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# Fragmentation and Unity: Language and its Becoming in the Essays of Yves Bonnefoy

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# FRAGMENTATION AND UNITY: LANGUAGE AND ITS BECOMING IN THE ESSAYS OF YVES BONNEFOY

**LAYLA ROESLER**

**A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**ABSTRACT**

An inverse correlation describes the relation between the considerable amount of critical work done on the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy as compared to the rather modest quantity of poetry he has produced and, by contrast, the paucity of critical work on his essays relative to the great number of them that he has written. In the main, the essays of Yves Bonnefoy remain significantly understudied because they are perceived –both by the critical community and by Bonnefoy himself—as being "secondary" not only to the primary poetic enunciation, but also to the theo-philosophical notion of *présence* that subtends his writing.

This work aims to contribute to filling the gap in understanding the role and function of the essay in Bonnefoy's œuvre. I argue in it that the essay assumes a preponderant role in his work because its nature corresponds to and dialogues with specific aspects of his own thought. I therefore examine the generic status and characteristics of the essay to demonstrate that it can incorporate a number of his key theoretical and literary positions more efficiently than poetry. I argue further that in Bonnefoy's work although poetry has a functional capacity of immediacy which can lead to the experience of the "presence" that is his principal focus, it is only the essay that allows for a holistic understanding of this "presence" and, consequently, greater receptivity to the acts of presence contained not only within its own matrix, but also in that of the poetry. This occurs precisely because of the nature of the essay: it is a genre open both to infiltration by poetry and by philosophy, with both potentially co-existing within its boundaries and nourishing each other to provide a more complete experience for the reader. This openness in the definition of the essay creates a sort of blurring at the edges of the genre which Bonnefoy consciously or unconsciously capitalizes on, using the essay to integrate the apparent contradictions of his philosophical position through tools derived from linguistics, and thus guiding the reader toward an apprehension of the presence that can inhabit language.

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# INTRODUCTION –
# Essay and Poetry: A House Divided?

"Il y a dans la poésie moderne française," writes Yves Bonnefoy in *L'Improbable,* "un cortège du Graal qui passe, les objets les plus vifs de cette terre—l'arbre, un visage, une pierre—et ils doivent être nommés. Il en va de notre espoir" (I, 126). His comment invites us to see poetry as the very figure of a union composed of naming and hope. And if this improbable concatenation of elements is cited in introduction here, that is because it mirrors the central concerns of Bonnefoy's written work. Indeed, he writes in his essay "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie'": "*Je voudrais réunir, je voudrais identifier presque la poésie et l'espoir*." This, then, is the call to arms, the battle-cry which resounds from the earliest of his texts to the most recent. And yet, despite this explicit valorization of the very notion of poetry and the consequent importance Bonnefoy attaches to the act of producing it, what is perhaps most striking for his readers is that he has not confined his writing to poetry alone. On the contrary, one of the most remarkable aspects of his *œuvre* is the double path he has chosen, maintaining in his writing a difficult equilibrium between two seemingly opposite poles: pure poetry in his well-known collections of poems[1] as well as in his narrative "récits en rêve,"[2] and a substantial collection of rigorous and thought-provoking essays that have spanned the entirety of his writing career.

And although Bonnefoy's poetic production remains, all things considered, relatively modest, he is a prolific writer of essays covering a broad range of subjects. Indeed, his essayistic production can only be described as vast and varied, especially if we consider the heterogeneity of the textual media within which his essays appear: introductions to texts written by others or

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1 *Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve; Hier régnant désert; Début et fin de la neige, Planches courbes, La Longue Chaîne de l'Ancre*, etc.

2 *Récits en rêve, Rue traversière, La Vie errante*, etc.

introductions to his own translations (of Shakespeare or Yeats, for instance); singly bound volumes of considerable length (*Rome 1630*; *Arthur Rimbaud*, etc.); prefaces to books on art and painting. Finally, there are also the written versions of talks where he spoke either as a guest speaker, or as the recipient of one of the numerous prizes he has received. The complete list of texts he presents as "essays" is long indeed.

Within this abundant and scattered corpus of essays, however, a number of them have a particular status inasmuch as they are gathered, organized, and presented by Bonnefoy as self-contained collections. For though he gives the main body of his essays the general title of "L'Improbable," this rubric itself consists of several independent volumes: *L'Improbable* (1959), *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* (1967), *Le Nuage rouge* (1977), and *La Vérité de parole* (1988). And although diversity marks the subjects these volumes engage with, at the same time the collections stand as a unified whole, first, rather technically, because they tend overwhelmingly to contain critical essays, but also, more generally, because these essays remain firmly rooted in the problems and imaginative spaces of Western cultural tradition. Additionally, Bonnefoy's collections of essays can literally be read as unified structures because they really do comprise an integrated whole, specifically presented as such. In the "Note bibliographique" to *La Vérité de parole*, Bonnefoy clearly indicates the relationship between the volumes of essays: "*La Vérité de parole* est le troisième volume de *L'Improbable*, recueil d'essais sur la poétique dont les deux premières parties sont *L'Improbable* (suivi d'*Un rêve fait à Mantoue*) et *Le Nuage rouge*" (*VdP* 331). By identifying *Vérité* as the *third*, and not the fourth volume of the collection of essays, Bonnefoy's statement clearly unites two original collections (*Improbable* and *Mantoue*) into one structure.

In the present work, though I examine the essays collected under the general title of *L'Improbable*, I focus more specifically on those contained in the 1980 volume entitled

*L'Improbable*. The latter is particularly interesting because it explicitly combines essayistic prose with poetic texts while also clearly demonstrating the intellectual structuring that governs Bonnefoy's essays. Indeed, for this edition, Bonnefoy combined the original series of *Improbable* essays with those of *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* in a single volume, bridging them with four additional essays entitled "Quatre Notes," while inserting two new essays into the "Mantoue" volume. This careful construction demonstrates the functional ambitions Bonnefoy attributes to his essays, and motivates my analysis of their purpose in his work, for though the unifying theme of the collections as a whole is a reflection on poetics, in these texts essay and poetry really do merge together not only by their common projection of the core ideas structuring Bonnefoy's writing, but also by the indubitably poetic qualities of the language in both. Finally, and most crucially, essay and poetry also fuse through the continuous interplay of the images that cross and re-cross the highly permeable boundary between them.

Many readers come late to Bonnefoy's essays. Seduced by the verse of Bonnefoy the poet, they come slowly to the essays to find out more, to discover the thinker behind the poetry. For that approach, we realize intuitively, is a widely accepted definition of the nature of the essay: prose that reveals the working of a mind that would otherwise remain hidden behind the scrim of poetic language. The reader of Bonnefoy's essays is not disappointed, for his essays do indeed reveal the intellectual—even philosophical—structures that shape his poetry. And yet, the complexity of the thought they reveal exacts a price: his essays have the popular reputation of being "complicated," or "obscure." Certainly, as numerous critics have suggested, they are far from transparent.[3] Indeed, at first reading, they do seem dense and difficult, uniting complex

[3] Regarding this absence of transparency, even Bonnefoy himself seems to concur with the description generally applied to his writing when he responds to a question by Bernard Falciola by saying: "Je suis surpris d'entendre parler de limpidité à mon propos" (*EsP* 63).

abstract concepts with a rich, poetic language, and covering great leaps of time and space in the variety of the subjects evoked.

Most critics recognize and explicitly acknowledge the richness and depth of Bonnefoy's essays. However, their very legitimate focus on his poetry has all too frequently led them to read his essays in a somewhat reductive manner, often describing them as no more than obscure but necessary companion pieces to his poetry. F.C St Aubyn recapitulates a common position when he cites Olivier de Magny's description of *L'Improbable* as the "art poétique le plus important et le plus personnel qui se soit exprimé depuis les grands textes didactiques de Reverdy, de Breton et de Jouve" (118). But an *art poétique* implies a need to explain and thus, by extension, a potential anxiety regarding incomprehension. Thus Daniel Leuwers writes in his, *Yves Bonnefoy*, that Bonnefoy is "un poète qui n'est jamais sûr d'être pleinement entendu au niveau de ses seuls poèmes et [...] a besoin de les accompagner de textes obliques" (62). Leuwers's statement is of particular importance for me because it points toward the question that first engaged me, namely, what is the function of the preponderance of essays within Bonnefoy's work? Can they indeed be read as some form of anxiety regarding a message that might not be transmitted by the poetry alone? If so, what kind of message cannot be transmitted in one form of writing, but might come across in another?

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter showed that Bonnefoy specifically conjoins the seemingly disparate terms of poetry and hope. What has interested me is that the identification of poetry and hope does not exist in a vacuum, but is rather the positive side of a Janus-like image whose negative double appears to discredit prose as being incapable of attaining the esthetic and ethical standards set by poetry. This negative quality, that is, the moral incapacity he sees in prose, has its own importance in the question of the role of the essay inasmuch as traditionally, the essay is a genre that has been closely associated not only with prose, but also

with the most negative connotations thereof, that is, the notion of prosaic writing, or writing that is uninspiring and thus unable to aspire to the elevated and elevating status of poetry.[4] This point is important for analyzing Bonnefoy's essays. I would, in fact, contend that his choosing to write in the very specific type of prose connoted by the essay has its own significance. For the essay, in point of fact, represents more than just a casual assembling of thoughts in prose. On the contrary, it is defined by specific characteristics and ambitions whose combination makes of it a genre that is particularly apt to reflect some of the philosophical and ontological concerns at the heart of Bonnefoy's oeuvre. Indeed, the essay is perhaps the *only* literary form that can simultaneously contain all facets of the position Bonnefoy seeks to transmit, for it allows for the existence of a literary space wherein the contradictions of poetry and prose can be momentarily reconciled as, for example, they are in the fragment of an essay where Bonnefoy metaphorically links poetry and hope in a sentence of prose: "je voudrais réunir [...] la poésie et l'espoir." It is emblematic that the stated goal, the union of poetry and hope, takes place in a prose sentence embedded in an essay. Indeed, it is precisely Bonnefoy's use of these tendrils of thought to connect prose and poetry that reveals an underlying agenda which has perhaps as much importance as his explicitly asserted poetical aims. Over the course of the following chapters, I will explicitly address the idea of the literary space of the essay and how various theoretical definitions of this space–in particular those that confront each other—give us the means to understand how and why the essay is the ideal textual form within which Bonnefoy's philosophical concerns can appear.

Returning to Bonnefoy's own understanding of the text uniting hope and poetry, one can see that even though he uses prose to express this union, the gist of the statement itself suggests the role the essay has with regard to poetry. For if poetry equals hope, then the essay, simply

[4] This meaning is similar in French. Significantly, in terms of Bonnefoy's preoccupations, the primary definition given in the Robert dictionary is one that tends more toward the ethical than the esthetic and evokes the terminology of "high" versus "low" stature: "écriture qui manque d'élévation."

because it is not poetry, can *de facto* be considered as inferior since it cannot attain the privileged status associated with the term "hope." This position is congruent with the attitude that Bonnefoy himself adopts with regard to the relationship between his own prose and poetry. In a talk at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (May 12, 1998) where he discussed the historical relationship between prose and poetry, Bonnefoy stressed the importance prose has had in maintaining a meaningful intellectual space within which poetry can emerge. After the talk, in response to a question, however, he commented to me that the role of his prose–and more particularly that of his essayistic prose—is essentially ancillary: prose exists to help us get to poetry. This statement clearly establishes the position Bonnefoy has reiterated in numerous theoretical texts and interviews (see, for instance, *Entretiens sur la Poésie* or the Colloque de Pau texts). From a critical point of view, however, the situation is fraught with ambivalence. The very existence of Bonnefoy's essays within the context of his explicit valorization of poetry creates a conundrum: do they really represent, as Leuwers suggested in the text cited above, some uncertainty regarding the transmission of a message through poetry ("un poète qui n'est jamais sûr d'être pleinement entendu au niveau de ses seuls poèmes"), or are they simply two forms of writing with divergent sets of ambitions and goals?

Certainly, Leuwers's hypothesis seems to be corroborated by the fact that Bonnefoy himself makes explicit links between specific essays and their corresponding poetic texts:

> «L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie» fut pour *Hier régnant désert* ce que «Les tombeaux de Ravenne» avaient été pour *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* ; et ce que «La poésie française et le principe d'identité» allait être pour *Pierre écrite* ou «Baudelaire contre Rubens» pour *Dans le leurre du seuil* : un emploi des catégories de pensée qui s'étaient dégagées de l'écriture des poèmes, premier fraiement (*YB* 166)

This comment is noteworthy, for implicit within it are certain assumptions that allow us appreciable insight into the way Bonnefoy perceives the relationship between essay and poetry. A first significant point is that he explicitly associates each major volume of poetry with its "own"

essay. Although there can be no doubt about his sincerity in giving us this information, this linking of specific essays with companion pieces of poetry must be approached with some caution. In reality, that information, so freely vouchsafed, is a double-edged sword, for while it doubtless gives us a useful insight into how he understands his own writing, it also has the latent function of orienting our reading of the essays and their corresponding poetic texts in the direction he would have us take. This caveat notwithstanding, the point to retain is that his own clear perception of a pattern of co-existence between poetry and essay hints at a symbiotic relationship between the two kinds of writing. This interconnection is further highlighted by his reference to what he terms *des catégories de pensée.* These "categories of thought," which are derived from the poetic text and yet somehow distinct from it, have significant implications, for they point toward the existence of a semantic content which, though it appears to be generated in the poetry itself, is nonetheless separable from that same poetry, making it thus both independent and transmissible, since it clearly has been transposed from the poetry into the essays.

The suggestion of a possible transposition of meaning from poetry to prose is particularly pertinent to the question of the function Bonnefoy's essays. For if his statement indicates that he believes his essays to carry on the intellectual work initiated in his poetry, one of the most significant consequences I draw from it is the explicit linking of poetry and essay in a single continuum of thought. In other words, by conjoining poetry and essayistic prose into a unified intellectual framework, Bonnefoy reveals two of the vital elements that shape his work: first, the very important notion that both prose and poetry are a means to a greater end, to what one might call a philosophical goal; and second, the notion that both partake of a similar creative impulse rooted, naturally enough, in a single *imaginaire*. The latter idea becomes clearer when one compares the description that Bonnefoy gives of the poetic act to the earlier description of the development of the essay out of the "categories of thought" given in the poetry. An interview

with Bernard Falciola provides what is perhaps Bonnefoy's clearest expression of the mechanics of the act of writing poetry. For him, poetry emerges in several stages. Out of a preliminary silence is born the need for a "true speech": "au début donc," he says, "le silence, le besoin qui s'est fait sentir à nouveau d'une parole vraie" (*EsP* 25). Following this, "le premier travail" consists of a sort of verbal gathering-in. He writes: "des mots surgissent. Des mots, des fragments de phrases, des métaphores, des métonymies aussi, et j'entends par là des associations sans raison visible, irrationnelles, énigmatiques..." (*EsP* 25). These enigmatic and obscure words to which he refers are the raw material of the poetic shaping. They lead to the second stage: "comprendre, me demander ce que ces signaux «veulent dire» : j'entends par là découvrir des relations signifiantes entre certaines *présences* qu'il faut préserver comme telles" (*EsP* 27, emphasis Bonnefoy).[5] This intellectual act of "understanding" is also a discovery, for it leads to the vision of a new world which is slowly defined by the language that brought it into existence: "c'est bien un monde qui de proche en proche se précise, puisqu'une langue à nouveau se forme" (*EsP* 27). Finally, in the third and last stage, the poet must find the means to integrate the truth of the new world which has slowly ripened in the inner self and which, he emphatically states, is not a description but rather the intellectual and moral acceptance of it: "[c'est] celle de son *acceptation* (emphasis Bonnefoy). Car de quoi est faite la poésie sinon d'unité, d'unité vraie qu'on a pu rejoindre, c'est-à-dire d'assentiment?" (*EsP* 28).

Two meaningful points can be gleaned from the above description. The first is the vital issue of the philosophical underpinnings subtending his thought. Falciola notes that Bonnefoy's poetry aims toward a philosophical and moral dimension lying well beyond mere esthetic

[5] In this citation, the syntactic choices contained in the word "présences" provide a lapidary view of some of the tensions that inhabit Bonnefoy's work. Though the use of the plural tends to mask the notional significance of a term and suggests the multiplicity of the elements that constitute presence, the deictic function of the italics retrieves the dispersal by drawing attention to the word.

concerns when he says of it that: "l'on retrouve un souci qu'on peut dire moral au moins autant qu'esthétique" (*EsP* 30). Many critics have pinpointed this moral dimension, which conditions in large part what one might describe as the "tone" of Bonnefoy's essayistic writing, lending it sometimes an overtly didactic cast. The second point is of particular interest, for it provides a bridge between Bonnefoy's poetry and his essayistic prose. Indeed, comparing the Falciola description of the creation of poetry with Bonnefoy's earlier indication of clear parallels between individual essays and specific collections of poetry shows that there is a certain similarity in the gestation of both. For poetry, as we saw above, the work consists in understanding the given material, that is, the words. For the essay, it would seem that the approach is similar, with the difference that the raw material is not the metaphors and various types of metonymy that rise irresistibly out of silence, but is the finished poetry itself. In his comment linking each collection of poetry to an essay, Bonnefoy carefully establishes his position by associating the essay with the term "un emploi": "[l'essai est] l'emploi des catégories de pensée qui s'était dégagées de l'écriture des poèmes" (quoted in Ravaud 166). His use of the word is significant, for *un emploi*, "a use of," opposes prose and poetry by stressing the functional capacity of prose, and thus reiterates the Bonnefoyian hierarchy in categories of writing. This notion is further substantiated by the comments made in another essay, where Bonnefoy writes: "justement la poésie n'est pas un «emploi» de la langue" (*I* 247), thereby suggesting that to see poetry as a mere use of language is to debase it, to disallow what he sees as its "higher purpose."

Within the context of Western perceptions of written forms and genres, Bonnefoy's position is far from unusual. On the contrary, the notion of a hierarchy between prose and poetry is by no means specific to his thought. Indeed, his distinction between prose and poetry is very reminiscent of the more "technical" aspects of the position Jean-Paul Sartre proposes, with the glaring difference that where Sartre's conclusion is one which denigrates poetry for its lack of

ethical commitment, Bonnefoy finds in poetry the highest moral achievement of language. Sartre's appraisal is particularly useful because it provides an introduction to how Bonnefoy absorbs images and vocabulary established by other thinkers. And though Bonnefoy's interaction with the Sartrian analysis of literature and genre doubtless remains latent, the comparison between the two writers shows the omnipresent Bonnefoyian tendency to rework extant intellectual constructions in the light of his own imperatives and integrate the new synthesis into his own writing. This strategy of absorption and transformation is, I would argue, a recurrent *modus operandi* for Bonnefoy, resurfacing most notably with reference to his positions against the structuralist and deconstructionist currents of thought, or even with regard to his vision of *présence*. Finally, concrete links between Sartre and Bonnefoy do exist, even if they were never developed extensively. In a lengthy footnote to *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre, playfully punning on Bonnefoy's name (bonne foi), favorably quotes several passages from the young Bonnefoy's contribution to *Le Surréalisme en 1947* in order to demonstrate that all surrealists are not blind to the difficulties of reconciling the division between imagination and *praxis* (303, note 6).

It is in that same text that Sartre proposes a complete distinction between prose and poetry when he writes: "Le prosateur écrit, c'est vrai, et le poète aussi. Mais entre ces deux actes d'écrire il n'y a de commun que le mouvement de la main qui trace les lettres. Pour le reste leurs univers demeurent incommunicables et ce qui vaut pour l'un ne vaut pas pour l'autre" (70). He continues, "la prose est utilitaire, par essence," meaning that the transparency of prose fosters communication by drawing the reader into sharing the mental structures of the writer: "la prose est d'abord une attitude d'esprit: il y a prose quand [...] le mot passe à travers notre regard comme le verre au travers du soleil" (71). Sartre reinforces this image by a similar description of style: "et le style, bien sûr, fait la valeur de la prose. Mais il doit passer inaperçu. Puisque les mots sont

transparents et que le regard les traverse, il serait absurde de glisser parmi eux des verres dépolis" (75). It is interesting to note that Bonnefoy's poetry and his prose both contain an image that is not dissimilar, that of a window which reflects the sunlight, thus becoming opaque. In Bonnefoy's work, however, this opacity obtains an ethical value that is diametrically opposed to the positive connotations transparency has in Sartre's thinking. Indeed, Bonnefoy links the opacity produced by the reflected sunlight to the recognition of poetry and through it, the all-important notion of the *présence*: "mais la chance de la poésie à venir […] est qu'elle est à point de connaître, dans son durable exil, ce que peut ouvrir la *présence*. […] Était-ce donc si difficile? Ne suffisait-il pas d'apercevoir, au flanc de quelque montagne, une vitre au soleil du soir?" (*I* 133).

Poetry, for Sartre, revels in its own opacity and the poetic word becomes, for the poet, a *thing* rather than an instrument of communication: "En fait, le poète s'est retiré d'un seul coup du langage-instrument; il a choisi une fois pour toutes l'attitude poétique qui considère les mots comme des choses et non comme des signes" (19). Bonnefoy, unsurprisingly, concurs wholeheartedly with the reification of the poetic word, but reverses the terms, attributing the higher moral value to poetry, and commensurately allowing prose little more than a purely functional capability. It could, of course, be argued that for Bonnefoy, essayistic prose has less value than poetry simply because it is secondary and comes out of the poetry. But this very fact highlights the differences between the Sartrian and Bonnefoyian analyses. For Sartre, the universes of prose and poetry remain "incommunicables." And although he concedes that there can be a certain "contamination" from one category to another when he writes "dans toute poésie une certaine forme de prose, c'est-à-dire de réussite, est présente et réciproquement, la prose la plus sèche referme toujours un peu de poésie, c'est-à-dire une certaine forme d'échec" (87, note 5), the aims of the two types of writing remain for him profoundly incompatible. For Bonnefoy,

however, although prose and poetry remain distinct, as seen in his use of the word "emploi" to distinguish them, they also share a greater purpose, which can be understood as the transmission of a more important vision.

