coherent 'history' or (auto)biography we cannot, indeed would not want to, reconstruct a modernist reading of Michaux's work. However, as I have already mentioned, there are various and disparate voices clamouring to be heard on the subject of Michaux's writing and/or use of drugs, all giving vague and confusing snippets of information, floating aimlessly around in that abstract space known as the 'discursive realm', endlessly connecting, dis-connecting and failing to cohere. These interpretations, although growing in number and constituting a possibly important contribution to Michaux's work, are not yet sufficiently plentiful to be theoretically framed as a discreet discourse on 'Michaux'. As soon as anyone attempts to explain Michaux's drawings there is the need to use the words of others in order, it seems, to attempt to *fix* their meaning. Although it could be claimed that this is the 'nature' of interpretation itself, it becomes more evident as a *problem* when reading any interpretations of Michaux's work. In using the words of others, writers on Michaux place their interpretation(s) 'elsewhere' rather than within a 'proper' discursive space (on/of Michaux). There is an added dimension to the problem of understanding Michaux's work in that philosophical discourses themselves do not provide any stable conceptual framework within which to 'place' Michaux's work. Even though I can appeal to certain 'concepts' the structures within which they evolve and are maintained are themselves made up of a multiple weave of disparate voices.²⁷¹ These drawings, I will argue, function *affectively* rather conceptually; in that they do not connote or represent any 'truth'. This raises a problem in that: '... there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary *specific* to affect the

²⁷⁰ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page 203.

²⁷¹ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, page 109.

form/content of conventional discourse ...[constitutes] a separate stratum running counter to the full registering of affect ...'.²⁷² The words I will use to describe Michaux's drawings are themselves transgressive, excessive, affective, always pushing against the limits of their own disciplines and leaking into others, always needing explanation from other sources, other discourses - ad infinitum. Never for-themselves, no full stop, no closure. I will therefore use fragments of texts from several philosophies, or philosophical cultures - some 'orthodox', some not - in order to weave a new theoretical pattern, a fold, *through which* we can view or 'inter-view'²⁷³ Michaux's art. This fold manifests itself in many ways, historically, temporally and literally. Buckling over, repeating and multiplying Michaux's life, time and graphic line(s).

* * * * *

To begin, a partial correspondence can be made with Blanchot's commentary on Kafka:

When we see the disorder in which [Kafka's] work reaches us - what is made known to us, what is hidden, the fragmentary light thrown on this or that piece, *the scattering of texts themselves*, unfinished to begin with and split up even more and reduced to dust, as if they were relics whose *power is indivisible* - when we see his silent works invaded by the *chatter of commentaries* ... this timeless creation changed into a *footnote of history*, we begin to ask ourselves if Kafka himself had foreseen such a disaster in such a triumph.²⁷⁴

This quote notes several things; how texts are scattered, how they fail to relate totally with one another, and how they fail to compose themselves into a mono-linear or sequential discourse. It also points to the chatter of commentaries, and how these interrupt any unambiguous reading of Kafka's work. Because of this constant chattering and failure to cohere as an

²⁷² Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', pp 221-2. My italics.

²⁷³ Derrida states that '... a *jalousie* (a blind) of *traits* cutting up the horizon, traits through which, *between* which, you can observe without being seen, you can see between the lines, if you see what I mean: the law of the inter-view'. Quoted in *Angelaki*, volume 5, number 2, August 2000, page 17.

²⁷⁴ Blanchot, *Work of Fire*, page 1.

discourse, Kafka and his writing become, like Michaux and his drawings, a footnote of history. As far as I'm concerned, the most interesting part of the quote is the last couple of lines, where Blanchot shifts a 'triumph' into a 'disaster', *seemingly* turning the positive into a negative by way of a dialectical sleight of hand. In fact, he interrupts any dialectical distance between the two 'events', by introducing 'fragmentary light', 'dust', 'relics' and the 'indivisible' all which force them into an neutral (indeterminate) space, a space which, I aim to argue, Michaux and his work also inhabit. Blanchot's notion of 'disaster', as an event (or multiple events), is an: '...alterity without name, transcending all transcendence ... [it] ... is another name for the infinite contestation or anonymity ... formulate[d] as the neutre; at any event, as an inassimilable force of the infinite withdrawal, separation, and displacement ...'²⁷⁵

I need to tread on 'safe' territory here: I need to set the 'scene', and explicate what it is that I, in part, reacted *against* when I first attempted to analyse Michaux's drawings.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pages 207- 208.

²⁷⁶ It is important, however, to note that Hegel's theories on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Aesthetics* constitute the spring board from which many disparate and important philosophies have sprung. I am not about to dispute its importance in this respect.

3.2 Filling the void.

Mescaline multiplies, sharpens, accelerates, intensifies the inner moments of becoming conscious. You watch their extraordinary flood, mesmerised, uncomprehending. With your eyes shut, you are in the presence of an immense world. Nothing has prepared you for this. You don't recognise it. Tremendously present, active, coloured, swarming in tiny islands very close together with no empty space teeming, vibrating but stationary, festering with ornaments, saturating the space which still remains immeasurable, which keeps coming to life in seething, twisting, interwinings, in unpreventable accumulations.²⁷⁷

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, Hegel, in *Aesthetics*, demonstrates how the subject(ivity) creating or viewing a work of art finds freedom from its own materiality by having its absolute consciousness 'reflected' back to itself, within an inter-subjective moment. Art, according to this theory, constitutes *the* medium through which radical oppositions are overcome: subject overcomes object, positive overcomes negative, reason overcomes chaos, day overcomes night, mind overcomes matter.²⁷⁸ The artwork, as a manifestation of the Hegelian Spirit, has worked to overcome the world and its objects by negating their negative 'qualities'. The (viewing) subject(ivity) in turn overcomes the absolute otherness of the artwork by negating its materiality, thereby transforming it in to an aperture through which it can *possibly* attain absolute freedom. Hegel states that the artwork is 'born of the Spirit' which itself is 'born again'²⁷⁹ when confronted with, and converted by, the viewing subject. Death, as absolute negation itself, is finally negated through the destruction of all that is a threat to the desired freedom of consciousness. It is important to note that any act of consciousness is *always* negation, either by the creating/viewing subject(ivity) or by the reflected consciousness of the artwork that works on the subject's behalf. It is, as Hegel argues, always a fight until death (of the other) which enables the Spirit to manifest itself as consciousness, thereby

²⁷⁷ Michaux, *Henri Michaux* (Whitechapel: Exhibition Catalogue 1999). No page number available.

²⁷⁸ Accordingly, Hegel argues that once the Spirit attains absolute knowledge (of itself) art is (will be) no longer possible or needed.

²⁷⁹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, page 2.

becoming 'life' in its fullest, triumphant, and most positive sense.

Consciousness, according to this theory, *actively* works towards the bright light of day by crossing over the *line*, the distance between life and death, then back again, replenished. It is important also to note that it is subjectivity itself²⁸⁰ that has conceptualised (and drawn) this line (as border).

Nevertheless, as even Hegel admits, contingency²⁸¹ (as the negative, unknown, some-*thing*) is always *proximate* to, and divides, consciousness; it is thereby always *threatening* to disrupt a sense of unity. According to Hegel, this threat is always kept at a safe distance even though consciousness is constantly having to re-cross the line between life and death to maintain its own sense of unity, consciousness *manufactures* a distance between itself and anything which may undermine it, postponing the moment within which it may have to face its own contingent other(ness). Consciousness constantly keeps its vision on the metaphysical horizon and struggle toward the attainment of absolute knowledge (of itself as subjectivity) by systematically eradicating the negative, sick²⁸² and transient world of matter situated 'below'. This 'other' corporeal state of being in the world, although nauseatingly close to consciousness, can, according to Hegel, eventually be

²⁸⁰ Although it is important to note that this subjectivity is part of a larger, communal 'Spirit' - as consciousness of a particular epoch. Therefore the subject in question draws this line within wider social, cultural and historical context(s).

²⁸¹ Hegel discusses contingency in various texts, specifically in relation to self-consciousness. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pages 124 - 126, he argues that '... consciousness, instead of being self-identical, is in fact nothing but a purely casual, confused medley, the dizziness of a perpetually self-engendered disorder. It is aware of this; for itself maintains and creates this restless confusion ... But equally while it takes itself in this way to be a single and separate, contingent, and, in fact, animal life, and a lost self-consciousness it also, on the contrary conveys itself again into a consciousness that is universal and self-identical ... It [consciousness] ... has itself the doubly contradictory consciousness of unchangeableness and sameness, and of utter contingency and non-identity with itself. But it keeps the poles of this its self-contradiction apart This unhappy, inwardly disrupted consciousness, since its essentially contradictory nature is for a single consciousness, must for ever have present in the one consciousness the other also; and thus it is driven out of each in turn in the very moment it imagines it has successfully attained to a peaceful unity with the other. Its true return into itself, or its reconciliation with itself will, however, display the Notion of Spirit that has become a living Spirit, and has achieved an actual existence, because it already possesses a single undivided consciousness, a dual nature .

²⁸² Here I am referring to both Kierkegaard and Sartre's notions of 'sickness' and 'nausea' as the realisation that the subject(ivity) is not separate from the material world of objects. Both 'sickness' and 'nausea' will be fully explored in a separate research project which will focus on the artist Wols.

eradicated as the two elements of self consciousness, the fixed and the changeable are fundamentally different and incompatible to each other; they are '... alien to one another; and because it [self-consciousness] is itself the consciousness of this contradiction, it identifies itself with the Changeable consciousness, and takes it to be the unessential Being.'²⁸³ Consciousness cannot accept difference as part of its very nature and incessantly attempts to negate the threat of difference by keeping it in a 'safe' (negated) place. As far as I'm concerned Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* provides a useful resource with which to understand Michaux's art and writing but, as we will see, although it is useful, it is theoretically insufficient.²⁸⁴ I will argue that consciousness, in constantly crossing the line between the two poles of the dialectic, between subject and object, life and death, the fixed and the changeable, always contains elements of both poles at any given time, and so always deconstructs itself in its own attempt to be subject/life/fixed. The very best that can be hoped is for a subjectivity to be partially and inconsistently 'formed'.

It is the incessant (subjective) movement across this rhetorical line, *between* 'inside' and 'outside', life and death, unity and difference, that interests me most in relation to Michaux's work and the *fold* which is of it and which I will have to temporarily 'inhabit' in the attempt to understand his drawings. Again, as argued above, this fold incorporates everything that we usually, albeit theoretically, separate out for the sake of brevity: identities, histories, spatial and temporal coordinates, and so on. This fold will not be an easy or 'safe' space to explore. Deleuze proffers a word of warning:

It's difficult to talk about. It's a line that's not abstract, though it has no particular shape. It's no more in thought than in things, but it is everywhere thought confronts somethings like madness,

²⁸³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, page 137.