The question of this "emploi" leads to a greater difficulty. Indeed, there is a certain ambiguity in the grammatical construction of the Bonnefoyian statement quoted earlier ("un emploi des catégories de pensée qui s'étaient dégagées de l'écriture des poèmes, *premier fraiement* " (my emphasis). The end of the sentence cannot but give pause: what is this "premier fraiement," and to what is it grammatically apposed, the "écriture des poèmes," or the essayistic "emploi"? In part, the disquiet experienced by the reader stems from the word itself, which is unknown, appearing neither in the *Trésor de la Langue Française*, nor in the *Robert*. It would therefore seem either to be a neologism created by Bonnefoy for his own purposes, or an archaic word that has fallen out of use. And yet the word itself, clearly rooted in the verb "frayer," is perfectly understandable within the context. Though such word-making is by no means a technique commonly used by Bonnefoy[6], it is useful to note that it correlates with a renewed focus on language seen as the locus for the unveiling of true meaning which is so central to some 20th century philosophical currents. For Bonnefoy also the creative potential of a re-centered language connecting us to a more authentic way of being cannot be overstated. Finally, the subordination he proposes for the essay would stem from his suggestion that poetry emits certain ideas ("des catégories de pensée") that remain opaque even for their creator. The prose of the essay could thus be read as an on-going attempt to furnish a more transparent meaning, making

[6] On the contrary, and in terms of "normal" words, critic Jérôme Thélot makes much of the relative "poverty" of the vocabulary used by Bonnefoy: "le lexique de Bonnefoy est de faible étendue. Spécialement son lexique nominal. Dans *Douve*, celui des quatre livres où les répétitions de substantifs sont les moins nombreuses, donc celui des quatre livres au lexique nominal le moins réduit, on compterait pour un total de 5000 noms, 1975 noms différents. C'est fort peu, si l'on croît l'échelle de Pierre Guiraud: à peine plus que Racine et Valéry, moins que tous les autres poètes français" (146).

the "premier fraiement" encapsulate in telegraphic manner some of the strategies he uses to conjoin poetry and essay.

Bonnefoy is seconded in this particular vision of the connection between poetry and essay by contemporary critics working on the relationship between the two genres. Indeed, Jean-Pierre Zubiate, in his article, "Essai et Poésie au XX$^{e}$ siècle," concludes not only that essay and poetry have become complementary forms of writing, but explains such a rapprochement by stating that "Il n'est pas […] gratuit que l'essai et la poésie se soient rapprochés à une époque où la poésie doutait de sa raison d'être. Dans l'essai se déployait l'affirmation d'un genre qui, pour être aussi indéfini que possible ne doutait absolument pas de soi, mais posait les éléments fondamentaux pour produire un énoncé de réalité assumant la transformation qu'il faisait subir à son objet" (415). Zubiate's evocation of the single object treated by poetry and essay tends to confirm Bonnefoy's suggestion that the *terminus ad quem* of both forms of writing can be a unique element. Moreover, Zubiate's point concerning the counterweight the essay provides to modern poetry's sense of doubt, echoes and reinforces the Leuwers earlier comment about Bonnefoy as: "un poète jamais sûr d'être entendu au niveau de ses seuls poèmes […]" (Leuwers 62). Finally, there can be no doubt that Bonnefoy's attitude of placing himself deliberately in the position of questioner of his own work is quite characteristic. In the introductory remarks of the 1983 University of Pau colloquium where he was invited to participate in the analysis of his own work, Bonnefoy said "L'écriture est une aventure de l'esprit dans laquelle ce qui se produit échappe très largement à son créateur, si même ce mot de création a du sens. Autant de problèmes se posent à l'écrivain, à partir de ce qu'il écrit que [sic[7]] de certitudes s'en dégagent. Dans ces conditions, il est le premier à s'interroger sur ce qui se passe sous sa plume" (5).

[7] This text is a transcription of a series of oral interactions; 'peu' would be a more logical transcription of what was probably said.

In sum, then, faced with the specific problem of the essays, it would seem that Bonnefoy believes, and would have us believe, that his essays represent a struggle to understand the categories of thought generated by his poetry through an intellectual exercise that takes the form of prose. However, given the framework that Bonnefoy proposes to structure the relationship between his prose and his poetry, my goal is to examine his essays to see whether they really are limited to the activity of clarifying, or even dismantling, the zone of shadows produced by the poetry. For while Bonnefoy's essays do derive their meaning, and indeed, their *raison d'être* from his poetry, they are also unique in that they represent a specific response to the esthetic and philosophical concerns which are central to his *œuvre*. In other words, his essays, precisely *because they are essays,* and as such, representatives of a specific literary genre, have a crucial role in his work. They are a response to a need that poetry cannot adequately fill. Thus to study them as mere adjuncts to Bonnefoy's poetry is to do disservice to the totality of his project. As I suggested earlier, such an approach has not yet been fully explored, for, in the main, Bonnefoy's critics have tended to relegate his essays to the position of satellites revolving around the poetic center, using them mainly to illuminate and clarify certain poetic problems and to demonstrate the theoretical position from which his poetry derives.

This marginalization of the essays, whereby they become handmaids to the central poetic enunciation, itself derives from an implicit theoretical position which is applied to the relationship between essay and poetry not only by literary critics reading Bonnefoy, but also, as we saw in the preceding pages, by the poet himself. To take an example of the dominant critical position, Alex Argyros, in his incisive article, "The Topography of Presence: Bonnefoy and the Spatialization of Poetry" reverses the terms of essay and poetry, but essentially presents the problem as it stands when he writes: "For the most part, the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy has been read as an application of Bonnefoy's numerous theoretical statements concerning the function of

poetry" (244). Hence the normative critical tendency thus far has been to situate the ensemble constituted by Bonnefoy's poetry and essays within a mechanism characterized by the opposition of two terms. Consequently, Argyros continues,

> critical work on Bonnefoy […] has operated within the horizon of one of the fundamental binary oppositions of Western esthetics: pure idea/its reification […] Specifically, the theory/application couplet makes a number of implicit assumptions. It assumes the possibility of a clear demarcation between two identifiable realms: the realm of theoretical prose and that of its realization in verse. (244)

Argyros, it must be said, does not subscribe to the notion that a system of binary oppositions can explain the relationship between Bonnefoy's poetry and his essays. Nonetheless, by seeing the poetry as an application of a theoretical precursor, he reverses the direction that Bonnefoy himself gives to the genesis of his work. This point merits attention despite the fact that it is essentially an insoluble problem of origin: which came first, the chicken or the egg; the poetry oriented toward ontological concerns, or the ontological concerns which took the shape of poetry? This point is far from trivial for the problem of locating a stable grounding origin is one that continues to haunt contemporary philosophical investigations and appears also as omnipresent undercurrent in Bonnefoy's work.

That said, although the locus of origin in Bonnefoy's work can be questioned from a critical perspective, it is important to stress the primacy that poetry and the poetic act have for him, because it is in the light of his feeling for poetry that some of his attitudes toward prose and essay become more comprehensible. Bonnefoy has clearly said on several occasions that he feels himself to be first and foremost a poet; his mission is to render unto poetry the ancient transformative power it once held. For him, as the title of his essay "Sur la fonction du poème" suggests, poetry has a function and thus, a purpose, indeed, an ontological *being* that sets it apart from other literary forms. Jacques Plessen, in a lecture given at the Colloque de l'Université de Pau, clearly indicates that this Bonnefoyian "fonction" is to be seen in opposition to a notion of

"functioning," and refers more to the semantic potential that lies in poetry than to a technical investigation into the details of how poetry works, or even an attempt to arrive at a definition of poetry. Plessen says of the poet that "dans ses réflexions sur la poésie, Bonnefoy part de cette question [...] 'Que peut la poésie?' et non pas celle-ci: 'qu'est-ce que la poésie ou comment fonctionne-t-elle?'" (13). This comment is entirely congruent with the position Bonnefoy seems to hold: for him, poetry has a power that transcends its limited physical or intellectual nature, which consists of words agglomerated on a page; poetry is, in fact, almost a belief. In a sense, therefore, Bonnefoy's position is akin to Pascal's leap of faith, stating that beyond rational understanding there exists a world which is no less real and true for not being immediately perceptible: "tout ce qui est incompréhensible ne laisse pas d'être" (*Pensées*, frag. 230-430 bis, 530).[8] According to Bonnefoy, the salient fact is that poetry has power. And while it can be useful to examine how poetry obtains this power, it is more important to focus our attention on creating a receptive environment within ourselves, "opening a place" for poetry wherefrom it can not only act on us, but, more significantly, furnish us the means and moral impetus for action.

Given the strength and coherence of Bonnefoy's position regarding poetry, the fact that he places his essays at an inferior level becomes clearer. And yet, much like the distinction between prose and poetry drawn from various sources, his understanding of the relationship between his own poetry and essays is not necessarily specific to him. Rather, Bonnefoy has inherited it–in

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[8] I would argue that in general some aspects of the Pascalian vision of the world are never very far from Bonnefoy's consciousness. In a curious, quasi-apologetic note following his essay "Paul Valéry," Bonnefoy writes:
"Ai-je «critiqué» Valéry? Je l'ai pris au sérieux, me semble-t-il, c'est un honneur que l'on ne peut faire qu'à un bien petit nombre d'écrivains.
Et ceux-là existent *en nous*. Nous avons à lutter contre eux, comme nous avons à choisir, et aux fins d'être. C'est une lutte privée. C'est peut-être un pari, dans le sens un peu grave que l'on donne à ce mot" (I 105 italics in text).
Bonnefoy's evocation of the "pari" points, I believe, to Pascal's "pari sur l'existence de Dieu." However, his use of italics (*en nous*), the rhetorical structure of his note, and even the fact that Pascal's name is not mentioned, seem to confirm Bonnefoy's initial statement that some writers "exist within ourselves."

part at least—from a long-standing French critical tradition which has had a significant influence not only on the contemporary understanding of poetry, but also on the reading of the essays of poets. This tradition, reading essays from Baudelaire's Salon pieces, to the texts of Mallarmé and Valéry, upholds an interpretation subordinating the essays of poets to their poetic production. Generally speaking, the critical tendency seems to be to use the essayistic text to "explain" certain potentially unclear elements of the poetry. But this attitude toward the essay and its relationship to poetry is itself based on a particular understanding of literature and writing which seems at least partially engendered by the Romantic vision of the poet as a sort of "divine oracle," a mouthpiece for poetry that comes from elsewhere. And in point of fact, that very mechanism of an exterior voice differentiated from an inner self, is thematized very early in Bonnefoy's poetry. In *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve*, he writes in the section tellingly entitled "Douve parle":

> Pourtant ce cri sur moi vient de moi,
> Je suis muré dans mon extravagance.
> Quelle divine ou quelle étrange voix
> Eût consenti d'habiter mon silence?
> (*Poèmes* 79).

In this instance, the possibility of such an exterior voice, with the attendant question of whether it can be associated with some form of divinity, or, more modestly, with that which remains foreign to the speaking *I*, is clearly problematized in the poem. And though it is ultimately rejected, the existence itself of the question reiterates the need for self-analysis evoked a few pages ago. Along similar lines, comments made elsewhere by Bonnefoy indicate that the matter continues to haunt him: "de mon côté du poème," he says in a 1979 reprinted in *Entretiens sur la Poésie*, "j'ai surtout l'expérience d'images qui me viennent obscures et qui le restent, et de contradictions que je n'arrive pas à lever" (63). Thus, the Romantic view that the relationship between the poet and his poetry is governed by a form of scission becomes more comprehensible:

because the poetic text is generated by an inspiration that seems to remain exterior to the poet, he must himself become the critic of his own poem, since it remains, potentially, as opaque for him as for any other reader. As a consequence, the relationship between the essay and the poetic text projected by Bonnefoy and so many others also becomes clearer: where poetry is the fruit of an inspiration which is perceived as a moment of transcendence, the writing of an essay is a humbler thing, a rather more laborious attempt to carve understanding out of that earlier transcendence.

If nothing else, the above schema serves to rationalize the higher status of poetry with respect to the essay. Nonetheless, while this explanatory approach might be a satisfactory way of exploring the essay-poetry tandem of many writers, it does not adequately account for the function of Bonnefoy's essays. For the idea that a poet's essays must necessarily elucidate his poetry supposes certain preconceived ideas that are questionable. The first of these is that prose is always more limpid, and frequently almost facile when compared to the "difficult" or "obscure" poetic text. The second notion embedded in the explanatory approach is the idea that a clear and discernible distinction always exists between prose and poetry. These statements are, of course, mere generalizations, but as such they contain a grain of truth: poetry is notorious for its perceived hermeticism, whereas it is rather rarer—though not, of course, impossible—to find prose that suffers from the same "disrepute."

I would suggest that one of the specific characteristics of Bonnefoy's essays is that they resist the categorization outlined above, and consistently escape the model that Bonnefoy proposes for them. Certain critics, most notably Gérard Gasarian, have already pointed out the difficulty of accepting the explanatory relationship. He writes in *Yves Bonnefoy*:,

> Bien qu'ils soient plus ou moins contemporains de l'écriture poétique, les essais n'expliquent pas les poèmes, ils les compliquent bien plutôt, reconduisant la difficulté de lecture dans un registre qui, pour être plus discursif, n'en est pas plus clair. […] Les essais peuvent se lire indépendamment des poèmes, […] ils n'en sont pas une réflexion exégétique mais un reflet lui-même poétique. (10, note 1)

Gasarian's last sentence, which addresses the notion that Bonnefoy's essays are themselves poetic rather than exegetic counterparts of his poetry, goes to the heart of the problem that interests me. It suggests that far from being merely derivative, the essays obey their own creative impulse, and thus have their own *raison d'être* that can itself be seen as poetic. In this, Bonnefoy's work and his technique of blurring at times the boundaries between essay and poetry can be put into parallel with a number of ideas expressed by Martin Heidegger. Indeed, in a 1950 lecture on language which was eventually printed under the title "Die Sprache" in *Unterwegs zur Sprache,* Heidegger leaves no doubt about his allegiance to the grounding importance of poetic language in providing access to an ontology, a "calling-into" the world. In that lecture, he reverses normative ideas, writing that "Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer" (208). The corollary to that thought is an idea that is capital for the approach to Bonnefoy's essays, namely Heidegger's suggestion that "The opposite of what is purely spoken, the opposite of the poem, is not prose. Pure prose is never 'prosaic.' It is as poetic and hence as rare as poetry" (208).

This crucial insight allows me to briefly broach here a number of other parallels that link Bonnefoy's work with that of Heidegger. The question of prose points, of course, to the far more important problem of how language can be made to reveal Being. J. Glenn Gray evokes the specificity of Heidegger's relationship with language, writing that Heidegger "finds it necessary to create words which should exist, he thinks, as derivatives of an original root word. The practice of returning to the root meanings of words, using archaic terms, and creating new word combinations […] is the essential core of his method of philosophizing" (418). It is difficult not to put this view into resonance with, of course, Bonnefoy's "fraiement," evoked earlier, but also, and far more tellingly, with the eponymous "Douve" of *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de*

*Douve* whose ambiguity has occasioned so much critical attention. Language, however, is merely the "technical" aspect of a far greater issue, which is the primordial importance of Being for Heidegger. And, as the following chapters demonstrate, it is difficult not to see in Heidegger's "Being" a strong kinship with the idea of *présence* that is of such paramount importance for Bonnefoy.

For it is no exaggeration to state that one cannot fully grasp the function of Bonnefoy's essays without having some understanding of *présence* and how it can find expression in writing. Indeed, critical attention has long affirmed that all of Bonnefoy's work deals in some fashion or another with the elaboration of *présence*. Even the most casual reader of Bonnefoy can hardly fail to be aware of its importance for him: the notion is so deeply embedded in all his work and so central to his aspirations as a writer that its discussion is unavoidable in any analysis of his work. But what, exactly, is this *présence*? In point of fact, it transpires incontrovertibly from his various attempts at definition that despite his overt rejection of the notion of "philosophizing," what he proposes in the shorthand term *présence* is something that can perhaps only be described as a philosophical endeavor inasmuch as it clearly aims to provide meaning not only for the intellectual, but also for the moral and ethical aspects of life and experience.

My objective is to use the descriptions of *présence* furnished both by the critical community, and also by Bonnefoy himself to move beyond them toward the study how presence works in the arena of the essayistic prose from which it is purportedly excluded. In order to address these interactions, I follow a two-pronged approach that broaches first, Bonnefoy's use of the term *presence*, and second, his predilection for the essay, examining both of these through the matrix of the historical antecedents that have molded them into the forms that now appear so familiarly known to us. The underlying impetus for this analysis derives from the observation that neither *présence* nor the essay are things Bonnefoy created *ex-nihilo* to further his own

expressive needs. On the contrary, because both pre-exist his writing, it is important to determine how they are perceived in general, to understand the connotations they might have for any individual, in order to effectively grasp their attraction and usefulness for him. Of the two, doubtless *présence* is the more important, especially insofar as it is a term that Bonnefoy himself has often attempted to define and describe. By contrast, definitions of the essay are rare to the point of non-existence in his work, and that very fact invites some form of questioning.

I thus first examine the philosophical and theological precursors of presence, using Bonnefoy's explicit rejection of these very antecedents to arrive at an understanding of the position he proposes in opposition to conventional notions of presence. This understanding allows us then to examine the strategies that he has adopted to convey *présence* through writing. A number of these aspects of presence–particularly its relationship to poetry—have already been extensively addressed by the critical community for the obvious reason that Bonnefoy himself explicitly and insistently proposes *présence* as the *telos* of his poetry. Frequently, however, the very notion of what presence itself might be remains under-examined. It is integrated into critical analyses as a monolithic block whose meaning appears so transparent that it needs no further elaboration.

And yet a historical examination of presence immediately demonstrates how multiple its definitions are. Thus, given the unquestionable importance of *présence*, combined with the fact that its description in Bonnefoy's poetry has been minutely studied, my interest has focused on going beyond his poetry and examining the tools he uses to transmit a more global understanding of the notion. These tools are, I argue, both linguistic and related to genre. They are anchored in the relationship between *présence* and Bonnefoy's use of deixis, but also on the literary grounding of the essay and its theoretical and philosophical potentialities.

What I propose here is not so much yet another interpretation of the signification of *présence* in Bonnefoy's writing, but rather an examination of how the quest to transmit that notion has itself contributed to the formal choices made by Bonnefoy in his work, first in his choosing the essay as a privileged mode of writing; second, in the way the essays are organized, the themes and intellectual inquiries they address; and finally in the stylistic elements, such as deixis or explicitly poetic strategies, that characterize them. A final significant aspect of my approach is to study those places in Bonnefoy's writing which demonstrate a blurring of the distinction between prose and poetry in order to examine how the interaction between the two types of writing nourishes an underlying Bonnefoyian project.

The first chapter gives an analytic reading of an important passage of prose, the "Dédicace" to *L'Improbable et Autres Essais*. This well-known and oft-commented[9] fragment of his writing provides an introduction *in situ,* as it were, to the stylistic and conceptual specificity of his work. It serves not only to introduce the singular nature of Bonnefoy's prose, but also the themes and stylistic imperatives that are characteristic of his writing, thus materially demonstrating that the tenuousness of the separation between prose and poetry can serve a philosophical purpose. The "Dédicace" furnishes a pertinent entry point into Bonnefoy's prose for while its status as paratext means that it can never be wholly integrated into the volume, at the same time precisely *because* of its paratextual nature, it has an overarching dimension that can speak to the totality of the essays. Further, the existing theoretical literature on paratexts views them as textual objects whose function is to *render present* the text they are attached to. This quality allows the second chapter to broach the notion of presence from the historical and theoretical perspective, addressing first the sacramental and theological dimension historically

[9] Though to my knowledge, there is, so far, no close reading of the entire text in the critical literature on Bonnefoy.

invested in the notion, before turning to its grounding function in contemporary philosophical thought. The link between the religious and philosophical dimensions of presence is developed through the analysis of a dominant characteristic of Bonnefoy's writing, namely the frequent use he makes of deixis.

After examining presence and deixis, the following two chapters address the essay as a specific form of writing with its own imperatives and limitations. Though many critical texts make frequent reference to Bonnefoy's essays in the course of their analysis of various other aspects of his work, his insistent recourse to the form itself has, as mentioned above, not yet been sufficiently analyzed. As yet, only one critical text of some length has discussed Bonnefoy as an essayist, and that is Daniel Acke's 1999 *Bonnefoy Essayiste: Modernité et Présence.* Acke's work, though highly interesting from the perspective of the art criticism that Bonnefoy has so intensely engaged in, does not grapple with the generic status of the essay. This appears to me to be a limitation, for indeed before one can profitably consider Bonnefoy's contribution to the genre, it seems essential to obtain a notion of those characteristics inherent to it that might have attracted him. Accordingly, the two chapters on the essay tackle its global definitions in order to better see the specificity of Bonnefoy's own practice of it. Coupled with these more general theoretical descriptions, the opposition between Georg Lukàcs and Theodor Adorno on whether the essay is essentially fragmentary or profoundly unifying serves as a backdrop to understanding how the contradictions of the genre mirror concerns that are crucial for Bonnefoy. Indeed, it is precisely because of the multiple possibilities contained in these plural definitions that he finds them useful; their variability allows for the literal emergence of a paradoxical type of writing which has the capacity to maintain simultaneously suspended all the modulations of the ideas he is trying to transmit through writing. It is, *in fine*, the very lack of cast-in-stone definitions and meanings—an absence that is inherent both to the essay seen as a distinct type of writing, and

also to the diffuse notion of presence—that provides the only possible solution to Bonnefoy's ontological imperatives.

The general framework created in the first chapters allows us to enter into the specificities of Bonnefoy's appropriation of *présence* and the essay. Chapter Five is devoted to analyzing his own acquisition of the notion within his progression as a writer. Bonnefoy's *présence* has not remained static and the evolution of the notion over the course of his writing offers substantial insight into how he has developed his definition of the term. And though it is difficult to associate Bonnefoy's thought with any dogmatic obedience to specific intellectual movements, one can discern in his own shifts in position a reaction to a number of twentieth century currents, among which the most identifiable are surrealism, structuralism, deconstructionism, as well as the phenomenological drift that has emerged in Continental philosophy. Somewhat like the Sartrian example given earlier, all of these can be seen to enter the arena of Bonnefoy's thought almost negatively, inasmuch as the construction of his own position frequently seems to derive either from some form of resistance to the ideas conveyed by the main figures and ideas of these movements, or is associated with what is at best a limited form of acquiescence to the tenets proposed.

But if surrealism and phenomenology contribute to providing the grounding notions of what Bonnefoy will develop into his own notion of *présence*, structuralism and its derivatives acutely pose the problem of the transmission of a presence seen not as an individual experience, but as the transposition of that experience into language. Bonnefoy's essays are a partial response to the problem of that transposition. The final chapters of the dissertation thus turn to the Bonnefoy's own use of the essay and language. From a purely descriptive perspective, the overwhelming majority of Bonnefoy's essays can be defined as critical essays, that is, they start from the perspective of what a critic has called "a culturally constituted corpus" and rely on an

individual subjectivity to examine this corpus. It is nonetheless obvious that Bonnefoy's essays have a very particular "flavour" and "color" of their own that might feed into an underlying objective motivating their style and form. These last chapters thus examine how the generic paradigm of the essay is either materialized or transformed in Bonnefoy's own practice. They focus more particularly on the nature of the Bonnefoy's writing, both essayistic and poetic, in order to examine not only how these diverge, but more significantly, where and how they merge. Indeed, in addition to the philosophical notion of *présence,* a number of metaphors, images, and even discernible incidents or events navigate continuously through Bonnefoy's essays and poems. Some of the more memorable examples of this shared function are suggested in the image of the *orangerie* as a physical space*,* the "salamander incident," or again the allegorization of a leaf of ivy. It is precisely this type of cross-fertilization that indicates most clearly the permeability between the genres in Bonnefoy's writing, and requires the interpretation that this work hopes to furnish.

# CHAPTER ONE –
# La déclaration d'intention:
# Paratext as Metatext in the "Dédicace" to *L'Improbable*

Bonnefoy's first collection of essays, *L'Improbable*, appeared in 1959, revealing the poet of *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve* and *Hier Régnant Désert* as an essayist whose prose matched the complexity and originality of the thinking subtending it. Both dense and lyrical, Bonnefoy's prose quickly garnered the reputation of being abstruse and difficult to access. In addition, critics reading him at the time pointed immediately to the ambiguous character of the thinking underlying the essays: "faute d'avoir scruté au niveau même de la parole la damnation du poète," *Combat* journalist Manuel de Dieguez wrote in July 1959, "le livre de Bonnefoy souffre d'une ambigüité profonde" (1). And yet already in that first edition, Bonnefoy had provided, in the form of a dedication to the text, a key to understanding the premises underlying his work and thought. That key opens up a mental realm which conjoins poetry and philosophy, language and representation. Indeed, as de Dieguez himself recognizes when he compares Bonnefoy's text with Maurice Blanchot's contemporaneous *Le Livre à venir*, "*L'Improbable*, de Yves Bonnefoy, participe de la même interrogation passionnée sur les conditions de la poésie et sur la nature du langage [que le dernier essai de Maurice Blanchot]" (1). This chapter seeks to show that the "Dédicace" to *L'Improbable* encapsulates both in its intellectual structures and in its form, all the major concerns that determine Bonnefoy's work. Understood thus, it is difficult not to see this quintessentially paratextual[10] piece of writing as a

[10] More precisely, *péritextual* if we hew to the analysis of the paratext that Gérard Genette introduced in *Seuils*. In that work, Genette writes of paratexts: "Plus que d'une limite ou d'une frontière étanche, il s'agit ici d'un *seuil*

microcosm of Bonnefoy's whole project, in the sense that it can be read not only as a succinct entry into his work, but actually as a demonstration of how he intends to transmit meaning through language. Bonnefoy's "Dédicace" is thus *oriented*: more than just an entry point into his text, it projects a purpose. Gérard Genette pinpoints this subtle power that exists in some paratexts when he quotes Philippe Lejeune's decription of them as "une frange du texte imprimé qui, en réalité, commande toute la lecture" (8). Bonnefoy's dedication is the very *exemplum* of that statement, for even without mentioning it explicitly, it provides readers with a rhetorical instantiation of the crucial notion of the *présence* which is the *telos* of all his work.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Bonnefoy's essays is the constant equilibrium he manages to maintain between the gravity of the message he is conveying and the lyricism of the language that bears the message. Consonant with that ambition, the "Dédicace" demonstrates one of the omnipresent preoccupations that inform his writing: the constant attention given to the interplay between language as tool for communicating ideas and language as matter to be crafted into form. Along those lines, the sheer lyricism of the dedication is so immediately and apparently striking, the intellectual structures so surprising, and, in a way, so disorienting, that it unmistakably signals its significance in Bonnefoy's work. This characteristic has not escaped the attention of readers and editors alike. Indeed, since the 1982 publication of *L'Improbable* in the Gallimard "Folio" paperbound edition, the "Dédicace" has had a curiously double paratextual existence, for in these later "pocket" editions,[11] it literally appears twice and is each time clearly demarcated from the text *per se*, thus consolidating its inherently independent and potentially extra-textual nature. The original Mercure de France edition (1959) set the short text in the

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[…] qui offre à tout un chacun la possibilité d'entrer, ou de rebrousser chemin." Genette's statement has resonance for readers of Bonnefoy, who will remember the close attention his poetry pays to the notion of thresholds as, for example, in *Dans le leurre du seuil*.

[11] A slightly revised edition appeared in 1993. This latter edition maintained the same format, printing the "Dédicace" on the back cover as well as in the front matter of the text.

conventional position of a dedication. The Gallimard edition, while maintaining the initial position, *additionally* repeated the text on the back cover. One can conjecture that the decision to print the text on the back cover, in a textual space traditionally given over to summarizing the contents of a book in order to attract would-be readers, was perhaps taken primarily for marketing reasons. That choice nonetheless tends to confirm the overarching significance of the "Dédicace." More than just a minor adjunct to Bonnefoy's essays, it has the potential to stand alone and provide a path of access, informing and orienting our reading of Bonnefoy's essays.

Moreover, the importance of this short text is further emphasized by the point I briefly mentioned in the Introduction, namely, that the "improbable" to which the dedication is addressed is reiterated and generalized in the title of the whole collection of essays which, to date, include *L'Improbable* (1959), *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* (1967), *Le Nuage rouge* (1977), and *La Vérité de parole* (1988). Indeed, as Jean Starobinski so pertinently points out, the *hors-texte* is never insignificant in Bonnefoy's work. Referring to the epigraphs Bonnefoy uses to preface his collections of poetry, Starobinski writes in his introduction to Bonnefoy's *Poèmes*: "chez un artiste aussi épris de lucidité, le choix des épigraphes équivaut à une déclaration d'intention" (*I*, 8). This "intention" that Starobinski so cogently evokes can be seen in several aspects of the "Dédicace."

I suggested above that the specificity of the dedication's content gives access to the themes and rhetorical functions that are pillars of Bonnefoy's style and thinking. Content, however, does not stand alone, for form also conveys intention in the text; indeed, the interrelationship between the two is capital. Additionally, the "Dédicace" demonstrates a material instantiation of Bonnefoy's tendency to absorb normative concepts and forms and modify them for his purposes. This chapter thus broaches the "Dédicace" through three angles: first, the form of the "Dédicace" *per* dedication by comparing Bonnefoy's text with the general function of

dedications to see how Bonnefoy follows these conventions or takes distance from them; second, the form given to the text itself–the explicitly poetic rhythms and structures of certain elements of the syntax; and finally, the more abstract themes that emerge from the text. The approach proposed is resolutely linear for, as will become evident, it is through a linear reading that the teleological objectives of the text appear most clearly.

## Dedications: Some Theoretical Considerations

> Je dédie ce livre à l'improbable, c'est-à-dire à ce qui est.
> A un esprit de veille. Aux théologies négatives. A une poésie désirée, de pluies, d'attente et de vent.
> A un grand réalisme, qui aggrave au lieu de résoudre, qui désigne l'obscur, qui tienne les clartés pour nuées toujours déchirables. Qui ait souci d'une haute et impraticable clarté.

This, then, is Bonnefoy's "Dédicace," much as it appears in all editions of *L'Improbable*. More generally, a dedication is part of what is referred to in publishing terms as the "front matter" of a book. Pagination–the distinction, for example, between Roman and Arabic numerals, or even the absence of any numbering, blank pages, etc.—usually distinguishes this front matter, setting it visually off from the body of the text. However, within that general context, a dedication has its own specificities. Typically, it is clearly referential, and consciously uses the voice of the author to name a specific person or persons who are generally well-known, either to the writer or to the reading public. Bonnefoy's "Dédicace" startles because it clearly eschews this last convention and directly addresses an abstract substantive: "je dédie ce livre à l'improbable." One of the consequences of this particular attribution is to undercut the intrusion of what can be perceived as an extra-diegetic reality, since most conventional objects of dedications are usually held to be physical persons whose existence is taken for granted by the reader. Addressing a dedication to the work itself via its title is thus a form of closure that sets itself off from standard

practice. There is an undeniably paradoxical quality to this approach in the sense that it opens a space, purportedly oriented toward the exterior, only to close it upon the book itself.

Another point here concerns the almost invisible use of the deictic function in the opening phrase of the dedication. "Je dédie *ce* livre" writes Bonnefoy, the physical presence of the book in the hands of the reader seeming to render the statement completely natural. And yet, of course, the deixic use is not completely transparent, for it serves to turn attention from the "this" of the "Dédicace" to the "this" of another text, thus subtly iterating the function of the dedication as a pointing gesture indicating a specific textual place. And if I bring it up at this juncture, at an moment when it seems so seamlessly integrated into the text, it is to better contrast the use of the demonstrative pronoun here with the more radical use Bonnefoy makes of it in other contexts as, for instance, the insistent reiteration of the demonstrative "cet" in the early poem "Anti-Platon."

A final element concerning how Bonnefoy's "Dédicace" functions *as dedication* hinges on the original meaning of the word "dedication" itself. Rather surprisingly perhaps, the primary meaning of the word concerns not text, but place, and refers to the consecration of a sacred area– church, altar, tabernacle, etc. Seen through the prism of Bonnefoy's writing, this point is vital, for the notion of writing as place is a central image in his work, and is one that has been addressed by a number of critics (see Argyros, Naughton, Née, et al.). Indeed, no reader of Bonnefoy's first volume of poetry, *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve* can fail to recognize the importance of "place": The climax of the five "acts" that compose *Douve* is tellingly entitled "Vrai Lieu." Within that section, three of the six poems bear the word "lieu" in their title: "Lieu du Combat," "Lieu de la Salamandre," and "Vrai Lieu du Cerf." The "Dédicace," thus, through its symbiotic connection with the entire corpus of the essays, suggests that place has equal importance in Bonnefoy's prose.

But before addressing the notion of place in prose, it is important to note that the notion of consecration is also of capital importance, for it involves a transformation, a making of something ordinary into something sacred–even a sort of calling into sacred, using the incantatory power of language. For although traditional religious practices typically involve an agent–holy water or chrism, burnt offerings, etc.—these actions tend to culminate with the voicing of special dedicatory prayers. From a linguistic perspective, these prayers–these words—are a clear example of an illocutionary performative act in the Austinian sense inasmuch as they explicitly perform the dedication and consecrate the physical space. Extending this capacity to texts, one can consider any dedication to a book to be an illocutionary act, for it does what it says it is doing: it dedicates by saying it dedicates. But, as Austin reminds us, certain preconditions are necessary:

> it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' [emphasis in original text]. (8)

In the case of dedications in general, their physical disposition at the beginning of a text creates the appropriate framework for writer and reader to perceive the act performed. This shared mental framework is so extensively taken for granted by the reading and writing community that many dedications begin not with an explicit statement of dedication, but simply with a preposition (e.g. "*to* my parents," "*for* Professor X"). Bonnefoy's "Dédicace," in contradistinction, explicitly takes on the illocutionary act, "je dédie," his choice doubtless linked to the immaterial nature of the object of the dedication, "l'improbable," and the ambiguity of its status as notion, text, or both. I would argue, however, that it can also be seen as responding to a greater necessity. Indeed, the title of one of Bonnefoy's most frequently cited essays, "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie," suggests that in parallel to the "placeness" of poetry, his dedication to

"l'improbable' can be seen as an act whose function it is to consecrate the space to come, the "lieu" of the prose text as well, and thereby invite the reader to enter the text almost as though entering a distinctive, virtually sacred space.

## Paradox and Possibility

Broaching the dedication, one can wonder what is most striking about the "Dédicace," whose identification of "ce qui est" with the notion of improbability has caused critic Gérard Gasarian to characterize it as "déroutante," or even "*confondante*" (9 emphasis Gasarian). Certainly, I would argue that what immediately attracts the attention of the reader is the poetic style of the text: in this instance as in so many others, the nature of Bonnefoy's writing is such that were we to change the label from "dedication" to "prose poem," the text itself would probably need little modification. But what are the specific characteristics which lead the reader to venture a poetic reading of this text? For those familiar with Bonnefoy's writings, the structure of the "Dédicace," with the specific address of "à..." ("à un esprit de veille; à une poésie désirée, à un grand réalisme, aux théologies négatives), can hardly fail to evoke that of "Dévotion," the poem that closes the first volume of *L'Improbable*.[12] Like the Dédicace, "Dévotion" uses the insistent reiteration of a rhetorical device–in both instances, the preposition *à*—as a technique which not only invites the reader to enter the text, but also hearkens back to the structure of many prayers addressed to divine figures. Further, considering the physical disposition of these two texts, located respectively at the beginning and at the end of the first edition of *L'Improbable*

[12] In addition, placing the longer prose of the Dédicace and "Dévotion" in parallel, it is impossible not to see an echo of Rimbaud's "Dévotion," particularly in the light of the fact that Bonnefoy has extensively written on Rimbaud (*Rimbaud par lui-même* [1961]; *Notre Besoin de Rimbaud* [2009]).

(1959), it is easy to imagine them as a pair of parentheses framing the essays that they contain between them.

Still, beyond the analogical type of relationship which links the dedication to "Dévotion," and thus associates it with a specifically poetic text, the "Dédicace" has its own specificity in that it deliberately interweaves a distinctly poetic message with explicitly philosophical concerns. Reading it, one becomes rapidly aware that its language does not quite fit the negative Sartrian definition equating poetic words with "verres dépolis," which are opaque and unsuited for true communication (75). Rather, Bonnefoy seems to be using the thrust of poetic language to forge the outlines of a intellectual and moral *prise de position* characterized here by the uniting of such seemingly disparate ideas as "théologies négatives," "réalisme," "esprit de veille," and "une poésie désirée."

The dedication opens with what one might justifiably interpret as a paradoxical statement linking "l'improbable" with "ce qui est." The paradox is arresting and rather unsettling, but its destabilization is perhaps linked less to the desire to surprise than to an intellectual *prise de position*. Indeed, in his *The Well-Wrought Urn*, Cleanth Brooks invokes the reasons for the omnipresence of paradox in poetic texts. He writes:

> Yet there are better reasons than that of rhetorical vain-glory that have induced poet after poet to choose ambiguity and paradox rather than plain, discursive simplicity. It is not enough for the poet to analyze his experience as the scientist does, breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from part, classifying the various parts. His task is finally to unify experience. He must return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience. The poem, if it be a true poem, is a simulacrum of reality—in this sense, at least, it is an "imitation"—by *being* an experience rather than a mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience. (213, emphasis in original)

Brooks's comment is interesting not only because his reference to a "unity of experience" is echoed virtually identically in Bonnefoy's work, but also because his suggestion that scientific methods of analysis are incompatible with experiential reality is one that Bonnefoy has also explicitly affirmed. The need for paradox thus suggests a way to enter into experience which is

not far removed from the notion we shall see later of rendering a text present to the reader. But in point of fact, Bonnefoy goes further, for though the notion of providing paradox as a technique enabling others to re-experience reality is central to his concerns, this particular paradox, when examined more closely in the light of Bonnefoy's philosophical ambitions, loses a good part of its initially ambivalent character and points to the philosophical foundations of Bonnefoy's practice.

As the antonym of "le probable," "l'improbable" derives much of its meaning and substance from the root definition of "probable." Thus, from its Latin root, *probare*, "le probable" is essentially that which has been verified. More ambiguously, but also perhaps more accurately, the Robert dictionary (1972) defines "le probable" as "that whose existence can be affirmed more easily than the existence of other things" (my translation). This definition serves to bring to light some of the semantic difficulties of the probable/improbable couplet. The Latin root, *probare*, with its dependency on the action of proving, seems ineluctably to orient our interpretation: in common parlance, something that is probable is frequently assimilated to something that is true or, something in whose existence the speaker has a high degree of confidence. In reality, however, "le probable," is precisely that which persistently slips out of the grasp of clear definition, for it is that which is *likely*, rather than that which is an incontestable fact. This problem of a disjunction between theoretical definition and practical use applies equally to "l'improbable," with the result that in Bonnefoy's paradigm, the notion of "l'improbable" becomes that which persists and cannot be wholly dismissed. "Le probable," thus, becomes logically associated with that which though likely, does not in fact exist, while "l'improbable," on the contrary, is linked with that which, however precariously and against all odds, continues to exist. And this is precisely the category of experience, or reality that Bonnefoy equates with "ce qui est."

This latter phrase merits some mention here, for it appears with great frequency in Bonnefoy's work, both in his poetry and in his prose, thereby indicating the degree of importance it has for him. "Ce qui est, c'est la finitude," he writes somewhat enigmatically, giving us to understand that it is linked to the passage of time, to inevitable endings (*EsP*, 82). This insistence on the acceptance of death as the only true measure of life is a fundamental characteristic of Bonnefoy's work. Tellingly, the understanding of reality identified with "ce qui est" is crucial in Bonnefoy's judgment of other poets. He writes in *L'Improbable* of poets such as Claudel, or Valéry: "il y aura chez les plus brillants poètes de notre époque à la fois un pessimisme et un scepticisme, et le désir d'une discipline pour se retraire de ce qui est" (*I*, 120).[13] Baudelaire, by contrast, "a pressenti au fond même de ce qui est, dans sa mort et parce qu'il meurt, qu'il peut être notre salut" (*I*, 118). These comments show that for Bonnefoy, the stakes are very high: like the notion of *présence*, the idea subtending the expression "ce qui est" is linked with no less than the notion of salvation, in the theological and thus grave acceptation of the word. Indeed, "ce qui est" must be seen as functioning in symbiosis with the way Bonnefoy uses the notion of *présence*. What distinguishes the two is that where *présence* is dynamic, a gesture, an attitude, or an act that reveals reality at a specific moment in time, "ce qui est" is the stable object of this revelation; it is the immutable reality revealed by the act of presence. One can even go farther and suggest a shorthand equation wherein "ce qui est" is the sum of *présence* and the notion of finitude. From a philosophical point of view, thus, what appears to us as a startling paradox equating "l'improbable" with that which simply "is," presents no internal contradiction for Bonnefoy.

That said, it is important to note that the means he uses to focus the reader's attention are primarily rhetorical, for in the final analysis, his linking of the two seemingly discordant terms is

[13] See also on this point of judgment and moral evaluation, John Naughton's "Excarnations" article.

a strategy that is essentially poetic in nature, much like Eluard's paradoxical union of orange and blue ("La terre est bleue comme une orange"[ (18)]) conjoined to produce a poetic explosion suggestive of a truth that lies beyond appearances ("Jamais une erreur les mots ne mentent pas" [*ibid.*]). Similarly, uniting the two terms shows that improbability and existence are one, that they are symbiotically linked in Bonnefoy's mind as the very shape that reality takes. Without explicitly naming *présence*, Bonnefoy thus manages by linking the idea of contingency imbedded in the notion of "l'improbable" with the stability of "ce qui est," to produce its very figure in the "Dédicace."

The beginning of the dedication thus clearly indicates the modifications that readers will have to make to their ordinary way of thinking in order to enter the arena of Bonnefoy's thought: by the opening words, "je dédie ce livre à l'improbable," he indicates that his collection of essays is dedicated to a way of thinking which aspires to distinguish itself at the very threshold from a line of rational, logocentric thought which is particular to Western culture and its Greco-Roman roots. Whether consciously or not, he also clearly shows us that pointing to *présence* and indicating the conditions for its textual existence are not necessarily strictly linked to genre, and are thus not the exclusive prerogative of poetry.

## Negation as Poetic Method

The second paragraph of the dedication moves the sphere of activity from an explicit re-orienting of intellectual structures to a more explicitly poetic discourse. This is immediately evident in the images of a desired poetry composed of rain, waiting, and wind. But before Bonnefoy broaches this vivid series of images, he sets the paragraph more subtly under the sign of poetry with his evocation of "un esprit de veille," which cannot but recall the intellectual and

spiritual attentiveness to the details of reality that André Breton advocates in such early Surrealist texts as, for example, *Nadja* (1928). But at the same time, Bonnefoy's "*esprit* de veille" emerges as a conscious intellectual stand against the negatively charged "état de veille," which Surrealism denigrates in favor of the ardently desired "état de rêve."[14] For Bonnefoy, as the reader comes to understand over the course of his essays, the "esprit de veille" is an attitude of awareness and receptivity which is the prerequisite for real interaction with the world that surrounds us. It is essentially opposed to the dream-state evoked by Breton through its call to action within language, as Bonnefoy makes us see in *L'Improbable*: "[les mots] nous demandent d'agir au lieu simplement de rêver" (*I*, 129).