²⁸⁴ As Judith Butler argued in her lecture 'Is Kinship Always Heterosexual?' (held at CentreCATH, University of Leeds, 14th May 2001), the combination of two entities [in this case the fixed and the changeable] does not constitute a deconstructive moment, as the two [separate] realms of signification/meaning still exist within a new combination. Also it is important to remember that within Hegel's dialectic the fixed can only exist in relation to its opposite, the changeable, therefore the negative is only utilised in order to define the positive [the fixed]. [+ + - = +].

and life some thing like death ... For Michaux it is the line of drugs “headlong acceleration,” the “whiplash of a frenzied coachman”. Such lines ‘... go beyond knowledge ... [they are] violent and fast, carrying us into breathless regions.’²⁸⁵

Attempting to view Michaux, ‘frenziedly’ crossing over this line in his drawings, will not eradicate the negative or give me the necessary distance to allow me to safely ‘obtain’ the truth; it will situate me and the drawings alongside alongside each other in a temporary and ambiguous space, within which the only traces to be found will be tenebrous moment of speeds, intensities and uneven, contradictory, multiplicitous flows of/and concepts. Examining Michaux’s drawings will not enable me to re-trace or re-compile his consciousness or experiences of drugs, as both are in excess of any kind of stable coherent meaning and, as previously argued, are always unevenly reconstructed by (cultural) memory. Such an excess unhinges dialectical oppositions, rendering them in a constant state of dis-location (as the location of both mine and Michaux’s subjectivity). Rather than viewing this as a disabling position, I will instead consider such a dis-location as one which allow me to *indicate* resonances, vibrations whilst not having to refer constantly back to a unified memory or originary ‘I’.²⁸⁶

Blanchot argues that the attempt to overcome (the negative) constitutes a paradox, in that the subject becomes dis-located from (in) itself (as unified) by incorporating, then rejecting, the negative in(to) itself. This struggle for freedom, from itself, means that consciousness is always having to renegotiate its own limit in order to relocate itself, constantly having to re-formulate a *strict* division between subject and object, inside and outside, positive and negative. This also means that subjectivity never moves from the limit(s) of its own being and never fully goes inside or outside ‘itself’. It oscillates in a neutral, indetermined zone - neither, but both, subject and/or object - always, frustratingly, *suspended* between the two, being everywhere but nowhere at the same time. This is the Deleuzian ‘line’ or ‘limit’: a zone of

²⁸⁵ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, page 111.

²⁸⁶ I must, at this juncture, admit that I have no real experience of drugs, and therefore found it interesting that Michaux’s drawings *may* convey some kind of quality or intensity beyond (yet reminiscent of) my own experiences.

indeterminacy, which both doubles consciousness into a (self-reflecting) subjectivity and at the same moment infinitely folds it into an endless labyrinth. The space or 'zone' occupied by this subjectivity, although believing that it belongs to the 'day' - as consciousness desires, - '... is only but the loss of a dwelling place. It is *intimacy* with the outside, which has no location and affords no rest.'²⁸⁷ This labyrinthal zone renders us all (Michaux, me and you) *homeless*. Consciousness is constituted in and by this labyrinthal zone, *within* which it searches for the location of its own positive and stable reflection, but in doing so it only locates transient 'moments' which then fold over and out of themselves and become re-incorporated back into the zone of indeterminacy. The relation between subjectivity and its world is not one of relations, but of non-relation. Here Deleuze concurs with Blanchot:

'... the theme of the Outside: the relation, and indeed "nonrelation", to an Outside is further from us than any external world, and thereby closer to us than any internal world' he goes on '... the interplay of near and far along the line Outside, as a life-and-death experiment, leads to specifically Foucauldian acts of thought, to folding and unfolding [to become] the process of subjectification.'²⁸⁸

In line with the differentiation inherent within Hegel's dialectical model Deleuze and Guattari argue that subjectivity is made up of two main elements.²⁸⁹ They posit an uneven, unequal and interrupted flow between such elements, which means that they can never be separated from or, indeed, at any one time be distinguished from, each other. This leads to a

²⁸⁷ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, page 31.

²⁸⁸ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, page 97.

²⁸⁹ This theory is also borne out in the section 'Micropolitics and segmentarity' in Deleuze and Guattari's, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pages 208 - 231: There it is argued that there are three zones to every assemblage (in this case 'subjectivity'). The first is the zone of power which is constituted through the segmentation of a solid rigid line; this is usually over-coded within a system of binaries [hence Hegel's dialectical model of matter/mind]. The second is the zone of indiscernability which relates to the diffusion of the first zone through a microphysical fabric, this 'is' the many relations, events and experiences which 'constitute' the subject. The third is the zone of impotence which relates to the flows and quanta which are beyond the control of the first or indeed the second zone. It is this last zone which allows seepage, mutation and constantly undermines and challenges the other two zones by constantly taking several, yet unknown 'lines of flight'. I would say that the 'tonal' is *roughly* correspondent to the first two zones, and the 'nagual' the third, although this is being reductive for the sake of clarity.

disastrous and potentially deadly contamination, a constant vibration which leaves the subject constantly on the brink of an indeterminate 'space'. Nevertheless, in the spirit of theoretical investigation, Deleuze and Guattari, basing their theories on ones found in texts by Carlos Castaneda, split the two elements and name them the *tonal* and the *nagual*. These 'elements' are useful in approaching Michaux's art. The *tonal* is that which allows me to investigate certain events/actions that cannot be placed within the *specific* sequence of Michaux's life, as *one-dimensional* historical 'moments'. Castaneda defined the *tonal* as that which incorporates 'everything we *know* ... its function is to judge, assess and witness.'²⁹⁰ The *tonal* would be utilised through tried and trusted modes of description and interpretation, for example, 'drug taking', 'art making', 'France in the mid-twentieth century', etc. Without the *tonal* 'there would be only weird sounds and grimaces and you wouldn't understand a word ...'.²⁹¹ The *tonal* is that which attempts to regulate, systematise and name chaos. The *nagual* on the other hand is 'the part of us we do not deal with at all - it has no description, no names, no feelings, no knowledge.'²⁹² However, a study of the *nagual* in Michaux's drawings could facilitate a *dis-articulation* of that which may escape such a systemised approach; that is the drawings paradoxical 'nature'.²⁹³

In this respect it is the *nagual* that interests me the most, in that the excesses of Michaux's drawings are somehow, imperfectly, placed within a quasi-philosophical system of *becoming* 'something' other than significant in terms of an already constructed, and restrictive system of meaning, i.e., the *tonal*. Here it is important to stress again that the *tonal* and the *nagual* are only separated for the sake of theoretical investigation; they are part of the same process:

²⁹⁰ Castaneda, *Tales of Power*, pages 123 and 125.

²⁹¹ Castaneda, *Tales of Power*, page 122.

²⁹² Castaneda, *Tales of Power*, page 126.

²⁹³ According to Brian Massumi '... paradoxes should not be taken as mere frivolities. They are serious attempts to pack meaning into the smallest possible space without betraying it with simplification A paradox is not a contradiction. A paradox abolishes contradiction. It does not negate, it compounds .' *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, page 21.

They are moments or aspects of a process. They are mutually determining, in reciprocal presupposition. But they can be unravelled ... they may be thought of as levels, or “plateaus.” We can operate on whatever level seems adequate to the problem we are dealing with, and can choose to emphasise that level’s connection to or separation from the others (the relation or the *non*). We must remember, however, that the ground is ultimately unstable, and should be prepared to jump at any moment.²⁹⁴

The *tonal* is all that is constructed through and by cultural, social and philosophical systems of thought. It is the subject(ivity) as described, organised and known. It is:

... the organism, and also all that is organised and organising; but it is also significance, all that is signified, *all that is memorisable* ... finally, it is the Self (*Moi*), the subject, the historical, social or individual person, and the corresponding feelings.

The *nagual* is also all of the above, but it includes all that can interrupt and destabilise the *tonal*. It is therefore:

... also everything [it is] Flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibres, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation, microperceptions, [which] have replaced the world of the subject.... There is no longer a Self [*Moi*] that feels, acts and recalls; there is “a glowing fog, a dark yellow mist” that has affects and experiences movements, speeds.

However, Deleuze and Guattari offer a warning in that the use of drugs can potentially and irrevocably annihilate the *tonal*.²⁹⁵ The important thing to remember is never to let go completely as the *nagual* renders speechless, engenders inertia, impotence and the inability to *rest* in certainty. It is essential:

... not to dismantle the tonal by destroying it all of a sudden. You have to diminish it, shrink it, clean it, and that only at certain

²⁹⁴ Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, page 21.

²⁹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari state that the *continual* use of drugs: ‘Instead of making a body without organs sufficiently rich or full for the passage of intensities, drug addicts erect a vitrified or emptied body, or a cancerous one: the causal line, creative line, or line of flight immediately turns into a line of death and abolition ... Black holes and lines of death.’ [*A Thousand Plateaus*, page 285]. What I take this to mean is that the drug-user can eventually destroy the tonal in the pursuit of the ‘pure’ nagual, which can lead to actual physical death or at the very least permanent aphasia where the subject(ivity) cannot remember itself as positioned within the tonal, i.e. as historical and/or temporal.

moments. You have to keep it in order to survive, to ward off the assault of the *nagual*. For the *nagual* that erupts, that destroys the tonal, a body without organs that shatters all strata, turns immediately into a body of nothingness, pure self destruction whose only outcome is death: "The tonal must be protected at any cost."²⁹⁶

Michaux eventually gave up drugs, after nearly a decade of experimenting with them.²⁹⁷ His continual return to the *nagual* was getting too dangerous. To diminish the *tonal* too much would allow the *nagual* to take over, confusing time, space and vision.²⁹⁸ The line folds over too quickly, multiplying all sensory perception to the point of getting lost. There is a time to give up. Michaux got to the point:

...where "to get high or not to get high" is no longer the question, but whether drugs have sufficiently changed the general condition of space and time perception so that nonusers succeed in passing through the holes in the world and follow the lines of flight at the very place where means other than drugs become necessary.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, page 162.

²⁹⁷ Michaux explained just before his death in 1984 that: 'I'm more of a water drinking type. Never alcohol. No stimulants, and for years no coffee, no tobacco, no tea. From time to time wine, and very little of that. All my life, very little of everything people take. Take and abstain. Abstain above all. Fatigue is my drug, as a matter of fact. I was forgetting: twenty-five years ago or more, I must have tried ether seven or eight times at the most, laudanum once and twice alcohol (frightful). *Darkness Moves*, page 207.

²⁹⁸ Huxley in his book *The Doors of Perception* describes how his use of drugs altered his perception of colours and shapes as well as temporarily suspending his sense of time and space.

²⁹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Page 286.

3.3 Flying, but getting nowhere, with Michaux

Like me, the line is seeking without knowing what it is seeking
 Preventing itself from 'arriving,' line of blind investigation.
 Without leading to anything, without attempting to be beautiful or
 interesting, criss-crossing itself without turning a hair, without
 turning away, without turning into knots or knotting itself to
 something, without perceiving object, landscape, figure.
 Colliding with nothing, somnambulant line.
 Curved in places, yet not enlacing
Encircling nothing and never encircled
 A line that has not yet made its choice, not ready to be finalised.
 Without preference, without accentuation, without completely
 giving into appearances.³⁰⁰

Vibrant certainty
 its touch so fine, making a sign
 peak, abyss on the same line.³⁰¹

So can Michaux's use of drugs and the scribbled articulation of his experiences help us, the viewers as 'non-users', to follow his lines of 'flight'?³⁰² Without the circularity of discourse, where meaning and object collide and coincide, where can such lines lead us?

It is my contention that Michaux, by taking drugs, 'diminished' (but never eradicated) the *tonal* (the 'self') in order to *concentrate* on/in the *nagual* (*affectively* the impotent yet plenitudinous swarm of the void). To follow the traces of his line(s) of flight is to watch the partial undoing of Michaux. Seen and understood like this, Michaux's images constitute an attempt to trace flows and lines; to hold onto the vibrations of his own consciousness sufficiently long enough to re-member or replicate them on paper

³⁰⁰ Michaux, *Émergences-Resurgences*, quoted in 'Simple Gestures' by Laurent Jenny in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 191.

³⁰¹ Michaux, *Jours de Silence*, quoted in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 215.

³⁰² Generally, within the concept of 'subjectivity' propagated by Western Metaphysics, there is a constant time/space continuum where the subject 'moves' in a teleological fashion towards 'death'. However, according to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of deterritorialisation or 'lines of flight', the process is not straight-forward in that there are multiple and uneven dimensions to such a 'journey', dimensions which ebb and flow, move back and forth, never arriving at 'death'. The dichotomy between life and death as that upon which the Western notion of subjectivity is based 'A person is either still alive or already dead' [Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, page 20] is thereby disrupted. Life and/or death can happen at any one moment, on any given dimension, as the tonal and the nagual are constantly in a state of uneven flux.