Along similar lines, the reference to the "théologies negatives" which follows is also a call to openness, for not only does it evoke the abstract notion of "le religieux" –"pourquoi refuser le mot?" writes Bonnefoy (*EsP*, 120)—which is such a silent, though central part of Bonnefoy's work, but it also points to a particular form of interaction with literature. Bonnefoy's comment concerning "l'expérience des images qui me viennent obscures et qui le restent" (*ibid*, 63) and which motivate his need for the clarification provided by the essay can be put in parallel with the description Philip Beitchman gives of literature: "Like the deity in the negative theology of the mystics Boehme and Eckhart, literature can be conceived of only in negatives–we can say only what literature is not, but we can no more identify literature with this negation than the mystics could positively find their god in his own absence" (63). More globally, however, the notion of negative theology integrates into Bonnefoy's own thought a type of ontological inquiry aiming at an intuition of transcendence through the systematic negation of intellectual categories of experience. It requires some attention here, for it demonstrates a technique that appears

[14] "Je suis obligé," writes Breton in the first Surrealist Manifesto with reference to "l'état de veille," "de le tenir pour un phénomène d'interférence" (23).

frequently in Bonnefoy's work: his appropriation of an existing word or expression which he empties of its original meaning in order to integrate it within his own intellectual landscape. Naturally, however, the word never really wholly loses its initial charge of meaning, even for Bonnefoy himself, with the result that the new meaning is always overlain by the shadow of the old. The net effect, thus, is that the words which Bonnefoy adopts—"théologie négative," "réalisme," "présence," to take a few recurring examples—are used as a sort of shorthand to accede to a common ground of understanding which Bonnefoy uses as a starting point from which to develop his differences.

In the case of "théologie négative," the original term has a long and tangled history. If the simplest definition is the one furnished by *L'Encyclopédie Universalis*: "Une méthode de pensée qui se propose de concevoir Dieu en lui appliquant des propositions qui nient tout prédicat concevable" (1115), the fact remains that the term is so open to variations of interpretation that it can be difficult to stay close to the core of the problem: what brought Bonnefoy to use it, not only in the "Dédicace," but in a number of other sections of *L'Improbable*? The first intimation of Bonnefoy's position lies in his use of the *plural* "théologies négatives," which suggests that he is not referring only to the purely religious sense, but the larger philosophical ideas encompassed by the notion. Two elements seem decisive, the notion of unity, and the incorporation of an apophatic method.

The historically intimate association between the type of thinking that a negative theology requires and a mystical approach toward transcendence has resonance not only in Bonnefoy's notion of *présence*, but also in his attachment to well-known mystical writers such as Plotinus or Saint Jean de la Croix, who appear as explicit references in both his essays and his poetry. The idea of the "One" that appears as a frequent leitmotiv spanning Bonnefoy's works emerges from these mystical thinkers, particularly from Plotinus, whose work is very closely associated with

the notion. It is one of the images that circulate through both Bonnefoy's essays and his poetry, with the notion of "l'Un" appearing, for instance, in this line from *Pierre écrite*: "Et tout ce haut pays *que l'Un très proche brûle*" (*Poèmes*, 243, emphasis mine), or in a *Mantoue* essay where Bonnefoy writes:

> "Elle est *l'ange*, qui a chassé les démons, et l'ange qui est unique, car c'est l'Un la grande révélation de cet instant sans limites, où tout se donne à moi pour que je comprenne et je lie.
> «Mien le soleil», écrit saint Jean de la Croix, parlant si loin en avant sur ce chemin qui s'ébauche, «miennes la lune et les étoiles, mienne la mère de Dieu.»" (*I*, 250, emphasis in original)

The idea of l'Un has remained with him: in his most recent collection of interview-essays, he returns to the conjunction between the mystical notion of the One and poetry, writing that "La poésie [est] l'intuition d'une unité qui demeure en tout et partout présente sous les réseaux serrés de la signifiance conceptuelle. La poésie atteste cette unité, ce qui recentre la pensée sur l'existence en sa finitude—cette émergence de l'Un en nous" (*L'Inachevable* 16).

A second reason for Bonnefoy's interest in "théologies négatives" is doubtless linked to the fact that the principles governing an apophatic method (from *apophasis,* the Greek word for negation) go far beyond the purely religious question which concerns only the "knowability" of God. Rather, they can, as *Universalis* indicates, be extended to a question which is far more central to Bonnefoy's thought, namely, the relationship between language and its capacity to provide a true means of communication:

> on en découvre l'existence [de la méthode négative ou apophatique] dans d'autres courants de pensée, même dans le positivisme logique de Wittgenstein ou dans la philosophie de Jaspers. Cette extension de l'apophatisme peut s'expliquer par la condition propre au langage humain, qui se heurte à des limites insurmontables s'il veut exprimer par le langage ce qui s'exprime dans le langage : l'apophatisme est un signe, un chiffre, de l'indicible mystère de l'existence. (1116)

Jean Starobinski very pertinently pinpoints Bonnefoy's need to use a negative method in order to circumvent the danger inherent in all language, that is, its tendency to become a closed system incapable of bridging the gap between writer and reader:

> Confier la tâche [d'accéder au monde second] au langage, à la poésie, c'est, pour Bonnefoy, poser en principe que le monde second a son fondement dans l'acte de parole qui nomme les choses et qui en appelle à «l'être» dans la communication vivante avec autrui (notre prochain). Cette tâche, Bonnefoy, dans ses textes sur l'art et sur la poésie, la définit principalement, par voie de négation, en dénonçant le péril attaché à l'exercice du langage, lorsque celui-ci, rompant avec le monde, et surtout avec autrui, opte orgueilleusement pour sa propre perfection autonome. (Poèmes 17)

And Bonnefoy himself writes in "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie française" that "la parole ne peut rien retenir de ce qui est l'immédiat […] Nos paroles les plus privées deviennent des mythes en se séparant de nous. Sommes-nous condamnés à ne rien pouvoir dire de ce que nous aimons le plus?" (*I*, 117). These sentences translate an anguish which is truly a hallmark of Bonnefoy's vision of writing. A position of negation with respect to language thus offers a strategic response, giving him with an intellectual and moral place to stand, because it provides a space to maneuver between the need to use language and the awareness of the pitfalls its use engenders.

If the preceding paragraphs suggest the general poles of attraction a "negative theology" might hold for Bonnefoy, the following extract from *L'Improbable* indicates how he transforms it to integrate it into his own intellectual structure: "Et cette poésie qui ne peut saisir la présence, dessaisie de tout autre bien sera du grand acte clos la proximité angoissée, la *théologie négative*" (*I*, 128). *Poetry*, we understand, will be the "théologie negative" in Bonnefoy's method of questioning. Here, he uses italics to point to the foreignness of the expression, to the intellectual borrowing that he is engaging in. Elsewhere, he will enclose the word "théologie" or the entire expression "théologie negative" within quotation marks to signify his adherence to the intellectual structure as well as his simultaneous modification of its purely theological aspect. But these are merely the surface modifications Bonnefoy is imposing on the term. The continuation of the *L'Improbable* text cited above establishes clearly his transformation of the substance of the term: "Quand, dans notre rapport avec ce qui est, tous les repères, tous les cadres, toutes les formules ont été *contestés ou effacés* [my emphasis], que reste-t-il qu'une attente dans la

substance des mots?" (*I*, 128). Language, the hope we can place in words themselves, is thus the crucible. Not only is it the object of the apophatic method, but, as poetry, it is also the context within which the negation, the "formules contestées ou effaces," allows a glimpse of the irreducible kernel of reality.

And so, finally, what remains of the original expression "théologie négative?" An important core, I would argue, for the historical weight of the term, perforce, impinges on Bonnefoy's text. And in the context of the hope placed in words we saw just above ("l'attente dans la substance des mots"), Bonnefoy, by erasing and challenging language ("formules contestées ou effacées") reproduces the intellectual schema of "la théologie négative." He writes of "ces errants du réel," which he describes as the indefinite categories of existence that have the potential to inhabit words: "On peut dire aussi bien qu'ils *sont* les mots, n'étant rien d'autre qu'une promesse. Ils apparaissent aux confins de la négativité du langage comme des anges parlant d'un dieu encore inconnu"[15] (*I*, 128, emphasis in original). This type of discourse has the net effect not only of elaborating the Bonnefoyian vision of what constitutes a negative theology, but also of giving, through his use of an apophatic method, an understanding of the seriousness and moral gravity of his position.

This method, which consists in postulating a series of negative principles, allows a winnowing down to the most fundamental principle of existence, namely the irreducible core that resists negation and remains inaccessible because we lack the intellectual means to formulate it.

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[15] The importance of this notion of a sort of *deus absconditus* is underlined by the fact that it occurs both in essay and poetry:
Oui, c'est cela.
Un éblouissement dans les mots anciens […]
Nous n'avons plus besoin
D'images déchirantes pour aimer.
Cet arbre nous suffit là-bas, qui, par lumière,
Se délie de soi-même et ne sait plus
Que le nom presque dit d'un dieu presque incarné.[*Poèmes*, 243]

This can most clearly be seen in mathematical terms: a surface is defined by eliminating the notion of depth, a line by eliminating the width of the surface, and finally a point by subtracting the notion of length. Bonnefoy's *récit* "Sur de Grands Cercles de Pierre" from the collection *Origines de la Parole*, demonstrates the mechanism poetically: "Dieu, en effet: ce qui excède le signe. Ce qui, signifié, serait aussitôt de l'éteint, serait déjà de l'aussi inconcevablement absent de tison éteint que le silence l'est du bruit, la ligne du point, la présence de la figure" (230). The mystery of this gratuitous existence corresponds exactly to Bonnefoy's recurrent expression "ce qui est" and returns us to the mystical aspect of the term "théologie négative." Wittgenstein provides a useful foil for thinking about Bonnefoy's "ce qui est." In the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, he refers to the mystical quality of this "is-ness," writing: "Ce n'est pas *comment* est le monde qui est le mystique, mais qu'il *soit*" (6.44, emphasis in original). He broaches in this section of the *Tractatus* the notion that domains lying outside the realm of the physical world cannot be addressed by language, which is essentially a logical structure. Bonnefoy, the poet, perceives the mystical, negative operation required to attain "ce qui est", but reiterates the power of language to define a positive place, writing: "A la théologie négative, qui déjà dégage de nos encombres ce fait absolu, mystérieux, fondateur, qu'il y a de la lumière, ne renonçons pas à adjoindre la théologie positive, où se dessinerait un séjour. La poésie est aussi la théologie de la terre…" (*EsP*, 48). The optimism of this passage suggests that if poetry is a negative theology, it also has the potential, once it has crossed through the fires of the apophatic method, of setting the foundations of a positive theology where language might finally be reunited with meaning.

## The Place of Poetry

Bonnefoy's explicit connecting of poetry and negative theology allows us to return to the "Dédicace" with a clearer understanding of the analogies that allow him to juxtapose "A un esprit de veille" with "Aux théologies négatives" and follow them with "A une poésie désirée, de pluies, d'attente, et de vent." The union of the two preconditions, that is, the state of attentiveness of the "esprit de veille," combined with the abstract intellectual paring down which is the essence of a negative theology, fuse together to generate what seems literally to be a poetic act. Two factors combine to transform a simple statement, "A une poésie désirée, de pluies, d'attente et de vent," into a poetic utterance. The first of these is expressed by the striking image of a desired poetry composed of wind, rain, and waiting. The second is contained in its specifically poetic rhythm.

The most significant point impelling a poetic reading of the images concerns the fact that they echo a number of Bonnefoy's specifically poetic texts. Hence the word "vent" is of significance. Like "salamandre, "lierre," or "orangerie," to take a few examples of Bonnefoy's incantatory words, "vent" is invested with symbolic weight in Bonnefoy's mental landscape. Consequently, it appears frequently and one understands that Bonnefoy uses it as a metaphor for violence and struggle. A sentence from "La Poésie française et le principe d'identité" clarifies the nature of the image. Bonnefoy writes: "si je veux sauver le mot *siroter*, par exemple, j'aurai à peiner longtemps sous le vent de l'extériorité" (*I*, 256). The wind is thus linked to the outside and to a notion of meaninglessness for, tellingly, in Bonnefoy's poetry it appears consistently within a constellation of images composed of "parole," "nuit," and "vent." There are multiple examples of this conjunction of terms. "Hic est locus patriae," for example, closes with the line: "C'était jour de parole, et ce fut nuit de vent" (*Poèmes*, 94), while the last poem of the section "Douve parle"

reads: "Parole vécue mais infiniment morte/ Quand la lumière enfin s'est faite vent et nuit" (*Poèmes*, 92). Finally, the poem "Menaces du témoin" highlights the metaphorical nature of this opposition: "Puis j'ai vieilli. Dehors vérité de parole/ Et vérité de vent ont cessé leur combat" (*Poèmes*, 117). Here, the expression "vérité de parole" takes us back to the word "attente" of the "poésie désirée, de pluies, d'attente et de vent." For "attente," the waiting, but also the expectation, almost the hope of something to come, is also the hope placed in "la substance des mots" which we saw earlier in Bonnefoy's application of a negative theology to language.[16] Similarly, the "vérité de parole" is that which has emerged from the crucible of negative theology, passed through the struggle with the wind of meaninglessness, the "vérité de vent," and has finally become: "un savoir, tout négatif et instable qu'il soit, que je puis peut-être nommer *vérité de parole*" (*I*, 128).

The close links between the words that appear in this middle section of the "Dédicace" and identical words found in Bonnefoy's poetry is further substantiated by the more formally literary characteristics that impel a poetic reading of this segment. Here, in a sort of "dérapage" that also appears frequently in Bonnefoy's essays and further serves to blur the distinction between poetry and prose, the poetic act itself is made manifest by the pattern of assonance around "poésie/désirée" and "attente/vent," which focuses the reader's attention on the more formally poetic aspects that are the culminating point of the sentence. Bonnefoy's use of very brief, verb-less statements inspires a reading that scans the fragments into a sort of a proto-quatrain, if we divide the last sentence at the natural caesura that follows the word "désirée." The "lines" created all contain fewer than 10 syllables, which "feels" like a very natural poetic length, spontaneously inducing a more poetic reading of this section of the text.

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[16] Cf. the expression "la terre adviendra" which Bonnefoy has used on several occasions to indicate the nature of the goal of poetry: "En art comme dans la vie, apprenons la parole de l'autre et la terre adviendra, figure intense parce que lieu partagé. Tel me paraît le dessein de la poésie" (*EsP*, 59).

More compellingly, however, (particularly because it is a writing strategy characteristic of Bonnefoy's poetry), the repetition that structures this part of the text–the "à" that was evoked above (but also the "qui" that follows)—evoke an incantatory rhythm suggestive of poetic discourse. Indeed, in a talk given at the Université de Pau colloquium, Patrick Guyon identifies the rhythmic element contained in a text as the linguistic equivalent of *présence*. He indicates: "Le rythme est le contraire d'un signe. […] le rythme c'est le mouvement de la forme, le passage du sujet dans la langue […] J'ajoute que s'il me semble le propre de la poésie (plus que l'image, selon moi), il ne caractérise pas qu'elle : toute parole vraie aussi bien." (307). Tellingly, Bonnefoy concurs explicitly with this position, saying: "je vais tout à fait dans le sens de ce que vous avez dit quant à l'analogie du rythme et de la présence […] Je suis tout à fait d'accord avec cette idée qui me semble ressaisir la parole humaine à son point d'origine" (308). Bonnefoy's whole-hearted acquiescence is, to my mind, a point that is important for examining his essays, for it suggests the existence of a "technical" bridge between poetry, prose, and *présence* that will allow us in the chapter on Bonnefoy's essays to construct a better understanding of how his need to transmit *présence* meshes with the intrinsic capacities of the essay.

And yet, in spite of all the poetic markers which focus attention on the second section, perhaps the most striking fact is that the "Dédicace" continues *past* that poetic juncture. As I suggested in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, this dedication must be read as a microcosm of the essays it introduces. The fact that it continues beyond its poetic apotheosis thus suggests the function of the essays within the body of Bonnefoy's work. Indeed, the very structure of the "Dédicace" demonstrates that the philosophical necessity of transmitting meaning must supersede the importance of poetry, for the continuation of the text beyond its eminently poetic middle section seems to undermine the supremacy of the poetic function, and imply that for Bonnefoy poetry is not the end but rather the means to an end. Certain texts appear to confirm this position,

such as a comment of his on our debt to Baudelaire: "Nous devons [à Baudelaire] de savoir, de savoir *vraiment* que la poésie doit être un moyen et non une fin" (*I*, 119, emphasis in original). This type of statement seems to fly in the face of his earlier comments, for if poetry itself is not the *telos* then what is? The concluding phrases of the "Dédicace" suggest that this goal is necessarily entangled in the complex notion of the realism ("à un grand réalisme") which spearheads the last, and undoubtedly most difficult paragraph of the text.

## Realism, an Avatar of *Présence*

How to interpret this "grand réalisme" which is the culminating moment of the dedication? At its most basic, realism speaks of a stolid acceptance of exterior contingency, of things we cannot change, and which not only *are*, but *are* in and of themselves, indifferent to our individual wishes and desires. And yet, as with the notion of "théologies négatives," the term "réalisme"[17] itself resonates on several different levels, and it is surely not coincidental that the two principle definitions—artistic and philosophical—closely parallel determining factors in Bonnefoy's work. The scope of the term is impossibly broad, covering a great many variables. I am interested here in examining only the more generally accepted definitions because the condensed and comprehensive nature of the "Dédicace" suggests that these are more likely to have guided Bonnefoy in making the message of his dedication so heavily dependent on it. Indeed, despite the overall philosophical intent and flavor of his work, Bonnefoy's explicit and frequent rejection of the notion of "philosophizing" suggests that the "realism" he is talking about is one that should be "à la portée de tous."

[17] The word itself is of recent origin, appearing in French in the mid-nineteenth century, and applied almost exclusively to literature and the arts. By 1878, however, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* defines it primarily as a "terme de philosophie scholastique: *la doctrine réaliste*," and adds: "Il se dit aussi en termes d'art et de littérature, d'une reproduction minutieuse et servile des choses."

Without entering into the technical details, a common definition of realism describes artistic or literary work that eschews idealization and attempts to show its subject "as it really is," with all its flaws and imperfections. But if this "artistic realism" can be more or less clearly perceived by all, its philosophical counterpart remains far more resistant to quick analysis. This equivocation is doubtless due to the fact that the term itself has changed directions over time and has come to designate a multitude of different and even contradictory notions. In his "Dédicace," Bonnefoy indicates by his use of the indefinite article ("*un* grand réalisme") his awareness of the plural definitions that revolve around the term. Clearly, however, this awareness is superseded by his conscious decision to select a single *specific* definition of realism, qualified by the adjective "grand." Between the awareness of the multiple, and the choice of the singular, the problem retains all its complexity: which corresponds to the "*grand* réalisme" that Bonnefoy has in mind?

One indication of Bonnefoy's orientation is given in his 1949 poem "Anti-Platon." Both the title and the poem itself help to clarify his position: he is utterly opposed to the Platonic way of thinking which claims that the world we perceive is merely an imperfect copy of an ideal reality. More specifically, Bonnefoy rejects in the Platonic vision the necessary separation of the world into two realms because this very separation suggests that reality is not here, in this world, but elsewhere. By opposition to this artificial separation, Bonnefoy repeatedly cites the capital importance of the *hic et nunc*, and the experience of the world that surrounds us. He writes in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne":

> Qui tente la traversée de l'espace sensible rejoint une eau sacrée qui coule dans toute chose. Et pour peu qu'il y touche, il se sent immortel. […] Pour un contact de cette espèce, Platon dressait tout un autre monde, celui des fortes Idées. Que ce monde existe, j'en suis sûr : il est, dans le lierre et partout, la substantielle immortalité.
>
> Simplement il est *avec nous*. Dans le sensible. (*I* 28, emphasis Bonnefoy)

Reality thus is here, in our world, inseparable from us. But if Bonnefoy's realism resolutely turns away from the impermeable distinction Plato and his followers make between

essence and existence, it does not shift to a deterministic type of materialism which makes a philosophical point of asserting that reality can never be more than the sum of the matter constituting our world. Matter, *per se*, is important for Bonnefoy. Repeatedly, in both poetry and prose, he returns to the image of stone which exemplifies, in its solid materiality the very texture of reality.[18] "Telle est la pierre," he writes, "je ne puis me pencher sur elle sans la reconnaître insondable, et cet abîme de plénitude, cette nuit que recouvre une lumière éternelle, c'est pour moi le réel exemplairement" (*I* 28). And if stone figures as his image of reality, in other comments gleaned here and there in his writing, Bonnefoy's position appears to run closely parallel to a form of philosophical materialism distinguished by its recognition of the independent reality of material things as, for instance, his reflection on Baudelaire's "A Une Passante": "Baudelaire ne crée pas cette Andromaque, il «pense» à elle, et cela signifie qu'il y a de l'être hors de la conscience" (*I*, 115).

And yet, it would be a mistake to see in Bonnefoy no more than a latter-day materialist. Statements from various texts make clear that his attentiveness to matter and "le monde sensible" goes beyond simply pointing to its existence. In many ways, his stance presents stronger affinities with certain positions held by the phenomenological thinkers with whom he is eminently familiar. As is shown, for example, by the salamander episode analyzed in Chapter Seven, Bonnefoy often seems in his work to address the issue of the necessary inter-connection between individual subjectivity and objective reality. Our real existence, he suggests, must partake of both simultaneously. Thus, when he declares "je […] nommerai […] un réalisme" "une intuition à la fois métaphysique et sensuelle qui est un des modes simples du sentiment poétique dont la fin

[18] See, for example, the collection of poems entitled *Pierre Ecrite*, with its multiple poems called simply "Une pierre."

habituelle est l'acte de la poésie" (*I*, 87), his statement recapitulates the phenomenological gesture of combining intellectual and sensory experience to accurately account for reality.