'...mov[ing] so quickly that one can only be apprehended by the tracing of one's disappearance. Tracing leaves a line in place: a cinematic thread beyond which the motion 'follows itself' in the hope of never catching up to itself.'³⁰³ It is not a case of Michaux being absolutely present or absolutely absent of/in these drawings - *all or nothing* - but a case of holding on 'just enough' to attempt to articulate the traces of his own dissolving consciousness, which then enable us, the viewers as 'non-users' to access the similar.³⁰⁴ There are, however, obvious difficulties in trying to inscribe that which is largely indescribable; *trying* to give significance to that which escapes signification within accepted cultural narratives. As indicated in the introduction, the circularity of discourse presumes an answer before the question is even muttered. However, the very instability of these images, their inability to cohere, attest to the intensity and multiplicity of the *nagual*. There are no replicates only incomplete traces. The dialectic between question and answer belies the 'fact' that that the answer exists as soon as the question is posited.³⁰⁵ The idea that questions and answers can be separated is therefore a false one, and in a similar fashion the *tonal* and the *nagual* cannot be that easily separated in that they always penetrate and contaminate each other, they can never be separated because neither one constitutes the positive and/or the negative of the other, they encircle nothing and are themselves never encircled or contained. While attempting to articulate his intense experiences of the *nagual*, Michaux *remembers* that his 'sense' of any remaining 'self' was:

incredibly fast, hundreds of lines of force were combing my being, which never managed to pull itself back together fast enough, which at the moment of coming back together was raked by a new

³⁰³ Jenny, 'Simple Gestures', in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 191.

³⁰⁴ I say similar instead of same, as these traces can never be stable enough to follow re-trace in an identical manner, like an already well-trodden path.

³⁰⁵ Deleuze, on page 15 of *Bergsonism* states that 'The truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a questioning of finding the question and consequently of positing it, even more than solving it. For a speculative problem is solved as soon as it is properly stated. By that I mean that its solution exists then, although it may remain hidden and, so to speak, covered up: The only thing left to do is uncover it. But stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing. Discovering, or uncovering, has to do with what already exists, actually or virtually; it was therefore certain to happen sooner or later.'

row of times, and then again and again.³⁰⁶

Looking at *Dessin de Mescalinién* (figure 15) it is impossible to say whether it represents a particular³⁰⁷ intensive, *nagual*, experience. Such experiences, once re-membered,³⁰⁸ tend to be unevenly replicated as they mutate and swarm into each other. It *could* be argued that the seemingly incoherent, irregular lines - each one entire and unimpaired but also partial and weakly insufficient, swarming and vibrating, leaking off the edge of the page - somehow resonate within their *own naguality*, as affective traces without memory. Each line indicates a 'new row of times', repeating itself but never within the same spatial or temporal zone.

This does not mean that Michaux somehow 'transferred' his experiences under the influence of mescaline onto (into) another medium, for to cite Michaux as 'master' of his own experiences, know them, hold them in his memory and replicate them would be to merely address the *tonal* aspect of his being-in-the-world and fall into the trite modernist notion of expression.³⁰⁹ Primarily what I am arguing is that Michaux's *naguality contaminated* his drawings as *nagual traces without memory*. All Michaux could ever do when he took drugs was try to re-position himself within the zone of indeterminacy, traced by the scratchy marks he left behind that resonate with such an *attempt*. Maybe the drawings are his attempt to keep connected with the world, to reinscribing himself, albeit agitatedly, onto paper. The metonymic affects of Michaux's *nagual* flight fall back into each other without presenting a positive whole or complete reflection of his subjectivity. Hegel's fight until death is thus never won, the dual consciousness becomes incalculable; it is therefore not a case of 'binary

³⁰⁶ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page xvi.

³⁰⁷ Although 'particularity' would indicate a specific and isolated event within a sequence of events.

³⁰⁸ In this context 're-membered' does not mean reflection where a subject recalls his or her experiences as though they were complete and knowable entities. What I am arguing here is that in re-membering the 'self' attempts to reconfigure itself through the tonal; yet such attempts are constantly undermined by the *nagual*.

³⁰⁹ In the second chapter of this thesis I argue that the modernist method constantly attempts to reassert the *nagual* within the tonal, although in doing so reduce it to concepts of the sublime, universal, etc., thereby rendering it 'safe'.

oppositions or contradictions, but ... resonating levels³¹⁰ which pollute each other. The very process Michaux went through in order to 'create' these images is therefore in itself problematic, in that whilst on mescaline his sense of self could be, at best, only ever partial never complete, and with no prospect of resolution.³¹¹ Instead, what he had to try and do was to reformulate and *somehow* signify the *nagual* within the *tonal*, the indeterminate within the coherent, keep hold of the construction of 'Michaux' and somehow attempt to *re-incorporate*, rather than deny, the changeable/difference into his sense of self. These drawings are traces of that struggle, whereby Michaux tries to limit the multiplicity of sensations, brought on by taking mescaline, without a structure within which to select any sensations as *primary*. 'Art is not a chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes as Joyce says, a *chaosmos*, a composed chaos ...'³¹² Chaos, within the experience of the drug comes *before*, indeed instead of the concept. Michaux has to wait until the *concept of chaos* kicks in, and then try to trace it on paper. Within such 'normal' circumstances therefore '... for the vision of things and beings, one sees by excluding as much as by receiving'.³¹³ Michaux also states that:

The present drawings are, need I say? *reconstructions*. A hand two hundred times more agile than the human hand would not be up to the task of following the speeding course of the inexhaustible spectacle.³¹⁴

Later drawings supply us with more evidence of this (for example figures 16 and 17). They were all drawn some seven years after the event(s) of taking drugs. Within these drawings he attempts to re-articulate the lines which allowed him to travel chaotically within his endopsychic state. The tightly

³¹⁰ Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', page 226.

³¹¹ According to Deleuze and Guattari's notions of de- and re-territorialisation the subject can never reconfigure as before. As argued in *A Thousand Plateaus* [page 226]: 'If an image of the master [of subjectivity] ... it is projected outward to the limits of the universe, as if something had domination over flows as well as segments, and in the same manner, the result is a fictitious and ridiculous representation.'

³¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, page 204.

³¹³ Michaux, *Sasir*, no page number given.

³¹⁴ Michaux *Henri Michaux* (Exhibition Catalogue: Whitechapel Gallery 1999), no page number indicated.

packed squiggles allow the continuation of a series of journeys, which in turn explore once more the affective sensory overload experienced on mescaline. These drawings are thereby constituted by both: ‘... “travelling” lines, which “don’t create objects so much as they create journeys, itineraries,” ... [and] ... “allusive” lines, “mad about enumerating ... creating microscopic palaces of proliferating cellular life.”’³¹⁵ Such lines however cannot be easily distinguished or separated. Looking at *Reaggregation Drawing* (figure 16), for example, we can trace the frantic movement, or journey, of the hand, yet with(in) such a journey ‘microscopic palaces’ *begin* to form. Both the journey and the formation of such ‘palaces of cellular life’ collide, yet any ‘life’ they contain cannot be attributed to Michaux as they seem to buzz like a cinematic image of strange molecular life. The ‘stream’ on the left hand side, although creating a kind of ‘clearing’ through which both the artist and viewer can ‘manoeuvre’, is rapidly ‘filling up’. The lines are not static and any journey upon/within this drawing can be hazardous, as any viewer could be easily overtaken in this way, by the contingent. Michaux’s mescaline drawings ‘register a state of flux where there is virtually no intervening vacuum between images and marks, but rather a plenum of uninterrupted pulsations and oscillations.’³¹⁶

Although Michaux stopped taking drugs in the late 1950’s he continued the theme of re-membering the effects of mescaline in his drawings almost to the day he died. Such images, seemingly as intense as his first, demonstrate how his perception of himself and the world - the distance between the two - had been irrevocably dissolved and displaced through his initial taking mescaline; the Unhappy Consciousness had been realised and never entirely shaken off. Again, this is not to grant Michaux some kind of transcendental ‘realisation’, it is only to say how his experiences, and his [artistic] articulations of them, somehow demonstrate, both to him and to us, the

³¹⁵ Jenny, ‘Simple Gestures’ in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 193. Within the same texts Michaux’s lines which range from the ‘travelling’, to the ‘penetrating’ and the ‘allusive’ are seen as movement away from Klee’s strict trilogy of ‘active’, ‘intermediate’ and ‘passive’ lines.

³¹⁶ Sieburth, ‘Signs in Action: The Ideograms of Ezra Pound and Henri Michaux.’ in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 212.

conflicting and transitory nature of subjectivity in its many (non)manifestations. Michaux had experienced the *nagual* within the *tonal* but continued to have problems in articulating such intense experiences. As he himself realised 'the image [could not] give matter to the concept; the concept, by giving stability to the image, would stifle its existence.'³¹⁷

I have been relying on Michaux's writings to the extent that I have, in an attempt to try in some way 'explain' his drawings. I am not relying them to re-present his experiences or indeed to present 'Michaux' as someone who knew exactly *what* and *why* he was producing the drawings. If I did I would be slipping back into the Hegelian mode of thinking, positing Michaux as a self-identical subject. What I am aiming to do is allow both the writing and the drawings to emerge in some symbiotic but protean relationship where the work of Michaux merges by folding 'his writing into his drawing and his drawing into his writing, pushing the boundaries of each form ...'³¹⁸ into affect. Michaux himself '...dream[t] of a language of pure lines that would communicate intimately or "murmour" without forming any ideas too definitely ...'.³¹⁹ Michaux spent many years trying to create such a 'language' mainly through the study of calligraphy. This is evident in the 'Mouvement' drawing project he executed just before he began his mescaline series. *Untitled (Movements [Mouvements])* (Figure 19) demonstrates his use of pictograms, a process where he attempts to blur text and image, but cancel out any signifying function. 'The sign, then, is given over to fiction, obeying the strange law without law which dictates how it should contrive itself, like the language it embodies, and thus represent itself as the image of its own enigma.'³²⁰ However utopian this idea was, what he manages to do in practice is coalesce, albeit in an equivocal fashion, the one-dimensionality of writing - the way in which the written word somehow grips onto, but never penetrates the page, or give the illusion of space - with the gesturality of

³¹⁷ Michaux, quoted in Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, page 21.

³¹⁸ <http://www.frenchculture.org/art/events/michaux-drawing.html#exhibition>.

³¹⁹ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page xiii.

³²⁰ Bellour, *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 199.

drawing. These gestures once placed on the page begin to manifest themselves outside the body, as they ‘...involve gestures, interiors, for which we have no limbs at our disposal but only the desire of limbs, tensions, élans, all made up of living cords, never thick, never swollen with flesh or encased with skin.’³²¹ The pictograms scamper across the page, their vivacity avoids anchorage, both visually and semiotically. ‘The sign scurries over the space of [the tension between language and non-language] like a panic-stricken insect.’³²² Michaux writes about the way in which the speed of making these pictograms confounded and *resisted* his own inertia, his slowness to (re)act or formulate on this way:

The greater part of my life, stretched out on my bed for interminable hours of which I never tired, I imparted motion to one or two or three forms, but always one more quickly, more to the fore, more diabolically quickly than the other ... I instilled in it a quite extraordinary mobility of which I was the counterpart and the motor, albeit unmoving and slothful. Electrified it All I have done here is repeat, sort of, on paper, in Indian ink, some of the innumerable minutes of my useless life³²³

It is the restlessness of the insomniac, the inertia and the inability to escape the speeds of contingency that I will now concentrate on in relation to Michaux’s later mescaline drawings.

³²¹ Michaux, quoted in *Untitled Passages* by Henri Michaux, page 210.

³²² Bellour, ‘The Utopia of the Sign’ in *Untitled Passages* by Henri Michaux, page 201.

³²³ Michaux ‘[From Postface, *Mouvements*]’ in *Untitled Passages* by Henri Michaux, page 61.