Moreover, the conjunction between Bonnefoy's realism and what he refers to as the "*acte* de poésie" suggests the importance of action engaged by the individual, for Bonnefoy will return repeatedly to the idea of the importance of action against the immobility of mere mental construction. To this act, so emphatically associated with realism, Bonnefoy opposes the danger of the "demeure d'esprit," as his criticism of Paul Valéry so obviously demonstrates: "Quand le seul acte réel est de se jeter hors de soi, d'approcher le plus qu'il se peut un monde de notre absence, le seul acte possible pour Paul Valéry est de se retirer de tout acte" (*I*, 102). Reality, Bonnefoy tells us, is dynamic; it is an act whose very movement carries it outside the arena of pure intellect. Applied to the "Dédicace," this position finds concrete confirmation in the litany of verbs constellating the final paragraph of the text: "aggrave," "désigne," "tienne," and "ait."[19]

The insistent sequence of verbs–particularly after the verb-less middle section—appears literally to impel the "grand réalisme" into movement, suggesting an unconditional attachment between Bonnefoy's realism and action. And yet, simply equating the two is complicated by three elements in this last section which considerably exacerbate the difficulty of the text. The first–and perhaps most troubling—is Bonnefoy's unexpected development of the subjunctive mood: "qui *tienne* les nuées/qui *ait* souci." The second is the rhetorical structure which puts two awkwardly compatible terms, "qui *aggrave* au lieu de *résoudre*" in a syntax where one would expect the conjunction of symmetrical terms such as, for example, "aggraver" and "alléger." And the third is the difficult shift from darkness, toward the plural "clartés," ("les clartés toujours déchirables") on to the final "haute et impraticable clarté."

[19] A un grand réalisme, qui aggrave au lieu de résoudre, qui désigne l'obscur, qui tienne les clartés pour nuées toujours déchirables. Qui ait souci d'une haute et impraticable clarté.

At first glance, Bonnefoy's rather surprising use of the subjunctive destabilizes, for the impact sought is not immediately apparent. From a purely grammatical point of view, Bonnefoy clearly *could* have used the indicative mode, but deliberately eschewed it. For the reader, the impression of destabilization is reinforced by the fact that the first two verbs, "aggrave" and "désigne," carry no distinguishable mark of the subjunctive, and so the passage initially can be (and probably is) read in the indicative mode until "tienne" and "ait", whose conjugation is unambiguous. The false impression of modal shift between the indicative and subjunctive reinforces the impression engendered with the word "improbable" of being in a sort of no-man's land, suspended between categories. And yet, the philosophical impact of Bonnefoy's decision is unequivocal: had he used the indicative, his choice would have indicated the accomplishment of the actions ("aggraver," "désigner," "tenir," etc.) undertaken by the "grand realism." His use of the subjunctive suggests that this is not the case. Its function, thus, is one of holding the actions of the "grand réalisme" to the level of an incomplete though ardently expressed desire. Indeed, this desire is perhaps even more strongly stated *because* of his use of the subjunctive, for if the primary action of the subjunctive generally suggests uncertainty, the more plainly perceptible meaning in the "Dédicace" lies in the prescriptive feeling it gives to the passage: these are the actions the "grand réalisme" should, or even *must* do. This didactic coloration given to the end of the "Dédicace" is an important point, for one of the defining characteristics of Bonnefoy's essays lies in their marked recourse to a critical evaluation of writers and artists that at times takes on a markedly injunctive thrust.

The "aggraver/résoudre" couplet presents a double problem, for the intrinsic ambiguity of the terms is further heightened by the fact that neither verb has an object in the sentence. The reader is thus left wondering: what is being aggravated or resolved? A sentence from *Entretiens sur la Poésie* suggests "la peur" as a possible object for the sentence. It is this "fear" itself that

allows us to see the unspoken notion of *présence* lying just under the surface of the "Dédicace." In *Entretiens,* Bonnefoy writes: "c'est à la poésie, recommençant le sacré, qu'il appartient de montrer *la forme vraie*, celle qui *dissipe* la peur qui fait que l'imaginaire existe, *aggravant* encore la peur" (44, emphasis mine). A striking number of parallels suggest a link with the "Dédicace:" the presence of "aggraver" in both texts; the parallels between "la forme vraie" and the "Dédicace's" "grand réalisme;" as well as "dissiper," which echoes "résoudre." At first glance, the *Entretiens* sentence seems highly ambiguous. However, like the paradox given by the word "l'improbable," the ambiguity can be resolved, here, by abstracting the grammatical difficulty of the sentence's appositions and putting "l'imaginaire" into opposition with "la forme vraie." This gives the following construction: fear creates the negatively connoted "imaginaire," which, once created, itself exacerbates this fear, and "la forme vraie" is the only way to escape this cycle. The "Dédicace," though it inextricably inscribes ambiguity into the sentence by suppressing the object, is at least clear on the point that the "grand réalisme" should "aggrave *au lieu de* résoudre."

Finally, putting Bonnefoy's "aggraver" into relation with a thinker closely associated with the notion of presence allows us to see in the "grand realisme" an early avatar of what will become *présence*. Indeed, Martin Buber's *I and Thou* provides what appears to be a causal connection between the notion of presence and the idea that it renders life itself "heavier." Buber writes: "Man receives […] a Presence [which] does not in any way lighten his life –it makes his life heavier, but heavy with meaning" (110). For Bonnefoy, the expression of presence itself remains latent in the "Dédicace," largely, I would argue, because *L'Improbable* is his first collection of essays, written at a point when his terminology, particularly concerning the word *présence,* was not entirely stabilized. Seeing the "grand réalisme" as an early figure for *présence* allows us to see that the perplexing phrases which follow demonstrate not only its mystical

dimension, but also the way in which Bonnefoy uses presence to critique the notion of image. Here, the double reference to "clarté," "qui désigne l'obscur, qui tienne les clartés pour nuées toujours déchirables. Qui ait souci d'une haute et impraticable clarté" creates a paradoxical effect much more resistant to analysis than the apparent paradox arising from the collision between "l'improbable" and "ce qui est." In these final phrases, the text forces us into a sort of conundrum, holding us suspended between the polysemous "clartés" which we know to be false ("nuées toujours déchirables"), and a higher "clarté" which we also know to be "impraticable." How to resolve this verbal impasse?

In the discussion of "théologies négatives," I introduced the idea that Bonnefoy's writing is strongly influenced by a mystical current shown by his predilection for thinkers such as Plotinus or Saint-Jean de la Croix. For this final part of the "Dédicace," an examination of mystical vocabulary and imagery allow for at least a partial explanation of the troubling conjunction of obscurity, light, and a final higher light, inasmuch as these very terms are at the heart of the mystical vision of the world. In his lexicon of philosophical terms, André Lalande provides a general definition of mysticism:

> L'idée fondamentale du mysticisme semble donc celle-ci : les images ni les concepts ne nous donnent la réalité ; il faut traverser les choses sensibles, les représentations intellectuelles comme des voiles ; et lorsque par la vie purgative et ascétique on s'est dépouillé de soi et des choses, lorsqu'on s'est offert nu au vide, ce vide, cette nuit obscure révèlent la plénitude d'une vie qui ne semble cachée et «mystique» qu'à ceux qui, selon le mot de Newman, n'ont pas émigré de la région des ombres et des images. (Note 663-4)

Lalande concludes his definition with a citation from the pseudo-Denys Areopagus which is particularly pertinent to the "Dédicace:" "ce qui paraissait, dans l'état inférieur, lumineux et réel, n'est plus que voile ténébreux et apparence ; et ce qui semblait nul et nocturne, se révèle comme l'immense lumière et l'absolue unité à laquelle communie l'âme «conviée au banquet divin»" (Note, 663). As concerns the "Dédicace," the most interesting aspects of Lalande's definition reside in the notion of "traverser des voiles," and in the movement from "nuit obscure"

to "plénitude." Both of these images are metaphors which give a sort of substance to the mystical approach. Tellingly these same metaphors, that is, the image of veils masking the passage between normal consciousness and reality, conjoined with the idea that what appears to the uninitiated as dark and obscure is, in fact light and illumination, are densely interwoven into this last part of the "Dédicace."

But it would be a grave error to suggest that the images conveyed by the "Dédicace" are the *telos* of the text. Bonnefoy, a noted critic of images, has in many texts vigorously challenged what he identifies as the "emprise des images."[20] A comment in *Entretiens* demonstrates how closely his own rejection of the image is aligned with mysticism's requirement to free oneself from the power of images in order to attain the truth. Bonnefoy writes "[…] je critiquais l'artiste qui s'abandonne à l'image […], quand je lui rappelais avec le dernier Rimbaud la «réalité rugueuse», disant qu'elle était la vérité" (*EsP* 42). For him, images allow us to abstract ourselves from the reality of our own existence through their seductive capacity to constitute entire worlds in and of themselves. Thus though the "Dédicace's" images of light and darkness echo the mystical ones, the content they point to differs markedly. For if the function of the "grand réalisme" is to maintain open the polysemy of that which is real, it does so by pointing toward darkness ("qui désigne l'obscur") which, in Bonnefoy's thinking, is connoted less with the inferior knowledge that mysticism rejects, than with an indication of the importance of our earthly passage. The essay "Paul Valéry" shows Bonnefoy's position. "Il y a des mirages de la clarté" (*I*, 99) he writes, his words reiterating the idea of the falsehood of what appears luminous until it is more closely examined. As these texts suggest, these visions of light are false because

[20] The criticism of the image as something that appears luminous and real but is, in fact, deeply problematic ("le rêve qui s'accepte rêve" [*EsP*, 42]) is one of the central themes of much of Bonnefoy's writing. See, for example, *L'Arrière-pays.* Numerous critics, (cf Patrick Née, et al) have pointed to Bonnefoy's deep ambivalence concerning the image.

they have not adequately taken into account the "obscur," the darkness that is an integral part of our material existence. Slightly later in the essay, Bonnefoy will provide the explanation for this inadequacy, indicating that "la matière de la poésie après tant d'errances recommencée [*sic*] est la méditation de la mort" (*I*, 101). Finally, Bonnefoy's sharp criticism of Valéry is borne in the idea that because of his idealism, "Valéry n'a pas su qu'on avait inventé la mort" (*ibid.*).

The "grand réalisme" of the "Dédicace" thus takes from mysticism the idea that one must question the images we are given. At the same time, however, Bonnefoy's realism turns away from mysticism, seeking instead to ground us in the only reality we have: our existence as finite beings. Where a truly mystical perspective abandons the material self for a form of apotheosis that is purely spiritual in nature, Bonnefoy's realism is firmly rooted in our attachment to that same "rugeuse réalité" that we earlier saw him borrowing from Rimbaud. Thus the duty Bonnefoy assigns to his particular iteration of realism is that of maintaining in us a constant awareness that light itself is composed of permeable veils masking the truth "qui tienne les clartés pour nuées toujours déchirables." This image of "nuées," it must be noted, is one that has remained with him, and is, in point of fact, one of a set of images that cross the frontier between essay and poetry. All these uses of "nuées" concur with the "Dédicace"'s vision of "nuées" as an impediment to be overcome, and this fact reinforces the importance of the realism in the "Dédicace," suggesting that it is only through our attachment to the reality of "ce qui est" that we can disperse the mirage that prevents us from attaining the "haute et impraticable clarté" which so surprisingly closes the text.

This final "clarté," following as it does the rigorous *mise en doute* of the plural "clartés," astounds. Bonnefoy hints at the absolute nature of this latter "clarté" through the suggestion that it is physically and morally high, *beyond* the "nuées," whose only characteristic is to be "toujours déchirables." And though these physical and ethical qualities seem to be undercut by

"impracticable," in reality, the weight of this adjective consolidates the moral dimension of the text by combining the injunctive quality we saw associated with the subjunctive and reversing the negative meaning seemingly associated with the word. Concretely, how does Bonnefoy achieve this? As with the analysis of the word "improbable," Bonnefoy's method is to focus on root definitions in order to reverse the apparently negative connotation of a word. With "impracticable," Bonnefoy reinforces the transformation through the use of the subjunctive mood, recuperating the negative aspect of the word and transforming it into a cautious positive. Indeed, although "impracticable" seems synonymous with "impossible," in fact, the two terms are not equivalent. Rather, "impraticable" indicates, in a physical sense, a place that is momentarily impassable, hence difficult, and perhaps even dangerous. But the salient fact for Bonnefoy is that something that is "impraticable" is difficult, but not impossible. It thus inhabits the same nebulous region as the "improbable" which opened the "Dédicace," and offers the same hope of a presence or communion which is not insurmountably far, but which nevertheless requires the work of intellect and spirit to access. The use of the subjunctive allows Bonnefoy to play on this chance, because if we understand that "impraticable" inhabits the gray zone of possibility which is the domain of the subjunctive, we also know that that which is impossible lives in the clear, sharp lines of the indicative. And it is only in this sense that Bonnefoy's use of the subjunctive mode takes on its full meaning, for, examined from the pivotal axis of the couplet formed by "impraticable" and its shadowy reflection in "impossible," the subjunctive allows the "impraticable" to maintain an opening toward the possibility of the "haute clarté." And it is in this sense that the final "clarté" can triumph, for the term "impraticable" does, in the end, allow the difficult access to the light. The extreme difficulty of the task, the doubtfulness expressed by the subjunctive thus supports the physical position of "clarté" at the very end of the text, and confirms that because there is no going beyond it, this high light is an end in itself.

## The "Dédicace": Making Present

The very notion of final destination inscribed in the "Dédicace" brings us back to a consideration of its paratextual nature. In a sense, the text's own existence is a testimony to the complexity of its liminal situation: while it is clearly positioned as a simple pre-text for *L'Improbable*, in reality, as we saw earlier, the very act of naming that other text also reveals the "Dédicace" to be a pretext, enabling the writer to guide—even orient—the reading of the essays contained in *L'Improbable*. To reiterate, then, Bonnefoy's "Dédicace" is more than an ordinary dedication; its avowed destination, while suggesting an obvious extra-textuality in the abstract notion of improbability, actually points not just to the text for which it serves as preface, but to a whole set of texts. Thus like the transparency masking a greater light, the final "impraticable clarté" of the "Dédicace" serves not only as the literal endpoint for the dedication, but also as an entry point into all of the volumes of *L'Improbable*. This realization brings us to a crucial element allowing us to glimpse through the veils of language and image a more subliminal *raison d'être* of the "Dédicace." Indeed, the entry point emblematized by the dedication is itself conditioned by another consideration that remains latent in the "Dédicace" but is of vital overall importance to Bonnefoy's work. That is, of course, the notion of presence. In *Seuils,* his seminal work on paratexts*,* Gérard Genette writes:

> L'œuvre littéraire […] se présente rarement à l'état nu, sans le renfort et l'accompagnement d'un certain nombre de productions, elles-mêmes verbales ou non, comme un nom d'auteur, un titre, une préface, des illustrations, dont on ne sait pas toujours si l'on doit ou non considérer qu'elles lui appartiennent, mais qui en tout cas l'entourent et le prolongent, précisément pour le présenter, au sens habituel de ce verbe, mais aussi en son sens le plus fort : pour le *rendre présent*, pour assurer sa présence au monde, sa « réception », et sa consommation, sous la forme, aujourd'hui du moins, d'un livre. (7, emphasis in original)

Genette's comment on a theoretical process strikingly echoes the terminology that is part of the bone and sinew of Bonnefoy's work. The idea that the function of a paratext is to render a text *present* encapsulates the crucial paradigm of Bonnefoy's writing in general, and the

addresses the main problem of this dissertation, namely, the function of the essays in Bonnefoy's work. Genette's notion of providing a type of guideline coincides very exactly with the idea of seeing the essays collected in the various volumes of *L'Improbable* as the cartographic itinerary of a mental progression through and to *présence*.

# CHAPTER TWO –
# Situating Writing and Position:
# Presence and *Deixis*

The notion of presence is of such pivotal importance in Bonnefoy's poetics that hardly any critic studying his work fails to give at least a sketchy definition of what the term means and how it is used by the poet.[21] Indeed, the word has now become so closely associated with Bonnefoy's thinking that in France, it is quite common to refer to him simply as a "poète de la présence." In the light of that ubiquity, many critics very naturally limit their analysis to showing how presence appears in Bonnefoy's writing, frequently without seeking to examine the reasons underlying his determination to build his thought around this word. They are supported in this approach by the idea that as a word, the term "presence" appears so transparent that it hardly needs any further explication: everyone knows what presence means.

And yet, things are perhaps not quite so clear-cut: presence is a much more enigmatic and variable notion than appears at first glance, and this even within Bonnefoy's own appreciation of the term, which has undergone subtle but significant modifications over the course of his texts. Thus to see how it enters into resonance with his thought, any attempt to define presence must necessarily pass through an understanding of the different permutations it assumed before becoming the cornerstone of Bonnefoy's poetics. In a sense, though, "presence" contains a grounding homogeneity: all the multiple layers of significance that have become embedded in the word encapsulate the struggle to arrive at what can only be described as an ontological

[21] See here the work of Richard Vernier, John Jackson, Jean Starobinski, Gérard Gasarian, John Naughton, and Patrick Née, to name but a few of the critics who have studied the subject.

understanding of reality, seen through a theological as well as a philosophical prism. And therein, perhaps, lies the usefulness of the term for Bonnefoy. Seen in this light, "presence" is a sort of intellectual shorthand not only for the capacity for certain concepts and words to contain multiple meanings simultaneously, but it is also a figure for the difficulty that even simple definitions represent.

A first question: why spend time on the theological foundations with respect to a poet who overtly disclaims his own personal adhesion to Christian doctrine, saying most notably in *Entretiens sur la Poésie*, "je ne suis pas chrétien [...] je n'ai pas de foi" (46) ? That fact notwithstanding, Bonnefoy's work is riddled with allusions to various elements of Christian theology and permeated with what one might consider as a sort of nostalgia for religion, a feeling which Bonnefoy himself defends by pointing out that both poetry and religion address the same life-issues, each providing answers that are necessarily related.[22] Along those lines, Concetta Cavallini indicates that the religious element of Bonnefoy's thought extends well beyond the purely religious sphere and confers an ethical dimension to his work. She writes: "l'ensemble de sa pensée, présentée dans ses œuvres et explicitée dans ses essais, revêt une dimension « religieuse » qui semble la rapprocher d'une éthique plus que d'une poétique" (5). To my mind, this larger ethical current is vital in that it provides the premises to understand the moral imperative for the essay in his work.

That said, a number of critics have pointed out the fact that his own use of the word *présence* seems to recapitulate some of the more "technical" aspects of how the term is understood in theological terms. Ronald Gérald Giguère, for example, suggests that

[22] For this aspect of Bonnefoy's writing, see, for example, his interviews with Bernard Falciola, reprinted in *Entretiens sur la Poésie*, the work of Jean-Pierre Jossua, or Daniel Acke's "Le Dieu des récits en rêve," among many others.

> la notion d'incarnation dans [la poésie de Bonnefoy] se rapproche plutôt de la notion chrétienne de Dieu se faisant chair. Selon le dogme, le Christ incarne le Père et le Verbe qui sont ainsi doublement rendus à la Terre dans l'Evangile et la personne du Christ. La parole poétique ne serait-elle pas rendue de son côté à la Terre par la poésie bonnefoysienne? Ou, à tout le moins, cette poésie ne serait-elle pas une tentative de rendre la parole poétique à la Terre par l'incarnation en elle du réel? (21)

His comment recapitulates a goal that seems to subtend much of Bonnefoy's interest in presence, appearing notably in the suggestion that presence inhabits poetry through the latter's own capacity to render reality. Bonnefoy's specific address to "un grand réalisme" in the "Dédicace" thus appears as a figure of this connection between presence and reality. However, I would suggest that this goal is an ideal whose realization is ever in question in Bonnefoy's writing, for Giguerre demonstrates one of the more dangerous pitfalls engendered by the perception that poetry can encompass presence. Indeed, the fraught question of knowing whether the type of transcendence suggested by the term "presence" can be obtained through language is precisely the problem that Bonnefoy himself is so anxiously aware of. And despite the stabilizing function of the religious vocabulary which tends to ground his thinking in much larger questions than the esthetics of poetry, this residual anxiety pierces through much of his writing, subtending the question of whether his essays are not the tangible, material demonstration of his subterranean fear that poetic language might not suffice to invoke presence, and that some other form of communication might be required to transmit the ontological position that appears to be of crucial importance for him.

To return, however, to Bonnefoy's appropriation of certain aspects of a theological vocabulary, as the following example shows, his writing is imbued with the figures and narrative elements of Christian tradition:

> la vérité c'est que "Dieu", tout simplement, et collectivement, est à naître et peu à peu, ou brusquement le fera, d'où vient que le mythe de la Nativité, par exemple, celui de l'enfant divin, de l'enfant à la fois quelconque et mystérieux, a pu bouleverser tant de siècles, et même prendre le pas, si souvent, sur la théologie de la Croix. Dieu est à naître, et j'ai, à des moments, non une foi, bien sûr, mais une foi dans la foi possible […] (*EsP*, 46)

Here, the tenor of the comment demonstrates a focus on the impact of what one might term, with no pejorative intent, the "myths" of Christianity, along with the precedence, for Bonnefoy, of the symbol of birth over the theologically more significant symbol of salvation through the sacrifice on the cross. This is not to say that the question of salvation is not pertinent to Bonnefoy's work. On the contrary, this notion is central to his thought, as is shown by the emblematic attention he gives to a broken leaf, which becomes the very figure of a form of salvation. What Bonnefoy rejects is the purely *theological* proposition which makes salvation accessible solely through belief in the dogmas of faith. It is, at least in part, the rejection of this proposition that allows him to develop his own position, for the theological axis to Bonnefoy's thought lies not so much in the narrative forms and symbols of Christianity–though these too have their importance—but rather in the fact that his writing aims to address notions of transcendence and communion that are generally more germane to a religious viewpoint.