3.4 Lines, balls and sleepless nights.

The self experiences itself as a corpse to be reanimated, or as a cloud or as a gaseous planet. It extorts to find a form.³²⁴

Michaux writes of the speeding up and disintegration of the 'self', when on mescaline:

rapid, infernal combing-uncombing of ... being - martyred,
penetrated, drawn out like wires, indefinitely.³²⁵

The horror of it was that I became a line. *In a normal life one is a sphere, a sphere that surveys panoramas* ... Now only a line ... the accelerated line that I had become.³²⁶

The images evoked by these quotations can be compared with the image of the Hegelian dialectic; as, when Michaux states that 'in a normal life one is a sphere, a sphere that surveys panoramas', he imagines himself as a self-contained subject(ivity) that is separate from all that he perceived; one that relates to, but is not contaminated by the world within which he exists, and re-presents himself to himself as a self-identical subject accordingly. Michaux imagines that by taking drugs he could 'become' a line rather than a sphere.³²⁷ As far as he is concerned, the line belonged to nothing, was 'without filitation, infinitely unwinding the skein of the ball. This line "transforms" the inertia of the ball into a tenuous activity.'³²⁸ Giving birth to what Michaux called 'the thin man'.

Little and lacunary
in a hurry and knowing that quickly he has to know
in his cockpit in his little galaxy
on guard ...
a pilot
pilot as long as he can
pilot or nothing³²⁹

³²⁴ Jenny, 'Simple Gestures' in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 187.

³²⁵ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page xvi.

³²⁶ Michaux, *Miserable Miracle*, page 87.

³²⁷ Or a ball as he sometimes refers to it.

³²⁸ Jenny, 'Simple Gestures' in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 192.

³²⁹ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, pages 233 - 234.

The line, 'the accelerated line that I had become,' is that which (un)folds at incredible speeds, unravelling the dialectic so there is no inside or outside, no subject or object division. It incorporates everything within its path. The struggle until death (of the other, the material world), as the desire to negate the negative, becomes a double bind. Although death in its brutal, negative and differentiated sense is *temporarily* 'conquered' and deferred in 'normal' spherical life, it also inhabits the subject as an unwelcome but necessary 'guest', biding its time until we let go of the *tonal* just enough so that it can propel us into the *nagual*.³³⁰ Subjectivity then, in its quest to escape from its own limits (i.e., through the 'freedom' of taking drugs) becomes contaminated by that which it fears the most - difference.³³¹ With the desire to cross the line between subject and object comes 'exile' and *homelessness*³³² constantly oscillating between its own desire for 'pure' consciousness and the brute materiality of its existence-in-the-world (as contingency). Existence, as the constant movement of the (attempted) overcoming of its own materiality and otherness of the outside world, is fraught with a paradox which manifests itself as anxiety, as subjectivity desires *both* blinding daylight (as freedom/absolute knowledge/truth) *and* the emptiness of night (as the release from materiality/dissolution of the outside, where subjectivity empties itself into the bliss of nothingness). All or Nothing. As Blanchot would have it, consciousness exists in a space which accomplishes neither as it (blindly) negotiates its way through the plenitude of the void - as the zone *in-between*:

³³⁰ According to Deleuze and Guattari [page 227-8] in *A Thousand Plateaus* '[through] the existence of a molecular perception to which drugs give us access we attain a visual and sonorous microperspective revealing spaces and voids, like holes in the molar structure ... the distinctions that appear in what used to seem full, the holes in what used to be compact; and conversely, where before there were just before we saw end points of clear cut segments, now there are indistinct fringes, encroachments, overlappings, migrations, acts of segmentation that no longer coincide with the rigid segmentarity [of the nagual].

³³¹ Blanchot argues that 'The values, morals, fatherlands, religions and private certitudes our vanity and self-complacency generously grant us are so many abodes the world furnishes for those who think on that account that they stand and rest amid stable things; they know nothing of the enormous route they are heading for ... *in flight from flight*.' quoted in *A Thousand Plateaus*, page 227.

³³² The homelessness I am referring to here is not only Michaux's as he 'crosses the line' through taking drugs, but my own as I manoeuvre my way through such alien theories.

If night suddenly is cast in doubt, then there is no longer either day or night, there is only vague, twilight glow, which is sometimes memory of day, sometimes a longing for night, end of the sun and sun of the end. Existence is interminable, it is nothing but an indeterminacy: we do not know if we are excluded from it (which is why we search vainly in it for something solid to hold onto) or whether we are forever imprisoned in it (and so we turn desperately outside). This existence is an exile in the fullest sense: we are not there, we are elsewhere, and we will never stop being there.³³³

Simon Critchley, in *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* goes further by outlining Blanchot's notion of the two slopes of literature, a notion which can be also applied to our understanding of Michaux and his (visual and verbal) articulations of drug taking. The first 'slope', in keeping with the Hegelian theory mentioned above, is where the artist (as the first viewing subject(ivity)) produces his artwork 'through a work of negation which is equated with death; it is "The life that endures death and maintains itself in death."³³⁴ Death, therefore, enables the subject(ivity) of the artist and other viewing subject(ivity)s to acquire freedom. An example of 'life' enduring through 'death' is provided by Rothko's work (figure 11) which proffers the promise of a safe crossing by overcoming the negation of Rothko's own suicide, as the moment of his no-longer-being-in-the-world.

The second 'slope' is not so safe. It is where terror comes into play. It is the moment of the 'creative' process where there is a partial realisation that freedom is not possible. The impossibility of the possible. It is not *necessarily* the terror felt when coming face-to-face with death as the end of existing-in-the-world or the dissolution of the 'I'. It is the terror of 'being riveted to existence, *the impossibility of death.*'³³⁵ Consciousness without the safety of a unifying subjectivity becomes impossibly intimate with difference. Blanchot likens this to the restless experience of the night where:

all familiar objects disappear, something is there but nothing is visible; the experience of darkness is the presence of absence, the

³³³ Blanchot, *Work of Fire*, page 9.

³³⁴ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 66.

³³⁵ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 55.

peculiar density of the void, where the things of the day disappear into an uncanny 'swarming of points' This is the night of insomnia, the passive watching in the night where intentionality undergoes reversal, where we no longer regard things, where they seem to regard us.³³⁶

The terror of the night produces shadowy figures, not quite formed. Looking at *Untitled (Movements [Mouvements])* (figure 20) we can see how life 'forms' begin to emerge, but not in any individuated sense, in Michaux's drawings. Excessive, threatening, they are in a state of uncoordinated 'becoming': '... from this opaque darkness [Michaux] foresees life being able to emerge. The black space contains images, just as the sheet of paper irresistibly attracts them.'³³⁷

According to Blanchot's theory of the insomniac, even the daytime world is not one of freedom, but:

as fatality ...the day stupefied by lack of sleep, the day as something to which one is riveted, what Blanchot calls the madness of the day. The insomniac finds both day and night impossible Night also becomes the 'diurnal activity ... where it turns over into the *utter neutrality* of fatigue and sleepless exhaustion.³³⁸

Once insomnia has been diagnosed the innocent bliss of sleep is no longer an option. Michaux himself describes one such instance:

Under the low ceiling of my little bedroom is my night, a deep abyss. Constantly hurled down to a depth of a thousand feet, with a gulf several times that big below me, *I hang on by the rough spots with the greatest of difficulty*, dead tired, mechanically, helplessly wavering between disgust and perseverance, the ant-climb continues with interminable slowness. The rough spots grow tinier and tinier, I can hardly make them out on the perpendicular wall. Abyss, night, terror, all fuse together, increasingly indissoluble.³³⁹

It is this second 'slope', the tracing of the zone of the insomniac, that now concerns me with reference to Michaux's mescaline drawings. For the

³³⁶ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 57.

³³⁷ Rodari, 'L'Homme de Plume', in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 179.

³³⁸ Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, page 63.

³³⁹ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page 23

remainder of this chapter then, the first slope can be put in parenthesis. This second 'slope' 'presents' us with an artist for whom transcendence is always thwarted through the repetitive act of searching for it within the creative process. Even when he attempts to articulate his experiences of the 'other' onto canvas/paper, he cannot negate such experiences or the materiality of his tools and make them 'his' (as positive events with which to facilitate his freedom). Michaux uses *force*-full resistance of his tools and materials to his own advantage.

The ambivalence of the gesture ... moves into the stroke. The stroke implies this ambivalence intrinsically. But it is also liable to spread beyond the stroke, to distribute itself among the different elements ... I am thinking specifically of all the processes [Michaux uses] that use the conflict of different materials as a constructive force.³⁴⁰

Michaux (willingly) becomes an insomniac. Within and without him swarms the plenitude of the *nagual* void as a neutral and resistant 'space'. The idea of work becomes worklessness, heavy as the restlessness of a sleepless night. The quest for absolute freedom through creating art is always interrupted by the vacillating materiality of 'his' subjectivity and the objects he uses and which like him occupy the zone of indeterminacy. This becomes even more evident, it seems, when drugs are involved, as the use of mescaline *intensifies* such an experience, further de-stabilising "the slow beings" that we and he are.³⁴¹ Protection: What is needed when confronting this zone of indeterminacy is to somehow slow down the vertiginous acceleration of its immanent approach, retreat (albeit partially) into the sphere, and try and follow the lines of its dispersal by:

... manag[ing] to fold the line and establish an endurable zone in which to install ourselves and confront things, take hold, breathe - in short, think. Bending the line so that we manage to live upon it, with it: a matter of life and death. The line itself is constantly unfolding at crazy speeds as we're trying to fold it to produce [again] "the slow beings that we are," to get (as Michaux says) to the "eye of the hurricane"³⁴²

³⁴⁰ Jenny, 'Simple Gestures' in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 194.

³⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 36.

³⁴² Deleuze, *Negotiations*, page 111.

* * * * *

We could protect ourselves, as already indicated, by approaching Michaux's work through the tried and trusted concepts of modernist theory, in order to, as it were, maintain a distance, stand back and survey. Such a method would only gloss over the inadequacies and inconsistencies inherent in the narratives constructed around Michaux's experiences of mescaline. As Deleuze and Guattari argue:

Philosophical concepts are fragmentary wholes that are not aligned with one another so that they fit together, because their edges do not match up. They are not pieces of a jigsaw puzzle but rather the outcome of throws of the dice.³⁴³

The sheer *proximity* of his drawings and the invasive 'quality' of his visual prose make theoretical capture difficult. Instead we need to somehow trace the various *connections* between concepts in their analysis, while acknowledging their various speeds, irregularity, insufficiencies and the dizzying possibility of infinite combinations. The problems of articulation, of the interruption of the *tonal* by the *nagual*, are inherent not only within the production, but also the interpretation of Michaux's work. So, in connection with this notion of the zone of intermediacy as the space of the insomniac, I also wish to explore Deleuze and Guattari's plane of immanence which, as the plane of thought image(s), is where:

Concepts are multiple waves, rising and falling but the plane of immanence is a single wave that rolls them up and unrolls them. The plane envelops infinite movements that pass back and forth through it, but concepts are the infinite speeds of finite movements that, in each case, pass only through their own components. From Epicurus to Spinoza ... and from Spinoza to Michaux the problem of thought is infinite speed. But this speed requires a milieu that moves infinitely in itself - the plane, the void, the horizon Concepts are absolute surfaces or volumes, formless and fragmentary, whereas the plane is the formless, unlimited absolute, neither surface nor volume but always fractal.³⁴⁴

³⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 35.

³⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 36.

The 'speed' of concepts and their fractal connections, collide and spin off within and upon the plane of immanence. It constantly leads thought to error, leaving its images (both visual and discursive) partial and unstable. The slick movement of the Hegelian Spirit negating the negative in order to reflect consciousness back to itself is constantly thwarted, de- and re-territorialised in an incessant and neutral, non-progressive movement of doing and undoing: death constantly undermining life but never leaving it abrogated = t/error. Michaux's images were constructed and are confronted within such a speed.