## A Theological Grounding

It is no secret that in the not-too-distant past, the term "presence" referred almost exclusively to the mystery of the presence of Christ contained in the sacraments of the Church. But from a historical perspective, even this point is fraught with instability, for this theological connection that bridges the gap between presence and deixis lies in the essential question of the true nature of presence. Indeed, from the very outset, a distinction must be drawn between different types of presence, symbolic, as in the sacrament of marriage, and real, or dynamic, as in the sacrament of the Eucharist The symbolic nature of the sacrament of marriage contrasts sharply with the explicitly concrete nature that Catholic (and Orthodox) religious doctrine gives to the sacrament of the Eucharist, and serves a double purpose, helping us, on the one hand, to

see better the specificity of the Eucharist and, on the other hand, allowing us to begin reflecting on the importance of a symbolic relationship between act and expression that is equally important in thinking about how poetic language functions. This distinction between a symbolic and "real" presence is of fundamental importance, as it is one that will continue to inform the notion of Bonnefoy's *présence*, echoing in various forms throughout his writing.

Of all the sacraments, the Eucharist is not only the single sacrament most closely associated with the notion of presence, but it is also the one for which the notion of real presence has posed the greatest number of difficulties throughout the centuries. The fundamental question– can something truly be present in something else—is one that has continued to haunt the human psyche, gradually evolving from a purely religious matter to a much broader question involving the capacity of language to contain meaning. Seen in its non-religious extension, thus, Eucharististic presence is important for Bonnefoy, the notion appearing in his writing both in the idea of a poetic *telos,* and in the goal of communion he asserts. And as was shown in the Introduction, the fusion between poetry and presence greatly informs Bonnefoy's own interpretation of his work. Unsurprisingly, it has thus mobilized an overwhelming amount of critical attention, leading in turn to academic corroboration of Bonnefoy's position by the frequent reiteration of the connection between *poetry* and presence (see, for example, Gasarian's *Yves Bonnefoy. La poésie, la présence*, or the work of John Jackson, Richard Vernier, among others). My intent, once again, is to go beyond this critical position and show that in Bonnefoy's work, the transmission of a notion of presence is not the sole province of poetry. On the contrary, the notion of presence is equally, if not more so, a philosophical ambition that Bonnefoy, using both the tools of poetry and those of rhetorical persuasion, attempts to delineate and express in his essays, in part, through the inherent plurality of presence.

The notion of presence, though capital, is, however, only part of the importance of the Eucharist, which also contains the vital notion of communion. Indeed, it is almost more the importance Bonnefoy gives to the idea of communion that tends to confirm the significance of the image of the Eucharist for him. And although he does, at certain moments in his writing, express doubt about the potential for communion through the acts of writing and reading, he vehemently claims for poetry primarily, but also for all writing more generally, the capacity to create a sense of communion and community. Finally, the last, and perhaps most poetically "technical" aspect of the Eucharist which translates into Bonnefoy's writing is the highly evocative image of the bread and wine of the sacrament, along with the associated images of blood and sacrifice. All of these images appear in various forms with great regularity, particularly in his early poetry and essays.

## The Eucharistic Word as Gateway to Deixis

Already, at a semantic level, a clear distinction is made by the fact that the Catholic Church insists on its position by referring to the *real* presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. In other words, Christ, in a mystery said to surpass human understanding, is given as truly present, truly contained in the offerings of the consecrated bread and wine, which are transubstantiated, their essence really and factually transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The corollary to this principle, so often reiterated by the Church,[23] is an adamant opposition to the notion that Christ might be merely symbolically present in the offering of the

[23] See the emphatic statements of the Council of Trent: "if anyone denies that the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ, is truly, really, and substantially contained in the Sacrament of the most holy Eucharist, but says that Christ is present in the Sacrament only as in a sign or figure, or by His power: let him be anathema" Session 13 of the Council of Trent, Canon 1, (as cited in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 604). Avery Cardinal Dulles writes: "Repeated by many popes and official documents since 1551, the teaching of Trent remains today as normative as ever. The contemporary Catechism of the Catholic Church is content to quote it verbatim."

sacrament. The conceptual difficulty of this position lies, of course, in the fact that since it rests entirely on a literal interpretation of the words of Christ as reported in the Gospels, it has no negotiable intellectual underpinnings, and has thus contributed to creating the great theological schisms of the Western world.

"*Hoc est corpus meum*" is the phrase that has caused such furor over time. It is of significance to us here on at least two levels: first, as concerns the notion of symbol, and then in its explicit use of *deixis*. Regarding the relationship between symbol and presence, the interconnection between the two terms is anchored firmly within the religious sphere. For, as indicated above, the Catholic Church has always interpreted this phrase literally, as a simple statement of fact. This interpretation functions deictically because the priest is a figure for the person of Christ, and as such may speak the words of institution as though he were Christ himself. The discourse is thus reiterated, indeed, almost literally re-enacted, thus instantiating the use of the first person and filling the open deictic categories "hoc" and "meum:" it is the rite that consecrates the elements of sacrament. Challenges to this view emerged early, but the most significant opposition, and the one which has remained embedded in the collective Western conscience, is, of course, the one established by the Protestant reformers. Their rejection of the very notion of a factual presence in the Eucharist is interesting to us not, of course, for theological reasons, but for semantic reasons that ground Bonnefoy's work and address the question of how language can represent reality, or even how it can actually *be* reality, coupled with the nature of the relationship between word and symbol.

The pivotal distinction between Luther's position and that of the Catholic Church lies in the power he grants to the Word. His argument, as B. A. Gerrish shows, "turns around the sheer power of the word, which does what it says. When we say the words over the bread, Christ is really present. Without the word, it is indeed just bread; but as soon as the words are added, they

bring what they speak about [...] No one can gainsay it: the power comes through the word" (380). This capacity of the *word itself* and not the priest as figure of Christ is precisely what is challenged by other Protestants such as Zwingli, whose distinction between real presence and the function of language prefigures the relationship between what de Saussure will later refer to as "signifier" and "signified." In essence, Zwingli claims that the words of institution function as a rhetorical figure and he reads the sentence "hoc est corpus meum" as operating on a symbolic level that contains a memorial rather than efficacious function and that the body of Christ must be read as a sign pointing to something else. This brings us, of course, to the question that lies at the crux of the debate, namely, what is the function of signs or symbols? When they point at something other than themselves, where do they point?

Both Luther and Zwingli derive their interpretation of the Eucharist from Augustine, for whom the sacrament is indeed a sign, but interestingly, it is a sign that points not outside itself toward something that is absent, but is rather a sign the stands for something–the real presence of Christ—that is invisibly present. In this, the sign itself partakes in creating the link between that invisible presence and the worshipers. For our contemporary mental landscapes, this fundamental question of where the sign points tends to be addressed not necessarily to questions of faith and salvation, but to language itself and perhaps even more particularly to poetic language with its well-known capacity to project outside itself while simultaneously pointing to the integrity and significance of its own form. It is precisely at this juncture that the notion of presence concatenates with the writing and thinking of Bonnefoy.

## Deixis and the complexification of language

The notion of the sacramental sign as an indicator pointing to some immaterial though real presence brings us to the second element encapsulated in the phrase "*hoc est corpus meum*," and that is the explicit–and double: both '*hoc*' and '*meum*' function thus—use of deixis. As it happens, this is of direct interest for us, as its frequent use is a striking characteristic of Bonnefoy's work, appearing regularly in both his poetry and his essays, metaphorically thematised, for instance in his statement that "loin d'être le prisme déformant, qui n'incite qu'à l'illusoire, le vers est l'indexe qui pointe vers cet au-delà du vocable" *EsP*, 264.. It has continued to inform his thinking, for in an electronic note to me (June 17, 2010), he indicated that for him "la *deixis* est le porche de la creation poétique."

From an analytic perspective, deixis is complex because it refers to a conceptual category of language whose meaning is instable, and always context-dependent. What appears to be constant is that the deictic word–or indexical, as it is sometimes called—is one whose meaning must always be understood as dual, simultaneously containing both a fixed and a variable sense. To put it more precisely, the deictic word is one whose immediate referent can only be filled at the moment of enunciation. Thus the stable definition of the word "I," understood as "the word that designates the speaker uttering this word," varies with the speaker. This characteristic of obtaining complete meaning only within the individual speech act has profound significance in Bonnefoy's poetics, as does the idea that indexicals cannot be contained within the system of language and have the potential to escape its structure. This contextually determined presence/absence resonates with the notion discussed above, namely, the possibility for presence to emerge through religious language, for in some sense, deixis points to the incontestable presence of its referent, whether material or immaterial, and presumes the reality of such a

presence. Indeed, to return momentarily to the notion of the Eucharist, using the conceptual framework of deixis one can see that the very crux of the theological debate on the words of institution rests on the nature of the referent for the deictic "hoc," with certain theologians even arguing that during the historical moment of the Last Supper, the phrase could only have been accompanied by a self-reflexive gesture, with Christ pointing literally at himself as he spoke the sentence.

This function of deixis, of pointing from within the discourse situation to a specifically extra-linguistic element that lies within the shared experience of both interlocutors seems quite straightforward. Indeed, in the vast majority of instances, especially verbal speech acts, the object of the deictic expression is clearly apparent to the speaker and the listener. However, what seems simple at the verbal, locally interactive level–the pointing gesture accompanying the word—describes what are, in reality, a complicated series of interactions between language and referential systems, between language and the perception of reality. As linguist Stephen Levinson remarks in his article "*Deixis* and Pragmatics," "Deixis introduces subjective, attentional, intentional and of course context-dependent properties into natural languages. Further, it is a much more pervasive feature of languages than normally recognized, and is theoretically puzzling in many regards (1).[24] Levinson's affirmation incites us to wonder what makes deixis so theoretically difficult. Later in his article, Levinson argues that it is not the existence of deixis that is problematic, but its function within a purely referential synchronic linguistic system (such as the Saussurean system) that is presumed to address constant relationships between symbol and reality. In other words, the type of language that many linguistic systems analyze "treats language as a disembodied representational system which is essentially independent of current

[24] This particular sentence is quoted from the version of the article available on a website (see bibliography). The version of the sentence in the *Handbook* is slightly different. Page numbers used in this dissertation refer to the pdf version of Levinson's article.

circumstances" (2). Thus the word "tree" always symbolically represents the object "tree," the verb "walk" always refers to an identifiable action, and so on. Deixis, however, as Levinson argues, following C. S. Peirce and other linguists, complicates the straightforward relationship between the symbolic representation of the word and its referent for

> the deictic system in language is embedded in a context-independent descriptive system, in such a way that the two systems produce a third which is not reducible to either. Or, to use Peirce's terminology, in language we have an intersection of the indexical plane into the symbolic one –it's a folding back of the primitive existential indexical relation into symbolic reference, so that we end up with something much more complex on both planes: on the one hand symbolic reference is relativized to time, place, speaker, and so on, so that a sentence like 'John will speak next" is true now, not later, and on the other [hand], indexical reference is mediated by symbolic meaning so that a phrase like 'This book' can't be used to point to this mug. (3)

This definition is of great interest for Bonnefoy's writing, for in it Levinson demonstrates a paradigm wherein the deictic component of language produces another level allowing for several different notions to coexist simultaneously within a single linguistic space. As I have suggested elsewhere, this idea of the capacity of some notions to encompass a variety of different visions of themselves and of the world is, to my mind, a key element in understanding both Bonnefoy's poetry and prose. And as the "*ce* livre" of the "Dédicace" showed, deixis is a tool that is particularly well-adapted to establishing his vision of the inherent and paradoxical capacity of language to consolidate, question, and even, in some instances, *create* relationships between itself and reality.

## Deixis and the origo: ego, hic, nunc

One theoretical aspect of *deixis* which is of central importance to the very words and expressions that appear in the work of Bonnefoy is addressed by Karl Bühler in his influential *Sprachtheorie* (1934). There, Bühler proposes the notion of a deictic "*origo*," wherein the utterance of the speaker is understood as located at the intersection of three axes, which are defined as temporal, spatial, and subjective (204). And although the deictic utterance can, of

course, point elsewhere, the *origo* can be thought of as a sort of "zero point," or a fixed instance which involves positing the time of utterance as "now," the place as "here," and the speaker as "I." There is nothing remarkable about these three terms, suggests Bühler. On the contrary, "ce qui est particulier, c'est seulement ce que chacun d'eux exige: regarde le phénomène sonore que je suis et considère-moi comme la marque de l'instant pour la première, comme la marque de lieu pour la seconde, comme marque de l'émetteur […] pour la troisième" (206). Thus Bühler's position points to the fact that all speech is a series of modulations based on the initial central triplet of *ego*, *hic*, and *nunc*.

As it happens, these three terms reverberate –at times even as direct borrowings of the exact Latin words—throughout Bonnefoy's writing, appearing in various forms in both in his poetry and in his essays. One need only, for example, think of the title of his early poem, "Hic est Locus Patriae," or the even more telling statement from his critical essay on Valéry in which he opposes "à ce que Valéry croit réel, *la* mer et *l'*olivier et *le* vent" (*I*, 100, emphasis Bonnefoy) a more terrestrial form of reality embodied by "cet olivier, mais dans sa différence profonde, son existence de *hic et nunc*, son être qui sous la hache ou l'incendie le perdra" (*ibid*). Given thus Bonnefoy's attachment to these very deicticals, it is interesting to note they also have a specific connection with theology. Indeed, Jossua, who has written much on the relationship between Bonnefoy and Christian theology, informs us that "l'expression *hic et nunc* est […] chrétienne et théologique. En effet, si la liaison d'adverbes–sans la copule toutefois—n'est pas ignorée du latin classique, elle est caractéristique du latin chrétien, dans lequel le sens courant («dans les circonstances présentes») se charge souvent d'une connotation précise : sur cette terre, par opposition à l'éternité et l'au-delà" (vol 1, 223, note 7). This opposition, of course, is important to Bonnefoy, and examining the model of "*origo*" allows us to see the areas where the underlying theories of temporality, spatiality and subjectivity concatenate with what he seems to be trying to

achieve in his writing, particularly, of course, through the way he actually uses deictic markers in his poems and essays.

The notion of *ego* would appear to be coterminous with the very possibility of a deictic enunciation in the sense that to localize and project a stable a *hic* and a *nunc*, the *ego* must first be anchored to determine the loci of the deictic words used (though Bühler also suggests that the three terms are inextricably simultaneous in their generation of subjectivity). Now while this primary occurrence of a person materially able to project a subjective self is of central importance for the use of deixis in an ordinary speech act–as, for example, in the visible and ostensible conflation between the speaker and the user of the word "I"—this same projection of the self becomes infinitely more complicated when applied to the act of writing. One could even argue that as concerns writing, deictic subjectivity is always a sort of fiction, inasmuch as it can never ensure a verifiable and authentic identity between the word and the act it presupposes. This is perhaps even more pertinent when considering the writing of fiction where–as opposed to a scientific research paper, for example, which deliberately erases references to the writing subject—the presence of a speaking subject given as the origin of the fictional discourse is generally explicitly posited. Naturally, of course, the purported absence of subjectivity in a scientific text is itself a fictional construct, but in general perceptions of writing, it is very common to imagine a sort of "sliding scale" assigning little or no subjectivity to something like academic writing, and increasing amounts of subjectivity to the more "artistic" forms such as fiction, poetry, or even the essay.

As will become evident in subsequent chapters devoted to more detailed readings of Bonnefoy's essays and poetry, the issue of the relationship between language and identity lies at the heart of his preoccupations. Indeed, the necessity for the individual subject to find a means of true expression, to find an authentic and individual "I" in spite of the prison of the linguistic

structures that surround each user of language, emerges in his insistence on the importance of the individual appropriation of language through individual speech-acts, or through what might be more familiar to the reader as the Saussurean term "parole." For Bonnefoy, it is only when the structure of language has been individuated by the speaker that presence can emerge within the text and interact with the reader. And I would further suggest that the very nature of Bonnefoy's writing–his constant shifting between poetry, essay, or, less frequently, the so-called dream narrations ("*récits en rêve*")—suggests the great significance he attaches to establishing the subject *per* subject at the center of the utterance. Poetry, as Bonnefoy repeatedly reiterates, must seek to *show* and, via the experience of the subject, create a direct connection with the reader through an interaction grounded in a perception of immediacy. The essay, as the following chapters show, contains the same form of potential interaction between writing subject and reader. As for Bonnefoy's fictional "*récits*," though they initially appear not to foreground subjective experience, demonstrating instead a break from the mimesis shown in poetry and essay, they are explicitly presented as "dream narratives," which means that their narrative elements are also explicitly filtered through the subjectivity of the hypothetical dreamer. Thus, rather than removing us from the sphere of un-mediated subjectivity, the "*récits en rêve"* serve to iterate yet again the inextricable presence of the subject, reminding us how constant the tension is, in Bonnefoy's work, between the explicit and the implicit speaking "I."

That fact notwithstanding, it is in the analysis of the *nunc* and the *hic* axes of deixis, particularly as they relate to the act of writing, that we can more clearly grasp the fundamental importance that deixis might have for Bonnefoy's philosophical and writerly project. As concerns the *nunc* axis, although its expression of a certain "now-ness" seems, in a true discourse situation, to be wholly context-dependent and bound to the moment of enunciation, the parameters again change radically when one considers it within the act of writing, for the temporal standpoint is

radically transformed by the dynamics of reading: the "now" of the author and the "now" of the reader are indubitably non-identical–clearly, in some objective sense, they point to two distinct moments in time. Paradoxically, however, they can also be thought of as identical, for the act of reading draws the reader into the moment of creation, and one could even posit that through that dynamic act, the reader is always engaged in a present moment that replicates the moment of writing. Hence the *nunc* facet of the Bühlerian triplet points in a direction that suggests the potential engagement of the reader in what might be read as a collaborative effort involving both writer and reader. This point is of vital importance in terms of what Bonnefoy appears to be trying to accomplish, particularly through his poetry: his claim for poetry is that it has the capacity to provide an access to presence, but that access cannot–and indeed *must* not—be limited to the passive reception of a finished text, but is obtainable only through a specific type of act, which he defines as an act undertaken both by the writer and by the reader.

Finally, the *hic* dimension of deixis complements the analysis of the *nunc* aspect, for the fundamental characteristic of these two forms is to presuppose an interaction between writer and reader. Considered at its originary, pre-writing level, the *hic* aspect of deixis has driven a number of philosophers, Bühler included, to posit that subjectivity itself and through it, interpersonal communication, is grounded in a mental notion of corporeal space, or at least, of a perception of the boundaries of one's own body. For instance, anthropologist Nils Bubandt, when referring to the relationship between the body and space, reiterates Bühler's original term of "Körpertastbild," writing that "the Körpertastbild is none other than 'the axes we take with us wherever we go' to which Bourdieu referred." Bubandt continues: "Bourdieu's departure point is identical to that of Merleau-Ponty when the latter argues that it is only through the primordial spatiality of our bodies, which is fundamental to our being-in-the-world, that we are able to perceive the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962:206)" (143). This reference to the creation of place via

one's own perception of the physical space of one's corporeal existence cannot but resonate for readers of Bonnefoy, who are familiar with the term "vrai lieu," or "true place, real place" that navigates throughout his poetry and his essays. Indeed, numerous are the references one finds in Bonnefoy's writing to the idea of poetry as a "space" within which *présence* might occur as, for instance, his comment that "le vrai lieu, c'est toujours un ici," which points to the connection he makes between the deixis of place and the notion of presence as a real, accessible possibility for anyone.

However if one can, in a concrete verbal exchange between two people, conceptualize how a feeling for the "presence" of an object or of a subject can occur within the immediacy of the *hic* dimension of deixis, once again, it is perhaps much more difficult to see how such a feeling might emanate from a written text. The seemingly transparent connection Bonnefoy makes between "here" and presence via the link of the "vrai lieu" challenges us to confirm the paradigm by examining how the act of producing a written text modifies the notion of spatial deixis. In point of fact, much of the interaction between the "Dédicace" as a literary space and the space of *L'Improbable*, the text to come, is related to the spatiality of writing. Indeed, at some level, one can legitimately consider that what is actually created by the written text is, quite literally, a physical space which contains the potential to be concretely inhabited by symbols, which are, again, also of a physical nature (e.g. shape, style, typography, etc.). To carry this reflection further, one can also consider that it is precisely because of its physical dimension that a written text can obtain its double capacity for openness and iteration. The textual "here" to which writers refer is a deictic "here" that uses words as symbols pointing not to an extra-linguistic "here," but rather toward the space within the text. But this imaginary space, this "here" for the writer, becomes, through the act of reading, a "here" for the reader as well precisely because of the conjoined attention that both writer and reader give to the physical space

constituted by the written text. And though both the *hic* and *nunc* dimensions of deixis draw the reader into sharing an impression of simultaneity with the writer, the *hic* dimension distinguishes itself by an additional characteristic contained in the physical quality of the written text. For not only does the physical nature of the text allow the reader to enter into it by projecting into a mental space governed by the symbolic interaction between the word and the world, but the physicality of the text is also a key factor allowing for the potential iteration of the experience from one reader to another.[25] Seen from this perspective, the written text is the creation of another type of virtual space, a material "here" shared by the writer and any number of readers: A corollary to that notion of shared space is the enlarged scope of the transmission: because of its physical nature, a written text has the capacity to iterate the experiences it generates to a potential community of readers. By extension, thus, it even might be said to have the potential to *create* such a community where none had previously existed.

### *Deixis* and totalization

The idea that *deixis* is a linguistic marker pointing specifically to that which is extra-linguistic introduces several interlocking notions that modify the perception both of language itself and the context in which it is used. Together, these two elements are crucial to the ontological project Bonnefoy is engaged in. As concerns language, one of the obvious consequences of using indexical markers lies in their self-referential capacity. The inherently "empty" nature of deicticals points back to their function within the system of language. To repeat the example used previously, the coded definition of the word "I" is something along the lines of: "this word designates the speaker speaking about him or herself." In the absence of a

[25] The fact that modern texts can have what seems like a purely virtual existence and transmission via different types of media (computers, Internet) does not really alter the fact that the text inhabits a physical space –if only one page a time on a screen—that is apprehended by some human sensory mechanism (visual, auditory, oral).

speaker, the word cannot be actualized, and is thus shorn of the more significant part of its meaning. One of the consequences of this dependency on context is that, as instantiated in writing, the use of deictics draws attention to the function of language as a tool, more specifically, as an *inadequate* tool.

This inadequacy can, however, take on a positive value, and the potential incompleteness of deictics has an impact on the way Bonnefoy positions his vision of language, inasmuch as he perceives them as a flaw in the system of referential markers. Indeed, the existence of deictics points to a certain incapacity of language to be a totalizing system, able to faithfully and *completely* reproduce the referential world. And if we see language as a controlling system which constrains speakers by making them use pre-established mental constructions, the use of indexicals suggests the possibility of allowing the speaker to break out of the dominant structure and become master of his or her own language. For Bonnefoy, it would appear that this deficiency in language's capacity to integrate the totality of the world might, precisely, be the opening allowing each user a modicum of freedom through his or her use of the individual speech act.

This notion of mastery over the individual expression of the general structures leads to an additional comment on deixis and language focuses particularly on what one might interpret as Bonnefoy's attempt to extract–to salvage, or save, one might say, using a word that appears regularly in his texts—parts of his writing from the constraints that language in general, but written language in particular, seems to impose on the freedom of the individual. For at some level, one can perceive writing as a sort of congealed form of speech, which serves to freeze and preserve something which is, by its very nature, evanescent and ephemeral. And, as will become clearer in a subsequent chapter on the philosophical affinities that Bonnefoy maintains with certain aspects of Sausurrean linguistics, the primacy that Bonnefoy attributes to Saussure's

"parole," or speech act is, in some sense, reiterated through the use of deixis. A very recent selection of essays by Bonnefoy entitled *Le Siècle où la Parole a été Victime* (2010) indicates clearly that this notion of "saving" the speech act from attack or victimization is one that has not diminished over time and continues to appear in his work. For one can consider Bonnefoy's insistence on incorporating deictic words into written structures as a sort rhetorical trope that functions as a trap, undoing writing, returning the written text to its origin as speech, and at times casting even further back in search of the origins of speech. And, as any reader of Bonnefoy is aware, the evocation of "trap" and "speech origin," enters immediately into resonance with Bonnefoy's own use of these words, either as titles to texts, "L'Origine de la parole," *Dans le leurre du seuil*, or integrated into his essays, where he attempts to address the function of poetry as a potential "trap" to seize presence.

Finally, the issue of deixis and totalization most notably concerns the notion of context. Many theoreticians point to the idea of the semantic deficiency of deixis, and the implications of this upon the respective roles of speaker and listener. For if we return to the root notion of deixis, that is, the notion of pointing that emerges from the Greek origins of the word, the deictic word itself stands for a gesture. And if we then take the demonstrative "this" as an example, within an exchange the vacuity of the word used alone serves to draw the attention of the interlocutor to the gesture that accompanies it. In his article, Levinson refers to Peirce's understanding of the relationship between the sign and the thing indicated, which resides in the shared attention of speaker and listener. Levinson writes: "The magical ingredient is the direction of the addressee's attention to some feature of the spatio-temporal physical context [...] Indexicality [i.e. *deixis*] is both and intentional and an attentional phenomenon, concentrated around the spatial-temporal center of verbal interaction [...] (11). Though this perception of indexicals dovetails particularly well with the importance Bonnefoy gives to the idea of poetry as an *act*, the important element to

retain from Levinson's comments is the notion that deixis supposes a shared focus between both speaker and listener in the sense that, being semantically incomplete, a true deictic always requires action from the interlocutor. Thus the very use of a deictic generates an act generated by focusing the attention of both parties on the element intended by the speaker. To return momentarily to Peirce's understanding of language, especially in terms of the "dynamical co-existence" he establishes between the deictic word and its object of reference, this question of *deixis* as a dynamic act has resonance for our understanding of Bonnefoy's term of "presence." In a letter dated 1906, Peirce writes: "the dynamical object does not mean something out of the mind. It means something forced upon the mind in perception, but including more than perception reveals. It is an object of actual Experience."[26] Again, Peirce allows us to better understand the conjunction between speaker and listener: "We must distinguish between the Immediate Object, –i.e., the Object as represented in the sign,—and the Real (no, because perhaps the Object is altogether fictive, I must choose a different term; therefore, say rather the Dynamical Object, which, from the nature of things, the Sign *cannot* express, which it can only *indicate* and leave the interpreter to find out by *collateral experience* (emphasis Peirce)"[27]

But if the notion of shared attention is true of deixis in spoken language, how does it function in a written text wherein the reality of the experience for the reader lies in the explicit absence of a shared physical environment? If the textual use of indexicals (through the word, "here," for instance) allows, and even, forces the reader to enter into the text as a mental space to inhabit with the writer, the use of deictic words can have the rather particular function of allowing the writer to draw the reader into sharing the intention that was at the origin of the text.

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[26] Peirce, C. S. in a draft of a letter to Lady Selby, SS 197, 1906 as published in the Commens Peirce Dictionary, http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/dictionary.html, retrieved Jan 22, 2009. Parenthetically, it is striking that Peirce's statement should seem to parallel so exactly what Bonnefoy will define later as *présence*.

[27] Ibid, Letter to William James, EP 2:498, 1909, retrieved Jan 22, 2009.

It would be difficult to understate the importance of this notion of intention in Bonnefoy's work, because the implications that derive from it can be seen as closely connected to the implicit "truth-value" of a text, which itself has crucial implications in the writing of essays. Levinson provides a mechanism for understanding the relationship between deixis and intention. He writes: when I point and say "I mean that" I intend to invoke in you a referent-isolating thought just by virtue of your recognizing that that is what my intention is […] In this way gesture – and arguably deixis in general – is crucially intentional: you cannot say "False!" to my utterance "I am referring to that" (11). Continuing this logic, it can be argued that when using deixis, the writer invites the reader into a construction that is –at least in part—not imaginary, but real and true *at the level of intent*. Thus, when Bonnefoy writes–not once, but twice—in the poem "Anti-Platon" "il s'agit bien de *cet* objet," even if the "objet" is only accessible through the imagination, there is no gainsaying the truth of the indication itself. Paradoxically thus, deixis appears to concatenate two almost contradictory definitions. The written deictic, which initially appeared as the very figure of an imaginary construction since the reader and writer could not possibly meet the deictic precondition of sharing the same physical or temporal space, appears instead to potentially exist as a small space of reality carved out of the vast structure of the fictional universes created through writing.

A final observation deriving from the connection between deixis and truth is linked to the possibility–or rather, the impossibility—for a deictic utterance to enunciate a philosophical truth, and it goes to the heart of Bonnefoy's equivocal relation with language and philosophy and the way these can inhabit the essay. The notion of truth is a complicated one that must be clearly delimited in order to clarify its relationship with deixis. Consonant with the training in Western philosophical tradition we tend to receive, and which Bonnefoy certainly received, we automatically perceive it as expressed by a statement whose truth is independent of the

circumstances and accidents of its production. The summum thus, of absolute categories of truth lies in mathematical statements, which remain true regardless of the individual assertion. But how can this be of significance to Bonnefoy? Again, Levinson provides us with an interpretation of the truth-value of deictical statements that cannot but have resonance for readers of Bonnefoy. In his article Levinson indicates that "any sentence with indexicals […] cannot directly express a proposition, for in any doctrine, a proposition is an abstract entity whose truth-value is independent of the times, places, and persons in the speech event" (15). If we develop the logic of Levinson's argument, it would seem that the deictic statement is antithetical to the possibility of introducing pure concepts into language. This seemingly simple statement is of capital importance for readers of Bonnefoy, for if there is one characteristic that appears insistently in his essays, it is his rejection of the very notion of conceptuality, a notion that he explicitly equates with immobility and death, with the very opposite of "presence." This attitude also emerges, though less explicitly, in Bonnefoy's poems. Globally then, from the perspective of language use, deixis has the potential to provide Bonnefoy with the means to create a formidable breach in the edifice of philosophical conceptions, and that fact itself has significance for the forms his writing takes. Deixis thus serves as a pivot around which to articulate the transition between the two complementary understandings –religious and philosophical—of "presence" that subtend Bonnefoy's own use of the term. Deixis is a crucial turning point because it functions both as a religious paradigm pointing toward some notion of immanence, and as a philosophical concern addressing the capacity for language to adequately enunciate the relationship between an originating meaning and the form that that meaning takes.

## Presence as a philosophical question

Bonnefoy's explicit rejection of a Christian frame of reference reminds us that the term "presence" has not only theological, but also philosophical roots, and suggests that because of his ambivalence regarding his own relationship to theology, perhaps these philosophical underpinnings are fully as significant as the theological ones. Tellingly, the dense quality of Bonnefoy's writing and thought has frequently caused readers to describe his essays as texts with a strongly philosophical axis. Jean Starobinski, for example, reiterates the ethical dimension of Bonnefoy's writing by connecting with it an ontological drive. He writes in his introduction to the Gallimard edition of *Poèmes* that the writerly need expressed by Bonnefoy resembles an "exigence éthique ou plutôt ontologique, beaucoup plus qu'esthétique" (*P*, 18). More explicitly yet, David Jasper suggests that Bonnefoy's attachement to philosophical thinking shifts "through Husserl and Heidegger towards an ethics of reading the 'other' in a hidden narrative whose possibility is 'conditional on the unconditional responsibility of *being-for-the-other*'" (111).

It is nonetheless true that from the point of view of literary criticism, it always seems a bit awkward to rush to attribute the grandiose—and frequently misused—title of "philosopher" to any writer who seems to step, however momentarily, outside the frame of his or her personal preoccupations and experiences. Still, the inverse phenomenon of rejecting the notion of philosophy as something beyond the sphere of normal human activities is itself perhaps as limiting as hastily giving the name of "philosophy" to any errant generalizing thought. From the perspective of Bonnefoy's work, the question of presence as a philosophical object of study is important because the notion itself has been a matter of serious consideration in the philosophical discussions of the past century. That fact cannot be neglected, for while Bonnefoy himself is not a philosopher, he is an extremely well-informed and constant reader of philosophical texts.

Consequently and rather naturally, what he takes from his readings filters into his writing and the development of his own thinking. Thus it is difficult not to interpret the larger-scale philosophical interest in presence as having incontestably furnished a background within which Bonnefoy's attention to—and predilection for—the term could develop.

## Bonnefoy and Philosophy: Ambivalence and Hesitancy

In his own writings Bonnefoy frequently projects a certain ambivalence toward the notion of philosophy. His essays often make specific reference to his reticence, even explicitly rejecting certain aspects of philosophical discourse. And yet, it is no secret that his thinking has been immensely influenced by intellectuals whose positions are eminently philosophical. Additionally, as will become clearer in a later chapter on the genesis of Bonnefoy's theoretical positions– particularly those regarding *présence* and the very notion of concept—he himself has worked and studied on the cusp of philosophy and theology for much of his life. Thinkers such as Plotinus, Hegel, Plato, Nietzsche, but also St Jean de la Croix, are constantly crisscrossing the pages of Bonnefoy's writing. His epigraph to *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve* for example, is drawn from Hegel.[28] And when I first began this project, Bonnefoy himself encouraged me to read Russian philosopher Leon Shestov's *Le Pouvoir des clefs (Potestas Clavium)* in order, he said, the better to understand his own position. Suffice here to recall the importance of Shestov in the French philosophical circles of the early twentieth century, his close friendship with Husserl, who enabled Shestov's decisive encounter with the work of Kierkegaard, and Shestov's impact on thinkers such as Heidegger, Bataille, and Buber, among others. Bonnefoy himself wrote the introduction to Flammarion's 1967 edition of Shestov's *magnum opus, Athènes et Jérusalem*, and

[28] "Mais la vie de l'esprit ne s'effraie point devant la mort et n'est pas celle qui s'en garde pure. Elle est la vie qui la supporte et se maintient en elle."

this introduction was reprinted in Bonnefoy's second collection of essays, *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue*.

And yet, as is amply demonstrated in his writing–particularly in certain sections of his essays— Bonnefoy very clearly rejects philosophical interpretations of reality. The surface of his discourse seems to express a resolute rejection of the very notion of "philosophizing" when, for example, Bonnefoy writes in *L'Improbable*:

> Je ne poserai pas de quelque façon philosophique le problème du sensible. Affirmer, tel est mon souci. [...] Je ne sais, je ne veux pas dresser la dialectique du monde, placer le sensible dans l'être avec cet art minutieux de la patiente métaphysique : je ne prétends que nommer. Voici le monde sensible. Il faut que la parole, ce sixième et ce plus haut sens, se porte à sa rencontre et en déchiffre les signes. Pour moi, je n'ai de goût qu'en cette tâche, recherche du secret que Kierkegaard n'avait plus. (*I*, 23)

It would be difficult to imagine a clearer repudiation of philosophy. Nevertheless, when we examine the statement closely, we see that despite his disavowal of a philosophical approach to the problem of expressing "le sensible," Bonnefoy builds the whole structure of his utterance around an explicitly philosophical lexicon by his use of the terms "la dialectique," and "la métaphysique," or even "le monde sensible." To a lesser degree perhaps, "la parole," and "les signes," also partake in the same discourse, and finally, of course, his specific reference to Kierkegaard sets the reader even more firmly on the terrain of philosophy. Concurrently, and more subtly, perhaps, the notion embedded in the text of *speech* as a sixth sense also carries semantic weight for those who, like Bonnefoy, are familiar with the very specific vocabulary of structuralism. Indeed, his definition of "la parole" as the highest of the human senses relies on the nomenclature used by structuralist thinkers but simultaneously extracts the act of speaking from the structure of language where structural linguistics situates it, and places it in a wholly Bonnefoyian configuration associating it with the physical senses. His re-evaluation of these categories here points toward an opposition to certain structuralist positions that becomes much more clearly defined in his later texts.

Additionally, the ambivalence contained in the passage between an explicit desire to reject philosophy, and the specifically "philosophical" framework within which that rejection takes place, is not without significance, for the resistance expressed here in terms of an opposition between a notion of philosophy and an act of "affirming," seems to stand for the real tension lying at the core of Bonnefoy's essayistic writing, namely his overt rejection of conceptual systems, but his simultaneous need for those same systems in order to efficiently convey an intellectually coherent thought process. The use of the verb "affirmer" is noteworthy in this context, for it gives us some indication of the didactic and ontological poles of his writing. The act of affirming can be read as linked to two highly significant elements of his mental landscape. One the one hand, defined as "exprimer qu'une chose est, ou est telle" (Robert Dictionary), "affirmer" can be related to Bonnefoy's preoccupation with the notion of being, particularly as this notion is shown in the crucial construction, "ce qui est," which serves, as we saw in the previous chapter, as a foil to the notion of presence. Indeed, it would not be excessive to suggest that without the notion of "ce qui est," Bonnefoy's *présence* would be seriously diminished. Additionally, and in conjunction with this ontological axis, the verb "affirmer" also intimates a didactic function which Lafaye points out in his *Dictionnaire des synonymes*: "Affirmer suppose quelque chose d'évident dont on est convaincu ou dont on voudrait convaincre." As we shall see in the chapters on the theoretical definitions of the essay, recognizing this didactic function is essential to fully understanding the capacities inherent in the essay and perceiving that it is those very capacities that allow it to take on tasks that other forms of writing are less able to address.

Finally, the problem of "affirming" rather than "philosophizing" is linked in large part to the *telos* of expressing presence through writing. And as Bonnefoy himself is painfully aware, in some highly significant sense, presence is an experiential quality of interaction that, almost by definition, cannot be mediated by language: "Que peuvent [les mots] retenir ou dire, quand la

présence se donne dans l'univers de l'instant?" (*I,* 126), he writes. And yet, insurmountably, Bonnefoy is forced to use language to express this presence not only in his poetry but in his essays as well.

## Presence in Philosophy: A 20th Century Focus

The term "presence" is linked to a number of "philosophies of existence" that have emerged with particular insistence over the course of the past century, and the notion itself lies at the heart of a signal conflict of perceptions on how philosophy can truly describe the reality of human thought and experience. But unlike the theological dimension of presence, which rests upon a clear perception of the emanation of Christ through the sacraments, the philosophical perception of presence is a far more nebulous phenomenon. In some sense, the complexity of the problem resides in its apparent simplicity and obviousness: that which is present can be seen as being no more than that which is immediately available to us at any given moment. Put more simply yet, presence *is*. And yet, it seems almost a truism to say that this simplicity is deceptive: a more careful reading shows that this uncomplicated phrase opens out onto a highly complex debate grounded in difficult ontological questions.

Regarding the percolation of the term "presence" into Bonnefoy's own intellectual environment, what is rather more important is the trend in philosophy that was particular to the Paris of the first half of the twentieth century, at the time when he was developing his own writing and thinking. The impact of phenomenology on the so-called "Continental" current of philosophy cannot be understated, particularly since the work of the German philosophers, most notably Husserl and Heidegger, but also Hegel and Lévinas was largely disseminated in French

intellectual circles in this time period.[29] Various connections made by "passeurs" Jean Wahl and Jean Hyppolite–thinkers known not so much for their own philosophical output as for their translation and transmission of ideas—but also by philosophers in their own right such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, or even Gaston Bachelard and Paul Ricoeur enabled these ideas to gain significant intellectual ground in the first half of the twentieth century. Some years later, though still firmly anchored in the same current of thought, Derrida's analysis of Husserlian phenomenology challenged the primacy of the notion of presence in Western philosophical thinking, and questioned the very possibility for such a presence to be at the origin of philosophical structures. Regarding these various actors on the French philosophical scene, it is important to note that with few exceptions all of these were people with whom Bonnefoy had direct contact, either through his studies with them, or through his personal relationships. Thus even though Bonnefoy's position evinces clear levels of demarcation from a number of the philosophical conclusions of his peers, there can hardly be any doubt that the thinking that characterizes phenomenology has had an impact on the manner in which he formulates his own vision of the world. A telling example can be found, for instance, in the "salamander episode" of the essay "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité," where he develops what would seem to be a clearly phenomenological axis to his own description of presence.

However, the very discussion of phenomenology as an entity is somewhat problematic, for there is a certain level of debate about whether it can be addressed as a systematic "school" of thought in the same way as, for instance Aristotelian logics, or Thomism, or even Cartesian epistemology. As Paul Ricoeur writes in his *A l'Ecole de la Phénoménologie,* "la phénoménologie est un vaste projet qui ne se referme pas sur une œuvre ou un groupe d'œuvre

[29] It is interesting, for example, to note that Emmanuel Lévinas's French translation of Husserl's *Méditations cartésiennes* appeared in 1931, almost twenty years before the German version, which appeared in the first volume of the *Husserliana* in 1950.

précises; elle est en effet moins une doctrine qu'une méthode capable d'incarnations multiples et dont Husserl n'a exploité qu'un petit nombre de possibilités" (8). Later in the same passage, he adds: "la phénoménologie au sens large est la somme de l'œuvre husserlienne et des hérésies issues de Husserl" (9). Picking up on his notion of heresy, what I propose here is an oriented order of definitions, a heretical reduction of phenomenology which will ignore many of the transformations made by Husserl himself to focus only on those aspects of it that might have direct bearing on what we observe in Bonnefoy's writing.

Generally speaking, I have chosen to limit my examination of phenomenology to the philosophical developments presented by Husserl, Heidegger and, to a lesser degree, Derrida. But Bonnefoy, it must be said, never evokes these philosophers explicitly, referring to them only indirectly in his own writing. He himself suggests an explanation for this form of circumlocution when he writes in the statement quoted in the Introduction:

> Ai-je «critiqué» Valéry? Je l'ai pris au sérieux, me semble-t-il, c'est un honneur que l'on ne peut faire qu'à un bien petit nombre d'écrivains.
> Et ceux-là existent *en nous*. Nous avons à lutter contre eux, comme nous avons à choisir, et aux fins d'être. C'est une lutte privée. (I,105, emphasis in original)

Though he is specifically concerned with Valéry here, the suggestion that certain writers are integrated *within* oneself, along with the attendant idea of inner struggle against them ("nous avons à lutter contre eux") is one that has, I would argue, repercussions throughout his writing, particularly with respect to contemporary philosophical currents.

Finally, although Heidegger and Derrida seem to be obvious choices–Heidegger because of the great attention he gives to poetic language, and Derrida because of the fact that he questions the very possibility of presence—my interest in Husserl derives from the fact that what he proposes is a philosophical rehabilitation of the individual subject, and that point is essential to *présence*. I have deliberately limited my scope to philosophical knowledge that would seem to be

most generally available to any well-informed reader, under the hypothesis that such knowledge replicates the information with which Bonnefoy himself has been the most in contact.

## Husserl and the Subjective Roots of Phenomenology

Though Husserl does not necessarily formulate his philosophical objective as an attempt to define presence, as Derrida points out, the notion of the presence of the self to itself is one of the presuppositions that subtends Husserl's work. From a more technical perspective however, a number of the tools Husserl uses to arrive at his method–namely, the equal importance given to the thinking subject as well as the objective world; the possibility of obtaining essential understanding through eidectic transformations—can illuminate a number of the underlying allegiances that help delimit Bonnefoy's notion of presence. In conjunction with these elements, it is important to bear in mind that Husserl's main object in engaging his reflection of Cartesian metaphysics, was, of course, the desire to reinterpret the function of radical doubt in order to more firmly establish a sort of *mathesis universalis*, a grounding of knowledge allowing us to understand the essential nature of the things and thoughts that constitute the world. As it happens, this desire to establish some form of method, is not alien to Bonnefoy's own preoccupations, even though he seems to deliberately to eschew the notion in order to orient his practice along the lines of what might be described as a "methodless method." This latter "unmethod" emerges particularly clearly in his essays, which can be read as prototypical *exempli*, furnishing a sort of a blueprint for guiding the reader's reflection. For if Bonnefoy writes each essay to show an intuition, an experience, a reaction, he *collects* his essays to construct something that transcends the immediacy of presence and resembles something more akin to a method. Along similar lines, Husserl demonstrates in *L'Origine de la Géométrie* that his objectives surpass the immediate goal

of determining the nature of geometry: "de toute nécessité, nos considérations conduiront vers les plus profonds problèmes de sens, […] si bien que nos problèmes et nos explicitations touchant à la géométrie galiléenne détiennent une signification exemplaire" (174).