... there are many things ... that threaten thinking: *stupidity, forgetfulness, aphasia, delirium, madness*; ...[which] in principle have only one single effect immanent in thought - *error*, always error.... [which] is the infinite movement that gathers together the whole of the negative th[is] movement given a negative sign is itself *folded within* other movements with positive or ambiguous signs.³⁴⁵

Error then, rather than the affirmative reflection intrinsic to the dialectic of transcendence, is *the* infinite, non-dialectical, asymmetrical and vacillating 'movement' which corrugates negativity by folding itself into other ambiguous movements within/upon the plane of immanence; and, as far as I'm concerned, it is the only way to think through, analyse, Michaux's drawings. The negative, in all its manifestations, is neither static nor redeemable because it is ever metamorphosing into other values, the infinite realm of neutrality. According to Deleuze and Guattari, subjectivity does not have its boundaries set out within a Hegelian dialectic, where the negative is, gradually and systematically, overcome; it has an even greater 'enemy' beyond (yet folded within) as the threat of the unstable, ambiguous sign, the constant threat of error which is always ready to interrupt and disrupt the 'certainty' of the *tonal*. This can also be applied to the error of discourse as that which somehow circulates around but never penetrates the object of its enquiry. What I will argue instead is that the subject(ivity) and its corporeal 'existence', like the artwork and the concepts applied to it, constantly aim

³⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 52-3.

and miss each other, but in turn also inform each other through incongruous and often arbitrary connections. The non-movement of error as the impotent, *inert*, beginning which can never gather the momentum of the dialectic will not afford subjectivity or indeed discourse, freedom from the material, or indeed free it into oblivion. It keeps subjectivity forever suspended and folded, weaves it into conflicting thought images, eternally transfigures it, layers it with different and converse aspects of consciousness, as well as incessantly alters its relationship with itself. As Deleuze adds:

The plane of immanence has two facets as Thought and Nature, as *Nous* and *Physis*. That is why there are always many infinite movements caught within each other, each folded in the others, so that the return of one instantaneously relaunched the other in such a way that the plane of immanence is ceaselessly being woven, like a gigantic shuttle ... Every movement passes through the whole of the plane by immediately turning back on and folding itself and also by folding other movements or allowing itself to be folded by them, giving rise to retroactions, connections and proliferations in the fractilization of the infinitely folded up infinity³⁴⁶

This plane of immanence constitutes:

A veritable anamorphosis this “planeology” is or appears to be: the “interval” [that] seems to extenuate into “zones” of indiscernability; the “underviable double” into a “multiplicity without the unity of an ancestor ... In zones of indeterminacy, in movements of becoming, a-subjective, impersonal intensities, compounds of sensations couple, transform, vibrate, migrate, intersect, split apart, diverge, pass from one being/body/surface/flesh to another - *without memory*.³⁴⁷

This passing from ‘one being/body/surface/flesh to another - without memory’ - is crucial for my approach to Michaux’s drawings. Our experiences, images, the resonances of our sensations, as memories and actions live on within and upon the plane of immanence without, as stated earlier, an unified ‘I’ or a stable subjectivity. As Deleuze argues:

If art preserves it does not do so like industry, by adding a

³⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 39.

³⁴⁷ Baross, ‘Deleuze and Derrida, by way of Blanchot’, in *Angelaki*, volume 2, number 2; August 2000, pp 33-34.

substance to make things last. The thing became independent of its “model” from the start, but it is also independent of other possible personae who are themselves artist-things, personae of painting breathing this air of painting. And it is no less independent of the viewer ... who only experience(s) it after, if they have the strength for it. What about the creator? If it independent of the creator through the self-positing of the created, which is preserved in itself. What is preserved - the thing or the work of art - is a *bloc of sensations*, that is to say, a *compound of percepts and affects*.³⁴⁸

When trying to think through and interpret these images one places oneself on plane of conceptual immanence, watching it fold, spin off; the subject emerges, then is folded back into or over itself, only to re-emerge at a different and accidental point. Memory folds into matter, matter into memory, both merge and mutate, on and in the incessant wave of the plane. Meanwhile, the *tonal* enables us to (albeit) partially reterritorialise within a social system of images and relations. The idea of the autonomous, individual subjectivity is thereby questioned, as is its distanced relationship with the material and/or the discursive world. There are no boundaries. The subject gets folded into object, object into subject, consciousness ebbs and flows within a non-progressive moment that is never static, never stable. Just incongruously vibrating. Consciousness, like every other entity in the world, is always fighting to maintain itself; parts of it are constantly dying whilst others emerge and re-emerge. It struggles to know itself as it blurs into the realm of others (which paradoxically are also part of the ‘self’ when such a self is opened up on/into the plane). As Michaux himself claims: ‘we are not made for just one self. We are wrong to cling to it. The prejudice for unity There is not one self. There are not ten selves. *There is no self. ME is nothing but a position*’³⁴⁹ At anyone time then Michaux is ‘nothing but a position’ precariously born and easily destabilised; as having more than one self means to suffer the constant flow of dis- and re-integration within/upon the plane.

³⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* pp 163-4.

³⁴⁹ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page x. My italics.

3.5 Michaux becoming-animal

Deleuze's idea of *Thought and Nature*³⁵⁰ as the constituting facets of the plane of immanence can also be used to question the fundamental notion of 'verticality' and 'horizontality' in relation to (self) perception and beholding others. Rosalind Krauss in *Formless: A User's Guide* argues that:

...perceptual logic, "seeing" bifurcates into two distinct functions: with the vision of animals focused on the horizontal ground on which they and their prey both travel, a vision that is therefore, in certain ways, merely an extension of their sense of touch; but with the sightedness of mankind recharacterized as "beholding". Qualified by its acknowledgement of the distance that separates the "beholder" from its object, the gap built into the human perceptual relation is what provides a space for all those varieties of vision which separate man from the animals: contemplation, wonder, scientific inquiry, disinterestedness, aesthetic pleasure. And in turn, the distance built into the very mechanism of beholding is a function of the upright posture with its dissociation of vision from the horizontality of the ground.³⁵¹

What I also want to argue is that, in questioning this 'fundamental' binary between human and animal, subject and object, sight and sense, we can begin to unravel and partially trace Michaux's experience of/on drugs in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming' (as becoming 'other' than an unified consciousness). When two upright beings behold each other their gazes are separate and distanced from each other; the dialectic can thereby work through the concepts of space and time; yet animals, because their head are closer to the ground, have to rely on all the developed senses they possess. This also means that they can operate in the dark, instinctively sensing their way around uncertain and dangerous territory; they make quick connections at any time, speeding up, slowing down accordingly. Yet this lack of self-formulating cognition and visual 'distance' from the world means that they can be accused of 'worklessness', in the Hegelian sense - as, if we recall, all human action *works* in an attempt to negate the world, which

³⁵⁰ As discussed in the last section in relation to the plane of immanence, and outlined in Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 39.

³⁵¹ Krauss, 'Horizontalities' in *Formless: A User's Guide*, edited by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, page 90.

in turn distances any threat to its unified subjectivity: 'On Kojève's submission, within the general framework of the teleological of Hegelian spirit through history, what Hegel's account of the 'spiritual animal kingdom' sought to address was the moment of the inactive and uncreative

....³⁵²

To close off the distance between the subjective and objective 'worlds' is to allow the unworking of subjectivity and 'give it over to the infinite movement of its own defamiliarisation, de-realisation, deconstitution, as the ground of presence, as the dwelling of presence.'³⁵³

This idea of becoming(-animal), as consciousness unravelling itself, can be mobilised through Bergson's ideas about duration and extensity. According to Bergson, when we think of existence we have to think about subjectivity as being constituted by two radically different dimensions. The first is that of depth or duration (verticality) where 'consciousness' as presence is constituted: 'Duration is the *contraction* of all successive past events into point in the present ...'. The second dimension, extensity (horizontality), however, '... is the *relaxation* of this point into the spatial coexistence of these events.'³⁵⁴ According to Bergson consciousness is constituted through the contradictory 'movements' of duration and extensity, of the verticality of the distanced and steady gaze; and it is constituted through the (feared) horizontality of its relaxation where 'verticality' collapses into a threatening sequence of (yet unknown) events. This contradictory movement multiplies into differentiated folds which then become *intensities*, multiple 'events' of the 'present', as there is always at/in any one moment an unequal interaction between (and within) extensity in(as) duration and duration in(as) matter. This means that duration is 'differentiated within itself

³⁵² Hill, *Blanchot; extreme contemporary*, page 104. The 'inactive' and the 'uncreative' can again be tied in with the nagual in that the nagual, according to Castaneda not only belongs to the animal kingdom, but is the realm of inactivity and inarticulation. See Castaneda *Tales of Power*, especially page 121.

³⁵³ Baross, 'Deleuze and Derrida, by way of Blanchot' in *Angelaki*, volume 5 number 2 August 2000, page 27.

³⁵⁴ Lawlor, 'A Nearly Total Affinity: the deleuzian virtual image versus the derridian trace' in *Angelaki*, volume 2 number 2; august 2000, page 62.

through an internal explosive force.³⁵⁵ This ‘force’ as brute existence, is where the multiplicity of extensity and duration incessantly collide, folding together and then pulling apart (but not totally). This collision then manifests (virtually) as ‘subjectification’. So when ‘... we perceive, we contract millions of vibrations or elementary shocks into a felt quality’.³⁵⁶ Such ‘felt qualities’, although multiplicitous and disparate in nature, are ‘endured’ as the uneven *sense* of subjectivity. We go on to construct complex philosophical frameworks through which to situate this ‘subjectivity’. We *theoretically* separate our knowledge of the world from our bodily sensations of it in an attempt to extract the subjective from the objective, the triumph of the *tonal*. The positive over the negative. Such structures ‘fix’ the image we have of ourselves in a process of self-reflection which believes itself to be static and total, moving through a stable teleo-temporality within which consciousness slowly but surely becomes known to itself through a series of dialectically (and safely) separated ‘events’. It is my contention, however, that the image of self can never be assiduously stable, rather it is ever-changing, evolving along the irregular and intense pulses which punctuate duration. This duration is itself constituted of multiple ‘durations’³⁵⁷ and constitutes the non-movement of consciousness, which remains *held* by the moment and thereby folds at different speeds and intensities. The desire of the insomniac is that of a movement towards an external horizon. But it is always caught in the zone of intermediacy which can never move the subject ‘inside’ or ‘outside’. This zone offers an infinite number of ‘... potential movements ... [that] are in some way made present without being actualised’.³⁵⁸ Deleuze also argues that this leads to ‘A *milieu* of events ...[that] is without interval: “even the void is sensation”’.³⁵⁹ This is not the linear

³⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, page 94.

³⁵⁶ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, page 87.

³⁵⁷ Deleuze on page 79 of *Bergsonism* argues that although time is multiple ‘... by virtue of the relativity of rest and movement, by virtue of the relativity even of accelerated movement, these contractions of extensity, these dilations of time, these ruptures of simultaneity become absolutely reciprocal. In this sense there would be a multiplicity of times, a plurality of times, with different speeds of flow, all real, each one peculiar to a system of reference.’ This indicates that the multiplicity of duration indicates a difference in degree/quality rather than in kind.

³⁵⁸ Massumi, ‘The Autonomy as Affect’, page 233.

³⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 165.

movement of the teleologically driven subjectivity where the horizon of events can be measured, or where choice comes into play. The non-movement, or interaction, between duration and extension can be as fast and intense as it is slow and lethargic; events multiply and thwart the moment/movement of negation, of self realisation or identification.

So, again, what has this to do with Michaux's drawings? Well, drug taking: '....Even in its supple form ... can mobilise gradients and thresholds of perception towards becomings-animal, becomings-molecular'³⁶⁰ In fact he wanted to 'appropriate a kind of personal bestiary' as a 'painter-predator.'³⁶¹ This 'becoming-other than' precipitates a crumbling of (the illusion of) verticality, as the distinct separation between 'pure' consciousness and 'brute' materiality, as the erect human dissolves and folds into becoming-animal. Michaux himself 'recognise[d] clearly enough that the 'holes' that make up his very being, the '*absent column*' on which he has '*built [him] self*,' are filled with 'a wind, an emptiness' of 'hate'. He says: 'this is my health' ('I was Born Full of Holes.'...').³⁶² These 'holes' undermine the duration of his subjectivity and allow the multiplicity and intensity of extension to unfold in(on) to his sense of the world and of himself making him weak and lethargic. Michaux's idea of 'being full of holes' also relates to Brian Massumi's notion of intensity as affect which 'breaks narrative continuity for a moment to register a state - actually re-register an already felt state (for the skin is faster than the word) expression can resonate with and *amplify intensity* at the price of making itself functionally redundant.'³⁶³ The affect of an image or word is faster than its functionality, and drugs precipitate this 'speed' in their ability to confuse and dissolve consciousness's belief in a unified self or, indeed, image of self. Drug-induced images resonate on a different register and constitute 'a disconnection of signifying order from intensity ... It is narratively de-localized, spreading over *the general body surface*, like a *lateral backwash*

³⁶⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, page 284.

³⁶¹ Jenny, 'Simple Gestures' in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 193.

³⁶² Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page xvii.

³⁶³ Massumi, 'The Autonomy as Affect', page 219.

from the function-meaning interloops travelling the vertical path between head and heart.³⁶⁴

Michaux's work can thereby be approached as the work(lessness) of the insomniac; as 'being' confronted by (and within) the neutre; the swarm of the night. These images trace the multiple sensations of the void. In becoming-animal Michaux's desire for a distanced gaze becomes *an organ of touch*, which resonates with intensity as he positions himself within the designifying zone of intermediacy. His drawings understood as 'blocs of sensations', are without memory and so do not constitute 'vehicles of capture' even on the plane of immanence. This plane is where concepts can be utilised but quickly dissolve into infinite connectivity. Through these blocs of sensations:

The subject is *traced* - in a state of destitution, deconstruction, deconstruction the hollowing out of time and space, the vertiginous depths ... are made to withdraw to the surface of the plane. Hugging closely to the surface of the plane ... [Michaux's drawing] becomes an art of surfaces.³⁶⁵

The surfaces of Michaux's drawings become blocks of sensation. They occupy the same zone of intermediacy as Michaux does, as the distance of verticality dissolves into the intensity of sensual proximity. Thus to declare Michaux's drawings as 'expressive' in the modernist sense - as indicating an ideal line through which to follow him back to his being-in-the-world - is to render them *mere* vehicles. Instead I will declare them constituent of intensities and/or extension upon the uneven plane of immanence which trace Michaux's experiences within/upon the zone of intermediacy. Each of his drawings is as much 'Michaux' as the man himself. Multiple 'events' without a singular uniform memory. Unstable in their conceptual significance, they infinitely fold and unfold, becoming impossible to the grasp of the *tonal*, 'disconnecting from any signifying order'. This is the almost impossible way that I am hoping to sustain a discussion of Michaux's drawings. This has

³⁶⁴ Massumi, 'The Autonomy as Affect', page 219.

³⁶⁵ Baross, 'Deleuze and Derrida, by way of Blanchot', in *Angelaki* volume 5 number 2 august 2000, page 33.

meant that I have had to be irresponsible in my abuse of 'standard' interpretations of his art, but not in a nihilistic way. I have not reduced Michaux's images to nothing. I have not rendered them worthless. Rather, I have tried to demonstrate how Michaux has attempted to re-present a *glimpse* of the void beyond the dialectic, as a 'space' which is full, swarming with infinite and intense points for/of becoming as well as infinite points for dissolving. Whether he did this purposely is open for debate, but what is evident is the (impossible) desire to go back and re-trace, both within his mescaline and his post-mescaline drawings, an already sequestered line of flight. Images, like those executed by Michaux constitute:

... an infinite, unending movement without progress or advance ... [setting] into motion the subject's dissolution, destitution, deconstruction: "from the moment we are outside ourselves ... in that ecstasy which is the image ... the 'real' enters an equivocal realm where there is no longer any limit or interval, where there are no more successive moments and where each thing, absorbed into the void of its reflection, nears consciousness, while consciousness allows itself to become filled with an anonymous plenitude."³⁶⁶

Michaux himself *tries* to articulate this 'anonymous plenitude', this insomnia in words, when in *Infinite Turbulence* (a book written about his experiences on mescaline) he is confronted by:

Innumerable scales. Infinite segmentation ... [which come] rolling down on upon me, towards me, loops, and infinite number of loops and twirls, and cables, plaits and braids, coiling and intertwining in twirls, twirls everywhere, intricately laced, lacework upon lacework, ceaselessly intertwined with yet more lacework, twisting and coiling, an infinity of ornaments for the sake of ornamentation.³⁶⁷

I am arguing that each word written or each stroke articulated by Michaux create *fragments* of experience (without memory). As marks of a discontinuous and uneven plane, partially constituting traces of an energetic, ambiguous force of infinite extension and intensity. This is not

³⁶⁶ Baross, 'Deleuze and Derrida, by way of Blanchot' in *Angelaki*, volume 5, number 2, August 2000, page 27.

³⁶⁷ Plant, *Writing on Drugs*, page 193.

strictly a case of synecdoche, where the part indicates the whole, but where the unstable fragment, which partially escapes conceptual or dialectical capture, implicates other fragments which, almost imperceptibly, speed off into/onto the plane of immanence and in some way *resemble* (but not reflect or imitate) our (alienated) *sense* of self. It is metonymy. What is drawn by/of Michaux, then, according to this Deleuzian reading of Michaux's work is 'the body, ... in so far as it is experienced as sustaining ... sensation.'³⁶⁸ All that's preserved, as stated previously is '... the thing or the work of art - [as] a bloc of sensations, that is to say a compound of percepts and affects ... [which are] *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and *exceed any lived*.'³⁶⁹ In this respect Michaux's drawings exceed 'Michaux'.

³⁶⁸ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, page 23.

³⁶⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* page 164.

3.6 A possible trajectory: Time and space(d) out

One issue that I have not directly dealt with, and unfortunately cannot do justice to within the limits of this chapter, is the way in which Michaux's drug-taking radically altered his sense of time (and indeed space). This also can be related to Bergson's notion of extensity (horizontality) and subsequently to Deleuze and Guattari's *nagual* or 'becoming-animal'. Dialectical time (as past, present and future), and the space within which it is measured 'belongs' to the *tonal*, the vertical; where the plenitude of the void belongs to the *nagual* - as the uncomfortable and horizontal 'world' of the insomniac. Time and space collapse and expand into each other within a ceaseless folding, causing multiple lines of (possible) flight which may take no time, or infinity, to undertake. The thoughts and visions of the insomniac are confused, phantasmic and can go into/onto a multitude of possible trajectories.³⁷⁰ The night confounds the measured teleological time of the day. Night is:

The time of the absence of time is not dialectical. In that time, what appears is that nothing appears, that being that grounds the absence of being, which is when nothing is nothing, and which us no longer as soon as there is something: as if there were beings only by virtue of the ruination of being, when being is lacking. The reversal which, in time's absence, constantly refers us back to the presence of absence, to this presence of absence, to absence as the affirmation of absence, an affirmation where nothing is confirmed, in which nothing does not cease to be affirmed, with the *monotonous insistence of the indefinite*, this is not a dialectical movement. Contradictions do not cancel each other out, nor do they become reconciled; *only in time, for which negation is power, is the 'unity of contraries' possible*. It is time's absence what is new renews nothing; what is present is no longer of the moment; what is present presents nothing, represents itself, and belongs henceforth and for all time to the movement of return.³⁷¹

According to this theory, time 'renews nothing ... it is ... the moment of return'. This indicates the layering up of events and experiences, constantly returning, being re-membered and re-articulated within the non-dialectical

³⁷⁰ Here I'm thinking of the partial-dreams which invade your thoughts as you *begin* to fall asleep or wake up, or when you wake during the night and minutes seem like hours.

³⁷¹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, page 30.

'moment' of the present, which is both 'present' but 'no longer of the moment'. It is a contradictory state of temporal affairs that thwarts the narrative structure of Michaux's recollections and, indeed, our reconstituting of them. We have to incessantly trace and re-trace the lines in order to 're/de-scribe' that which cannot be wholly signified. Time is protean, vibratory, contradictory, and constantly returns/folds back onto itself, haunting consciousness with the disarticulated memory of the zone, re-calling the 'self' back (forward) into its own dissolution/desolation. In this sense, Michaux is: "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."³⁷² Massumi adds to this argument when he asserts that the zone of intermediacy, of the insomniac, or as he calls it, the *virtual* has:

... a different temporal structure, in which past and future brush shoulders with no mediating present, and as having a different, recursive causality; the virtual as cresting in a liminal realm of emergence, where half-actualised actions and expressions arise like waves on a sea to which most no sooner return.³⁷³

Michaux himself said that he wanted to articulate *all* moments as experience by consciousness, not just those *selected* within a sequential and ideal time, one that excludes *all* others. Michaux wanted to 'draw *all* the moments that little by little make up life, to let people see the phrase within, the phrase without words, a rope indefinitely unrolling, winding, accompanying in all its intimacy all that comes in from the outside and the inside too.'³⁷⁴ Michaux's drawings attempt to articulate a series of excessive and protean temporalities, as experienced when taking mescaline. But Michaux's writings and drawings also demonstrate the *asymmetry* and multiplicity of *experienced* time, and the way it often conflicts with the 'official' measured version. This discussion of temporal also ties in with the notion of the *insomniac* and also that of the *virtual*, in that the visions of the night are, as argued

³⁷² Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page ix.

³⁷³ Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect,' page 225.

³⁷⁴ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, (ed. David Ball), page 320.

above, multiple, and are experienced as inhabiting varied, and often contradictory, temporalities. Michaux himself argued: ‘ ... what appears when the evening has come and the film of impressions created by day plays back to you (muted though, and shorter)’³⁷⁵.

³⁷⁵ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, (ed. David Ball), page 320.

To conclude this chapter I will return to the main argument: that perception and re-presentation are *indivisible from* matter, form and image, and not just re-presentations or articulations of them. I will (briefly) develop this line of thought with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming'. If Michaux's perception of space and time is affected by his ingestion of mescaline then so is his perception of shape and size. No longer is the world measured through the (upright) observations of the (spherical and vertical) homo sapien. Instead, within the zone of intermediacy, the 'self' dissolves and perception becomes molecular: the lines, spores, vibrations and flows are concentrated into a non-space where perception multiplies at an intolerable rate and exceeds the grasp of the tonal. The Mescaline drawings (figures 22 and 23) resonate with the t/error of the insomniac, where the swarm of the night envelops the subject(ivity) and refuses to release it into the ecstasy of oblivion. The void within which Michaux falls is full of intricate connections, 'microperceptions [and] microoperations': time returns, folds, slows down and accelerates within the same 'moment'; relations become nonrelations, subject *almost* dissolves into object; the *nagual* intensifies and the universe contracts. Initially put forward by Michaux in his text *The Major Ideals of the Mind, and the Countless Minor Ones*,³⁷⁶ this theory was (later) developed by Deleuze and Guattari:

... if we confer upon perception the molecular power to grasp microperceptions, microoperations, and upon the perceived the force to emit accelerated or decelerated particles floating in time that is no longer our time, and to emit haecceities that are no longer of this world: deterritorialization, [as Michaux said] "I was disorientated ..." (a perception of things, thoughts and desires in which desire thought, and the thing have invaded all of perception: the imperceptible finally perceived). Nothing is left but the zigzag of a line ... shredding faces and landscapes. A whole rhizomatic labor of perception, the moment when desire and perception meld.³⁷⁷

Accordingly Michaux asserts that mescaline gave him:

³⁷⁶ In the accompanying footnote Deleuze and Guattari state that in *The Major Ideals of the Mind, and the Countless Minor Ones* ... Michaux further develops the analysis of speeds, molecular perceptions and "microphenomena" or "microoperations".

³⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, page 283.

The ability to separate out, to gauge, increases in the eye (which can see the most delicate reliefs, insignificant wrinkles)the imagination (where visual images flash by, with unheard-of intensity, far above 'reality' which weakens and diminishes)³⁷⁸

The sensation of the diminished subjectivity is here related to the (excessive) level of the molecular: the body is engulfed by the affective structures of brute materiality. 'Normally', when the subject(ivity) is spherical (and vertical) 'Will and consciousness are subtractive. They are limitative, derived functions which reduce a complexity too rich to be functionally expressed.'³⁷⁹ Once these limits are lifted (in Michaux's case through the taking of mescaline), the rich complexity of the zone of intermediacy becomes apparent and intense, almost too intense to be endured, the limit of endurance being the realm of the insomniac. My aim has been for us, when looking at Michaux's images, (impossibly perhaps) to 'get comfortable with the productive paradox.'³⁸⁰ When while looking for meaning within the *tonal*, we should prepare ourselves to be folded (and unfolded) into and onto the immanent and nagual intensities, as *traced* by Michaux.

Summary

In this chapter I have concentrated on the *mescaline drawings* of the French artist and writer, Henri Michaux, whose drawings have not been discussed in any great detail outside France. In exploring the notion of *becoming* through *decomposition* I have shown how Michaux explored, through both contemporary cultural discourse and by using drugs, the problems of existence, time and space in a way which was radically different to his modernist (American) counterparts. It is the idea, of decomposition and death *within* subjectivity and within the artwork itself, that has allowed me to address the work of Michaux, an artist whose articulations are only ever *almost* there, constantly disintegrating and reforming before the viewer's

³⁷⁸ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page 106.

³⁷⁹ Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', page 223.

³⁸⁰ Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', page 221.

apprehensive gaze. This has allowed me to explore the concept of *temporality* not as one which constitutes a teleological progression towards (and potential overcoming of) death, but as one which incorporates death within a *multiplicity* of temporal and spatial coordinates. In exploring the theories of Blanchot, Deleuze and Guattari and Bergson (who describes the experience of time as varied and incoherent) I have demonstrated how teleological time, based on the idea of the essential self, travelling towards death, decomposes *within* the work of Michaux. This collapses the dialectic between life and death, consciousness and corporeality, and thereby questions the role of the transcendental signifier as the privileged figure of mid-twentieth century artistic production and consumption. What has interested me the most is that Michaux operated at a time when the concept of death and disintegration took on a particularly interesting and multifaceted function, in order, it seems, to articulate several new approaches for understanding and interpreting life in relation to art. My ultimate aim in this chapter has been to look at important connections between French philosophy and the artistic production it provoked, connections which are rarely articulated in *accepted* modernist discourses.

Conclusion:

Face to (de) face

What is a face?

... the face is ... the original unity of glance and speech, eyes and mouth, that speaks ... Thus it is also that which hears the invisible, for "thought is language," This unity of the face precedes in its signification, the dispersion of the senses and the organs of sensibility. Its significance is therefore irreducible. Moreover, the face does not *signify* incarnate, envelop, or signal anything other than self, soul, subjectivity, etc. Thought is speech, and is therefore immediately face ... The other is not signaled by his face he is this face: "Absolutely present, in his face, the Other - without any metaphor - faces me The face is presence, *ousia*"³⁸¹

The figure of the face has woven itself into/onto the body of this thesis as prosopopeia, as the light of knowledge, and as the voice that speaks from a phantasmal space. The figure of prosopopeia, as it wraps itself around all possible thought, speech and sight becomes the primary signifier for a universal subjectivity which belongs to, and is acknowledged within, a *community of the same*.

As argued in the first and second chapters of this thesis, faciality is not necessarily represented by an actual physical face, that is physically seen and recognised, though it can and often does present itself as such. The face primarily represents itself as a complete or partial *surface*. Within this dissertation, the surface in question is that of the painting or drawing. The surface of the face either ' ... reflects light, or on the contrary, emphasises its shadows to the point of engulfing it[self].'³⁸² Over the last two chapters I have argued that Rothko's paintings attempt, through discursive strategies, to reflect *back* the light (of knowledge) in order to *illuminate* the self-identical subject(ivity). Michaux's drawings, on the other hand, *engulf* the face; they attempt *to de-face* the art object as its ability to signify dissolves into the naugal. More of this later.

³⁸¹ Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', pp 100- 01.

³⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, page 168.

The *face*, as the figure of *prosopopeia*, becomes manifest so that it can cover over the paradox of dis-embodied speech. This disembodied speech does not come from a corporeal body, live or dead, but through discourse. But subjectivity cannot acknowledge this fact, instead it raises spectres, names them, so that it can look at its own, ideal, reflection. The figure of *prosopopeia* also brings the *other* back to us *re-membered*; bringing him or her across our own proprietorial borders and resituating his or her 'presence' within our own 'present'. Through the figure of the face we can 'presentify ... make the absent present, as if that which returned were the same ...'³⁸³ Faciality is, I have argued throughout this thesis, the *spectral*, superimposed, via discursive and visual structures, onto the objects (and subjects) we create³⁸⁴ and assemble around *us*. This face is, therefore, *virtual*; it is the (force-ful) animation of (his) subject(ivity) through the spectrality of discourse.

The void is covered. But what is the void? Where is it situated? It is situated *within* discourse, as its own *excess*. It is also the (anti)foundation of all discourses, that which is posited as bringing (forth) *force* to representation, but such force, I argue, manifests from/in an *ontological fiction*. The *force of being*, as self-identical subjectivity, becomes a spectre that has been discursively superimposed onto its own non-being. Discourse *interrupts* death; the disintegrating corporeality of the body; by constructing a semiotic *space* within which the subject(ivity) constructs its own stable and idealised image. However, as argued previously, death constantly undermines the very infrastructure of Being by introducing absolute and irreducible *alterity*.

absolute excess and dissymmetry [is] in the space of what relates us to ourselves and constitutes the "being-in-us," the "being-us," in something completely other than a mere subjective interiority.³⁸⁵

Discourse disavows that which will always be *excessive* to its own structure

³⁸³ Derrida, 'The Force of Mourning', page 182.

³⁸⁴ This includes the 'natural' world where the 'real' can only become manifest through its reappropriation by discursive and visual narratives.

³⁸⁵ Derrida, 'The Force of Mourning', page 189.

and narratives. It does this by ‘... hollow[ing] out the living present that precedes ... death.’³⁸⁶ This is how excess is ‘removed’ so that meaning can be clearly *illuminated* and know as ‘true’ and ‘present’. This is the *work* of discursive strategies.

I have also argued that when we face the *other*,³⁸⁷ believing it to be an autonomous and identical being, we face another (and our own) spectrality. The dichotomy between inside and outside, subject and object, is thereby dislocated, albeit temporarily. The geometry of gazes - between identical subject(ivity)s - requires the lines to be drawn between *their* internal and *the* external world(s). However, this line is never stable, because a fundamental interiorisation has to take place so that subjectivity can consume its *other*. Distance thereby collapses and the two (subject and object) combine. Both the self and its other are - however, incongruously and irreducibly - different. Hence the impossibility of both the subjectivity and its other being *identified* and incorporated by an idealised and mutually-reflective interaction. Discourse denies this impossibility by giving an idealised *face*, an *identity*, to both the subject(ivity) and to its other. But as the subject(ivity) in question is its *own* other, it already has within it an irreducible contingency. Death is always-present within the subjectivity’s constitution. Difference, as death therefore cannot be deferred into the future, permanently covered or interrupted. Although this deferral is promised through and by discourse, self reflectivity instead of providing a self-identical image, becomes ‘the deadly mirror’³⁸⁸ within which subjectivity *performs* its own spectrality and believes that it is its own *force-full* being. However, such force is not based on any ‘real’ *ontological* foundation, but on a *hauntological* one. Within this hauntology comes *all* signification, *conjured* through and by discourse.

“Conjuration” signifies ... the magical incantation destined to evoke, to bring forth with the voice, to *convoke* a charm or a

³⁸⁶ Derrida, ‘The Force of Mourning’, page 180.

³⁸⁷ The ‘other’ can be *any* subject or object. In relation to this argument, the ‘other’ is the artwork and/or the spectre of the artist.

³⁸⁸ Derrida, ‘The Force of Mourning’, page 190.

spirit. Conjunction says in sum the appeal that causes to come forth *with the voice* and thus it makes come, by definition, what *is not there* at the present moment of the appeal. This voice does not describe, what it says certifies nothing; its words cause something to happen.³⁸⁹

This hauntology is a representative fiction, in that it represents that which cannot be re-presented. Hauntology confers power on the image through the conjuring of *significant force*, but such force is semiotically generated and remains trapped within its own fictivity. Subjectivity *faces the other*, in both senses of the term,³⁹⁰ but the alterity it encounters de-faces that very process. This is where repetition comes into play in that, paradoxically, subjectivity can never realise its own (or the other's) de-facement. So discourse sets to work and infinitely *repeats* the promise of deferral, propelling any encounter with death, as absolute and irreducible alterity, into the 'future'. History becomes a *series* of such repetitions, making spectres appear and re-appear in an *attempt* to keep death, as the total dissolution of being, permanently deferred.

He lived there, the house reconstructed itself around him, I saw him behind the window, waiting without hearing me, exhausting the overfullness of our words through the wait.³⁹¹

It can be argued that all (art) historians are undertakers in that they become:

... those who deal with cadavers but so as to seal them, to make the departed disappear, which remains the condition of their "apparition".³⁹²

History is in a constant state of *mourning*. It covers over the loss of *absolute* and ontological force by creating a spectral, a hauntological one in its place. It repeatedly raising the dead through prosopopeiaic figuration. The spectre, made in the impossible image of that which is irredeemably lost, dazzles and

³⁸⁹ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, page 41.

³⁹⁰ When subject(ivity)s face each other they both give a face to the 'other' and turn to face the other in the hope of self-reflectivity i.e. that the 'other' will reciprocate.

³⁹¹ Blanchot, *The Step Beyond*, page 72.

³⁹² Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, page 46.

bewitches with the brightness of *light*, the pharmakon is imbibed and for a *moment* the face of the other comes *into focus*, their voice is *heard* and *understood*: Death is conceptualised, put in its place and given face. The promise of self-reflectivity is discursively made to the subject(ivity) by giving the spectre a *name*.³⁹³ The subject(ivity) is thereby *force-d* to believe in its own (reflected) immortality.

Transfiguration, the event of the absolute visual that constitutes the ground without ground of the foundation of power, the bedazzlement of whiteness that is associated with the anticipation of death “as if” ... “the extreme, final, image, that of the absolutely white figure or face, could only anticipate the taste of the exquisite death”.³⁹⁴

The force of alterity, the lack at the very core of being, posits another problem as the *non*-relation between an ontological origin and the phenomenological world, between *being* and *action*. What causes action and *where* does it take place? It is my contention that any action takes place through and by systems of belief, that it is considered necessary for action to be decided by an autonomous subject(ivity) who then carries out a predictable re-action. In my introduction I discussed Hegel’s circular epistemology within which every question already determines its own answer. Here I take this epistemological argument one step further by putting forward the proposition that no action, or question, can manifest in isolation. Within the wider complexities of the excessive discursive strategies each action has innumerable causes and effects, many of which can never known or determined. Each action is always in excess of itself; it can cause (and be caused by) an infinite number of often contradictory ‘events’. This excessive state of affairs means that any action is volatile and excessive and can destabilise subjectivity at any moment. In an attempt to prevent this happening, any action is pre-performed, within a constant state of repetition, through the *play* of spectres and within/upon the historical

³⁹³ This ‘name’ can be that of the subject itself, or in the context of this argument, that of the artist.

³⁹⁴ Derrida, ‘By Force of Mourning’, page 191.

screen.

... the past is empty, and only the multiple play of mirroring, the illusion that there would be a present destined to pass and to hold itself back in the past, would lead one to believe that the past was filled with events, a belief that would make it less unfriendly, less frightening: a past thus inhabited, even by phantoms ... the appearance of events that are there only to cover over the void, to enchant it in hiding it, while all the same announcing it through the mark of irreversibility.

Modernism is, I contend, one such 'repetition'. It is constantly encircling itself, or being encircled within the post-modern discourse, as an irreversible moment. 'Rothko' is just one spectre trapped within such a moment and the tape-loop makes him play out the same old modernist routines, by semiotically articulating, but at the same time denouncing, his own death. It is, as I have demonstrated in chapter two, almost impossible to free him from such constraints, because in doing so, I can only declare his and my spectrality. When I de-face 'Rothko' and uncover his decomposition, I become intimate with my own alterity and consequently my own death.

* * * * *

In exploring the notion of faciality, to see where it will *finally* lead, I will return briefly to the theories of Deleuze and Guattari. This I will do in order to argue that Michaux's use of figuration and faces within his drawings was an attempt to de-face the unified subject(ivity) at the very same time that modernism was *facing* its own image. Rothko's paintings, in contrast, with their illuminosity and ambiguous form, can be seen as a facial construct, '... a visual percept that crystallises out of "different varieties of vague luminosity without form or dimension"'.³⁹⁵

Deleuze and Guattari argue that there is not one but *two* semiotic systems. One is a white wall, upon which is 'inscribe[d] signs and redundancies.'³⁹⁶ The

³⁹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp 168.

³⁹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp 167.

second is a black hole as 'Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies.'³⁹⁷ These semiotic systems are not discreet in that they penetrate and confuse each other and at their *intersection* a face emerges:

A broad face with white cheeks, a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole. Clown head, white clown, moon-white mime, angel of death, Holy shroud.³⁹⁸

This face manifests *between* the white wall (upon which signification takes place as day-light, rationality, knowledge and life) and the black hole (which is the void, the confusion of night-time, is dark, irrational, chaotic and deathly). A face can be, according to Deleuze and Guattari, any combination of these two systems. As the combination is never static or stable it effects an infinite array of faces, any of which can be appropriated, especially when '... you are just falling asleep, or into a twilight state or hallucination.'³⁹⁹ The dominant discourse, however, selects just one ideal face to give *itself* a signifiatory force. In the West this is the face of Christ: he who rose from the dead in order to redeem man and offer him transcendence beyond the corporeal. This means that all other faces are disavowed, removed and assigned (in)to the black hole; as the 'space' of t/error.

Michaux's drawings can be located on/at the *intersection* between these two systems, between the whiteness of the paper and the blackness of his Indian ink. He constructs lines that are *not quite* signification or non-signification but *struggling* between the two. As Michaux battles to keep hold of the *tonal*, he is constantly re-absorbed by the *nagual*. The twilight zone that he inhabits by taking drugs and the insomnia that inhabits him, opens up the plenitude of the void and a plethora of unknown, and disavowed faces rally to take position. As argued in chapter three, this intersection between the white wall and the black hole opens up an indeterminate zone *between* the

³⁹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp 167.

³⁹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp 167.

³⁹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp 168-9.

polarisation of *all* or *nothing*, between the transcendence offered by the face of Christ and the vertigous void of absolute nothingness. Within this space subjectivity is threatened by a multitude of faces, any one of which can be embodied by its destabilisation. This means that subjectivity can be, and is, established and disestablished within each and every moment of its existence. The ideal face (mask) slips with *every* encounter with difference. The faces *fragily* contained within Michaux's drawings are both individuated as other, and de-individuated as any-other (including the self). Within his constant struggle to keep some sense of self, Michaux fights:

... faces with faces. Facelessness which 'tirelessly connects a wholly unfigurable origin to the parade of faces in which it *could* have embodied itself.'⁴⁰⁰

According to this theory subjectivity becomes a *nomad* without a 'stable' face given through and by discourse. This stable, idealised, face however can never *fully* correspond with the neutrality of faces that constantly parade before him (us). The incongruity of faces: the aging face, the corporeal face, disturbs the idealised image presented to, for, and by us, through discourse. As the ideal and stable face is (momentarily) lost, within the swarm of the twilight hours - *between* day and night - an infinite array of imperfect and partial alternatives manifest before (and within us), welling up from the plenitude of the void. Michaux, when writing about such experiences intensified through the taking of drugs attempts to articulate the dissolution of his own face as:

... not saying not playing
not saying yes, not no.
Monster.
Dark space.
Face.
reaching,
moving,
passing,
slowing, budding toward us ...
Lost face.⁴⁰¹

⁴⁰⁰ Jenny, 'Simple Gestures' in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 197.

⁴⁰¹ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page 151.

The monstrous emerges within such experiences, as the light is not bright enough to illuminate the scene with its knowledgeable beam. The shadows, the creases that burrow into the surface of the ideal face, become deeper, producing black holes from which a multitude of yet-to-be-formed faces emanate. Michaux became obsessed with the fragility of the (ideal) face as: '... the self can be stripped of its 'face', its individual being, or it can haemorrhage out catastrophically. It can also be engulfed'⁴⁰² As the horde of monstrous faces come in and out of the shadows during the twilight hours, a partial memory of them always remains, not as the idealised and *petrified* faces of a re-membered and individuated people, but as a swarm of ambiguous and spectral facial *traits*: '... the re-appearance of the apparition that will never be either the appearing or the disappeared, the phenomenon or its contrary.'⁴⁰³

Looking at a selection of *Mescaline drawings* (figures 24 - 27) we can see how Michaux attempts to 'capture' these monstrous faces as they emerge *between* their appearance and disappearance, from and into the shadows. As our gazes skim across the surface of the drawings, faces emerge to greet us but then again, *not quite*.

Behind the set features, desperately seeking a way out, expressions like a pack of howling dogs.
 From the brush, in black blobs, somehow they flow forth: they liberate themselves ...
 The first few times, one is surprised.
 Faces of lost souls, of criminals, sometimes, neither known nor absolutely unfamiliar either (strange, remote correspondence!)
 Faces of sacrificed personalities, 'selves' that life, determination, ambition, a propensity for rectitude and consistency, stifled, killed off.⁴⁰⁴

Within a stable and open geometry of gazes, the self-reflecting subject(ivity) surveys the material world so that he or she can negate its negativity and then abstract its ideal qualities. However, when looking at Michaux's drawings the viewing subject(ivity) cannot be sure as to

⁴⁰² Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page xiv.

⁴⁰³ Derrida, *The Spectres of Marx*, page 54.

⁴⁰⁴ Henri Michaux, 'En pesent au phénomènène de la peinture,' reprinted in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, page 196.

who is looking at him or her, or why. The faces emerging from these drawings are unstable, protean and sinister. They are partial, homeless, without origin and without essence. The viewing subject(ivity) searches for the ideal stable face on the illuminous white wall,⁴⁰⁵ but finds instead a series of fluctuating black holes, from which the faces emerge, and through which the viewing subjectivity could fall.

The mirror is not the place to observe yourself. Men,
look at yourselves in the paper.⁴⁰⁶

* * * * *

I have already argued that very little has been written about Michaux and his drawings. Although I believe that this situation is about to change, it is important to *indicate* how this lack of a discourse on/of Michaux can cause problems when viewing Michaux's drawings. 'Rothko' and his paintings are nestled within a discourse of promethean proportions. The viewer can access, through reading texts on Rothko's life and paintings, and visiting the artworks themselves, not only the discourse on Rothko, but also that on other modernist artists, practices and critiques. However, Michaux doesn't have such a substantial discursive backdrop for his work, his personae (as artist) is not yet as 'formed' as Rothko's. This *adds*, in my opinion, to the instability of Michaux's work; as a viewing experience and as an object for investigation/interpretation.

Michaux, I contend, as both an artist and a writer, *traces* a pre-post modern 'moment' at the same time as the dominant modernist discourse, we are lead to believe, was all pervasive. Because Michaux worked on the *margins* of two disciplines, writing and drawing, he occupied a liminal space, a zone of indeterminacy if you like. Although its not unusual to

⁴⁰⁵ The 'white wall' in Michaux's case was the paper he drew on.

⁴⁰⁶ Ball, *Darkness Moves*, page 36.

be both writer and artist, I believe that with the trauma still being felt in France after the second world war, and with the the social, political and cultural upheavals also occurring at the time, Michaux, along with many of his contemporaries were using what today would be called 'deconstructive methods' to try and understand their world and their position within it.

To finish I will make the following claim: Post modernism, through its deconstructive methods, believes that it has exorcised, or is in the process of exorcising, the ghost(s) of modernism. But can it do this given that it *presents* and *names* it, albeit as the realm of self-deluded spectres? It is as if deconstruction conjures up the enemy so that it can conjure it away. Although the self-identical subject(ivity) has been unmasked, de-faced, so as to reveal the void underneath, this process of revelation has to be repeated in order to keep the spectres 'in their place'. This is, I contend the 'triumphant phase of mourning work',⁴⁰⁷ where discourse *both* celebrates and mourns the loss of the self-identical subject(ivity). It is my contention that at *any one time* discourse either celebrates (in the case of post-modernism) or mourns (in the case of modernism) the loss of the self-identical subject(ivity). At any one moment, within any culture or discourse, *both* the celebration, and the mourning - of the loss of the self-identical subject(ivity) - are manifest. This means that within any epoch *both* modernist and post-modernist 'moments' and/or 'traces' coincide with and contaminate each another. Fred Orton makes a similar claim in relation to symbol and allegory:

As for the distinction between the Modern and the Post-Modern as epochal descriptions, though the basic forces and relations that determine material existence and the forms of consciousness we make of it have changed, and continue to change, the presence of the symbol/allegory binary, unchanged in its meaning and value since the era of Romanticism, probably indicates that no finally distinctive break has yet occurred that might be represented in practical consciousness as Post-Modernism. If this is not the case,

⁴⁰⁷ Derrida, *The Spectres of Marx*, page 52.

and the Post-Modern is with us, then what is claimed to be its defining impulse in practical consciousness is a residue of the beginnings of the Modern. The symbol/allegory opposition still structures practical consciousness. And Modernism's structuring binary oppositions are still in place doing their work.⁴⁰⁸

I will end this dissertation with prose - as it has been so important throughout my writing - a quote from Michaux, which I think encapsulates many of the arguments made in this dissertation:

Like a bell ringing out a catastrophe, a note listening only to itself, a note piercing everything, a low note like a kick in the belly, an aging note, a note like a minute that has to cross a century, a note sustained through the discord of voices, a note like a death warning, a note that has been warning me this whole hour through.⁴⁰⁹

Summary

In this last chapter I have concluded by drawing together, and considering, the problematics unravelled in the preceding three chapters. My main aim was to take apart the *division* between modern and post-modern concepts of subjectivity, especially in relation to death, in order to show the similarities between the two, thereby arguing *against* the myth that the post-modern subject(ivity) is the antithesis of its modernist predecessor. I have demonstrated how the art and theories of modernism were being questioned at the *very time* they were at their zenith. By utilising again the figure of *prosopopeia*, I have demonstrated how American artists such as Rothko attempted to cover over, by creating a *face* (of the artist), the threat of the ambiguous, deathly and unpredictable materiality of both the viewing subject(ivity) and the artwork itself. I have, however, concentrated on Michaux in this closing chapter to demonstrate how, in his work and in the theories that informed it, the impetus to *de-face* developed. By looking

⁴⁰⁸ Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, page 13.

⁴⁰⁹ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, page 321.

specifically at Michaux's drawings of faces and almost-human forms, I have demonstrated how he *struggled* with the attempt to privilege the contingency and multiplicity of the corporeal, (as the *nagual* that inhabits subject(ivity)), over the transcendental fixed and *faced*. I have also demonstrated how the dominant discourse(s) of the West have attempted to cover and stabilise the nagual through the creation and implementation of a rhetorical subject(ivity), especially within its relationship to art and the artist.

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