The quest for a type of exemplarity that would serve as a form of grounding principal is, needless to say, not specific to phenomenology alone. Two interlocking themes have a bearing on the specifics of Bonnefoyian *presence.* The first concerns phenomenology's attachment to phenomena, whether material or conceptual. The second deals with the vital importance of the subject as the sole agent able to effect those fundamental reductions that alone can lead to an awareness of the essential nature of the objects of reflection. As concerns the first aspect, Husserl highlights the independent existence of objects that lie beyond the bounds of the subject: "Les choses corporelles sont simplement là pour moi avec une distribution spatiale quelconque; elles sont 'présentes' au sens littéral ou figuré, que je leur accorde ou non une attention particulière" (Husserl, *Ideen,* as cited by Lyotard, 18). And though this attention to exterior objects seems similar to the observations on materialism evoked in the previous chapter, the signal difference lies in Husserl's focus on the subject and his rejection of the psychologism that suggests that because all understanding transits through the perceptions individuals have of the phenomena extant in the natural world, there is no external reality that is not delimited by an act of perception, and therefore no possibility for absolute knowledge of what lies outside the subject.

Certain elements of psychologism are not antithetical to Husserl's position: he himself clearly posits the perception of phenomena by the individual consciousness. His opposition, however, is more specific. As Jean-François Lyotard suggests, Husserl's principal criticism of psychologism lies in the fact that it amalgamates what he perceives as two distinct subjects: "Le psychologisme contre lequel Husserl lutte identifie sujet de la connaissance et sujet psychologique" (9). This unjustifiable–for Husserl—conflation leads to the affirmation that the

simple statement "this wall is yellow" cannot have any existence independent of the subject who, upon perceiving the wall, enunciates the preposition (*ibid* and *infra*). In contrast, Husserl focuses on the proposition that the world of objects outside myself (or of any individual) does, in fact, exist as an entity, or sum of distinct entities that are not inherently conditioned by the subject. As concerns Bonnefoy, a similar rejection of the tenets of psychologism can be seen in his attachment to the material existence of the objects of our world, in, for instance, the twice repeated "Il s'agit bien de *cet* objet" of "Anti-Platon" (*Poèmes*, 33, emphasis in original). This attachment to the real existence of the world outside the individual echoes through a number of Bonnefoyian texts as, for instance, the intense focus on the notion of realism seen in the Dédicace to *L'Improbable*.

Just as important as positing the independent existence of the world, however, the second key characteristic of Husserlian thought views the subject as the vital center of the phenomenological method. As James Edie writes, "For phenomenology, the subject is the zero-point of a system of coordinates, the necessary center of all experience, around which the world of objects is arraigned as in an indefinite horizon" (106). The focus on the subject is axiomatic, for it opens the way to examine the relation between the self and the other which is a significant subtext in Bonnefoy's writing, and emerges particularly clearly in his essays and interviews. The notion of phenomenological subjectivity can itself be examined from two different perspectives. In the first place, the very specific focus on the subject must be seen as a form of opposition to philosophical systems that aim at pure objectivity based on the hypothesis that reality can only be accurately given if we can exclude those specific, contingent moments of its perception through the vector of individual subjects. And in the second place, the focus on subjectivity is linked to the notion of "intentionality," which, because it is inextricable from consciousness, can only emanate from the subject and is, in fact, the very element that distinguishes subject from object.

The grounding principle of phenomenology resides in the fact that without denying the possibility of objective exterior information, the Husserlian approach incorporates subjectivity into its method of inquiry, even going so far as to give it a central place in its reflection on the means by which objective knowledge may be attained. The subject must assume this crucial role because, Husserl suggests, individual consciousness is the only pathway through which phenomena can obtain their transcendental meaning. On this subject, Heidegger will go even further and contend that it is the specific *role* of man–even his duty—to enable the existence of phenomena. And yet, in clear contradistinction to the passive reception of phenomena that characterizes the psychological subject, the phenomenological subject has a decisively dynamic role: it makes itself receptive to phenomena in order to extract from them an understanding of their essential nature. This is rendered possible, and even necessary, by the notion of "intentionality," which itself designates a hypothesis that offers a manner of understanding the relationship between subject and object by seeing this relationship as being intrinsically oriented, or focused. The notion further indicates the means by which an individual subject broaches all objects, whether these be physical (that table over there) or mental (the most suitable table for my future house), and allows them to enter into consciousness. In the Husserlian model, it is the fundamental property of "aboutness," which is the very characteristic of consciousness, and describes the fact that consciousness can only apprehend objects by mentally targeting them as objects of its reflection, by "thinking about them." The importance of the subject *per* subject is thus evident.

And yet, the apparent transparency of this relationship is not without its own problems. Though the apprehension of the ultimate signification of any phenomenon can only be achieved through the subject, this pathway is itself conditioned by the method that articulates the relationship between objective world and subject. And it is precisely at this juncture that the

problem of "presence" becomes axiomatic. In his introduction to *L'Origine de la Géométrie*, Derrida affirms that the essence of Husserlian phenomenology resides not so much in the specific qualities of the subject and object, but in the Husserlian method that supposes the articulation between subject and object to lead to truth. He writes: "Depuis *Idee der Phänomenologie*, tout l'itinéraire de Husserl confirme l'essence de la phénoménologie, en sa découverte fondamentale, celle de la réduction transcendantale, comme essence d'une Méthode, au sens le plus riche et peut-être le plus énigmatique de ce mot. Husserl dit de la réduction transcendantale qu'elle est « L'Archi-Méthode de toutes les méthodes philosophiques »" (166, note 1). Derrida, we will see, challenges the "method" and the blindness of certain presuppositions it entails.

But how do the fundamental postulates of the Husserlian method method relate to Bonnefoy's assimilation of phenomenology? In point of fact, because it remains, unquestionably, a highly technical philosophical position, it is evident that Bonnefoy interacts not with its specificities, but rather with the more general notions contained within it. In a sense, what Husserl proposes is not only a description of a philosophical enterprise, but also the manner in which such an enterprise might take place. This is the celebrated epochê, or "bracketing" of all prior knowledge and reasoned assumptions regarding the phenomena that appear to the subject. Although similar at first glance, to the familiar Cartesian step of rejecting the very existence of the world in order to discern the *res cogitans* as the thinking subject, the Husserlian technique is radically different in that it accepts the existence of world, simply putting the knowledge furnished by it aside for the purposes of the phenomenological reduction. Lyotard equates this position with the deliberate refusal to take a position, whether of radical doubt, or of acceptance: "au doute il faut donc opposer une attitude par laquelle *je ne prends pas position par rapport au monde comme existant,* que cette position soit affirmation naturelle d'existence, ou mise en doute cartésienne, etc." (19, emphasis in original). And because this deliberate "non-position" belongs

to the world of lived experience, the subject doing the reduction (the *I*), must abstain from using it to construct further algorithms to explain either the phenomena observed or the self that is observing them. The result of this operation is to reveal the residual being that remains after bracketing, and which can be understood as the transcendental truth inherent not only in the object, but also in the observing self. Husserl writes:

> C'est seulement dans la mesure où le contenu apodictiquement universel de la sphère des formes spatio-temporelles invariant à travers toute variation imaginable se trouve pris en considération dans l'idéalisation qu'une formation idéale peut naître, qui soit à tout jamais et pour toute génération humaine à venir re-compréhensible et donc transmissible, reproductible avec son sens inter-subjectif identique. (212)

Theoretically, it is this method of epochê that results in the awareness of the residual essence of the phenomenon and leads to the apprehension of its fundamental truth, and thus of its true presence. As concerns reading Bonnefoy, an important facet of Husserl's position lies in the eidetic transformations associated with his reference to "all imaginable variations." In essence, this consists in mentally varying the characteristics of the phenomenon observed until a contradiction is reached regarding its temporal or spatial existence. To give a simple and banal example, if we take a common table as a phenomenon to observe, we can mentally vary its characteristics, making it change in color, height, width, surface quality, and so on. We could also attempt to mentally locate it in another time: last week, tomorrow, in the next century, etc. None of these manipulations would seem to alter the so-called "tableness" of the table. *A contrario*, if we imagine it surfaceless, or without some sort of supporting structure like an *n* number of legs, we reach a mental contradiction which no longer allows us to identify the object as a table. This contradiction itself is what allows for the disclosure of the *aeterna veritas* of the object (213).

This influence of these eidetic transformations is particularly apparent in his earlier collections of poetry., In *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve*, for instance, the central character of Douve is, over the course of the poems of the collection, perceived in a multitude of

different manners, from landscape, to feminine figure, to various animal forms. All these infinite variations in the "character" seem to point the reader toward a definition of the "truth" of the character. And indeed, in contradistinction to the later collections of poetry, *Douve* contains a number of poems incorporating the words "vérité" and "vrai" in their title. This tendency culminates in the fifth and last section of the book, which is called "Vrai Lieu." Tellingly, this type of eidetic transformation also bridges the gap between poetry and essay, for certain very concrete images that appear in the poetry–the ivy, the orangery, etc.—also appear in the essays. The most significant of these transfers is doubtless the image of the salamander that I have already evoked, and which appears in a number of the poems of *Douve* before being re-examined in the essay "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité."

## Poetry, Language, and Heidegger

Husserl's grounding positions notwithstanding, it is the work of his student Heidegger that has doubtless had a greater influence on Bonnefoy's writing and thinking. We saw briefly in the Introduction the connection that exists between the perception of poetic language Heidegger projects–most notably in the essays of *Poetry, Language, Thought*—and the type of praxis that emerges from Bonnefoy's prose and poetry, particularly in the way clear distinctions between these forms are frequently blurred in his work. The importance of Heidegger' work for the analysis of Bonnefoy's work is two-fold, inasmuch as a number of the crucial points issuing from more general considerations of Heideggerian philosophical inquiry participate not only in shaping the contours of the *présence* we encounter in Bonnefoy's writing, but also have implications upon the multiple definitions of the essay.

My focus here is on the broadest aspects of Heidegger's thought, aspects that are more or less in general circulation. As concerns those definitions of presence that reverberate in Bonnefoy's work, two points seem to me to be of overarching importance. First, is the notion of "Being" that inevitably subtends any question of presence. As Richard Cohen remarks, "The most important, deepest founding question of philosophy is for Heidegger the 'question of being'" (24). Second is the primordial importance for Heidegger of integrating death into philosophical thought. Indeed, Lévinas points out in an interview with Christian Chabanis (1982) that "Spinoza dira –vous le savez—que les philosophes ne doivent penser à rien de moins qu'à la mort. Par contre, c'est Heidegger qui a poussé le plus loin la référence de la pensée philosophique à la mort" (159). Along with these key points, other considerations such as the nature of truth, as well as a strong sense of moral obligation or duty are fundamental to Heidegger's vision of the function of philosophy,. Tellingly, these are fundamentally important in structuring the essay as a genre, but also in Bonnefoy's own essays.

The question of Being can itself be decomposed into two intimately interconnected elements which seek to reveal its essential nature, while grappling in parallel with the question of what it means to be human. In a first step, Heidegger rejects the Aristotelian principle of man as a rational animal, rejecting, in other words, the idea of man as a natural entity to which something– rationality—has been added. Humans for him differ from all the other beings in their capacity to consciously reflect upon Being. This causes them to stand out from Being, confering upon them the quality of what Heidegger repeatedly calls *ek-sistence*.[30] He thus builds upon the cardinal importance given to the conscious subject in Husserlian phenomenology, and suggests that it is the very *function and nature* of humans to discern and show the being of all things. Further, this

[30] For an elucidation of this term, cf. Heidegger's statement: "La proposition: 'l'homme ek-siste' n'est pas une réponse à la question de savoir si l'homme est réel ou non; elle est une réponse à la question portant sur l''essence' de l'homme" (*Lettre,* 67).

function, he suggests, completely reorients the position of man in relation to the world and to being: "l'homme," he writes in the *Lettre sur l'Humanisme* originally addressed to Jean Beaufret,[31] "n'est pas le maître de l'étant. L'homme est le berger de l'être" (109). The celebrated image of man as a shepherd naturally evokes a certain religious lexicon that is also proper to Bonnefoy's writing. For both writers, their use of a clearly identifiable religious vocabulary generates the strong sense of moral purpose that emerges so vibrantly from their textual production..

Additionally, and co-extensive with the call to duty and concern given by the image of the shepherd, the metaphor of man as keeper of Being also reveals the exterior, independent nature of this Being to which man must attend. J. Glenn Gray highlights the nature of this relationship by pointing out that "Man does not create Being, but he is responsible for it since, without his thinking and remembering, Being has no illumination, no voice, no word" (416). Heidegger thus confirms in his work the autonomous, non-psychological existence of Being initially proposed by Husserl, but focuses more intently on the fact that philosophical method–and particularly that of metaphysics—has long veiled and forgotten authentic Being. Phenomenology, and more particularly Heideggerian phenomenology, purports to remedy this situation by disentangling the misbegotten confusion philosophically engendered by the conflation of two different categories of Being: "depuis toujours, 'l'Etre' est pris pour 'l'étant', et inversement 'l'étant est pris pour 'l'Etre', tous deux étant comme mélangés dans une confusion étrange et sur laquelle on n'a pas encore réfléchi" (*Lettre*, 101). Crucially, the trajectory toward Being, that is, toward an understanding of the fundamental essence or truth of those things that merely *are*, is materialized

[31] It is interesting to note that Beaufret, who, for many years, was considered as *the* French specialist on Heidegger, began an unfinished doctoral thesis under the direction of Jean Wahl, who was to become Bonnefoy's thesis director for his thesis on sign and signification. Bonnefoy's affectionate esteem for Jean Wahl is reiterated in the recent (2006) *Dans un debris de miroir,* a collection of remembrances of friendships wherein Bonnefoy writes of Jean Wahl that "Je me souviens de lui comme de la réflexion qui s'élance dans l'éternel matin de la connaissance honnête et des décisions courageuses" (88).

in the act of disclosure, by which the Being that is always inherently present in the phenomenological object is unveiled, its truthful essence standing forth and becoming present to the observer.

From the point of view of the form of presence encountered in Bonnefoy's work, several points are important. The first of these is the distinction made in the phenomenological method between two categories of thought, which can be assimilated to the difference that exists between act and state. Disclosure, the unveiling and making-present of Being, can thus be thought of as a dynamic gesture, an act whose function is to reveal a truth that might be accurately described as inherently static in nature. As I suggested in the Introduction, this idea is integrated into the Bonnefoyian perspective through the frequent and explicit distinction his work makes between *présence* on the one hand, and "ce qui est," on the other. In conjunction with this, Heidegger's conviction that *poetic* language is instrumental in the gesture of unveiling cannot but resonate for a poet such as Bonnefoy. For if Heidegger gives a primary position to poetic language in allowing for the incidence of disclosure, it is important to note more generally that the high value he places on language is not restricted to explicitly poetic language. Indeed, in contradistinction with many of the theories of language, Heidegger's view places language squarely at the center of man's relationship with himself and with his world. As Gray notes, "Language is conceived by Heidegger in a way directly contrary to most modern thinking. It is no mere tool or instrument, nor does its essence consist entirely in being a means of transmitting information. Language is the supreme event of human existence because it enables man, in the words of the poet Hölderlin, 'to affirm what he is'" (417). As Heidegger himself repeats insistently in his "Language" essay: "Language speaks." In other words, it is language itself that through man has the power to invoke absent things, bringing them into itself by the very naming, the calling of them. Heidegger writes: "The call does indeed call. Thus it brings the presence of what was previously uncalled into a

nearness. […] The calling calls into itself and therefore is always here and there–here into presence, there into absence" (198-9). Thus Heidegger's position echoes a number of the considerations we have already encountered: a theological grounding enacted in a specific lexicon; an evocation of deictical markers (the "hereness" of presence); and an explicitly ontological orientation. All of these aspects contribute to sketching out a strongly personal notion of presence that cannot but resonate for readers of Bonnefoy.

In addition to seeing language as an entity, another point of contact between Heidegger's thought and Bonnefoy's work lie in their attitude toward death. Indeed, Heidegger effects a complete transformation of death, taking it out of the realm of the incidental where metaphysics has traditionally placed it, and bringing it to the center of philosophical reflection. And though the notion of death might at first glance appear to be less immediately pertinent to definitions of presence *per se*, seen from a Heideggerian perspective, the two notions are highly interdependent. Richard Cohen explains that incorporating the idea of death is of crucial importance for Heidegger, for it is only when human subjects understand and integrate the idea of their own death that they can become properly present to themselves: "Mortality, […] far from being the sort of thing the philosopher must flee or dismiss for the sake of purified intellection and eternal truth, is to the contrary, the most philosophical of all moments. It is only in being-toward-death that the temporality of one's own being, and the historical-ontological context within which one's own being finds its ultimate sense, are disclosed" (23). Given Bonnefoy's conscious and deliberate integration of reflections on the value of death, particularly in early texts such as *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve* as well as the *Improbable* essay "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne," Heidegger's perception appears to constitute a significant substratum in Bonnefoy's view of the interaction between writing and reality. Cohen very cogently breaks Heidegger's understanding of the impact of death down into a number of descriptive points, of which perhaps

the more important from a Bonnefoyian perspective are the last two. Cohen writes first: "what being-toward-death reveals to Dasein[32] about itself is that Dasein is a temporal being, an 'ecstatic' temporalizing being;" and then: "because being-toward-death is not a self-understanding that Dasein can maintain at all times, when Dasein does realize itself this way it enters into the back and forth movement of 'fallen' (*Verfall*) or 'inauthentic' Dasein and authentic Dasein" (24). As Bonnefoy's work shows, both of these points have a strong bearing on the vision of presence and its materialization in writing that he develops in both poetry and essay, particularly in the opposition between presence and what he has called "la mauvaise présence."

Before closing this section on the philosophical definitions that appear to have had an impact on Bonnefoy's choice to incorporate the term "presence" into his own thinking, some mention must be made of the Derridian countercurrent to the notion of presence which is, I would suggest, never very far from Bonnefoy's thinking, notably in the later volumes of *L'Improbable*, as well as in the diverse allocutions, interviews, and articles collected as prose texts in *Entretiens sur la Poésie (1972-1990)*. Indeed, it is patent that texts such as "La Présence et l'Image,"[33] or "Lever les Yeux de son Livre" indicate a strongly held *prise de position* that correlates both with Bonnefoy's thorough familiarity with the positions of deconstruction and structuralism, but also with the great reserve he feels regarding the capacity of these two philosophical positions to accurately express our relationship to the world and to language. Along those lines, the thumbnail sketch he gives in "Lever les Yeux" of the deconstructionist view of the interaction between writer, text, and reader are clearly marked by his reticence

> Ce n'est pas l'auteur qui est, c'est sa langue, laquelle ne serait ni vraie ni fausse, ne signifiant que soi-même. Mais aussi bien, ajoute-t-on, elle est infinie, ses formes ses effets se disséminent de toutes parts dans le livre sans qu'on puisse jamais les totaliser, et de ce fait la lecture a une fonction

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[32] The question of the precise translation and meaning of Dasein is one that has been extensively addressed. For our purposes, it is useful only to note in passing that the "da" of Dasein (being-*there*) anchors it in within the deictic constructions that have already been evoked in this chapter.

[33] Bonnefoy's 1981 "Leçon Inaugurale" delivered after being elected to the Collège de France.

> plus clairement qu'auparavant créatrice—pour autant, bien sûr, que le lecteur se fasse attentif à la profondeur textuelle, et en recueille le plus possible dans les réseaux de son analyse. Lire est devenu une responsabilité, un apport, à l'égal d'écrire, et d'ailleurs aussi une fin en soi, puisque celui qui lit n'a pas à se juger plus réel, ni plus présent à soi-même, que l'écrivain. (*EsP*, 224)

Though Bonnefoy's description remains neutral on several points, his opposition to some of the more easily recognizable elements of the deconstructionist position –the challenge to the centrality of the author; the auto-referentiality of language; the absence of truth, of self-presence—is unmistakably marked by his own use of the conditional "serait" ("are said to be"), or the apposition "ajoute-t-on," both of which allow him to take distance from these emblematic deconstructionist themes. For if it is clear that he can accept certain aspects of the re-evaluation of authority —and even embrace them, writing in "L'Analogie Suprême," "Oui, bénéfique le défi qui a été jeté au règne de l'auteur et de sa parole au nom des droits du langage et du désir, dont les voies sont impersonnelles" (*EsP*, 176)—it is equally clear that his is a voice of opposition, for he continues the above statement with: "Ce défi ne pourra être maintenu, il faudra bien que notre fondamental libre-arbitre soit reconnu dans son rôle, qui est de décider qu'il y a du sens, il faudra que l'auteur se réaffirme, sinon dans les méandres de l'écriture, du moins dans son rapport avec son œuvre, dont il a le devoir de faire du sens" (*ibid.*). Indeed, such statements make it difficult to completely exclude the idea that Bonnefoy's strong adhesion to the notion of presence might also be anchored in a form of resistance. For despite their undoubted merit in forcing reflection on matters that had seemed thereto to have escaped critical analysis, the ideas proposed by Derrida have, over the course of his career, also met with general incomprehension and even fierce opposition. Thus it might be argued that inasmuch as Derrida's thought is generally considered to be opposed to very possibility of a stable and unvarying presence, the intransigency of this position might have contributed to a desire to "salvage" (to borrow Bonnefoy's "sauver") the notion itself from the violence that would seem to be done to it in the deconstructionist model.

## Against presence

Though his focus tends in other directions, there is no question about the fact that for Derrida, presence is at the heart of a substratum of thought that informs all of Western metaphysics. The notion of presence is even, as John Sallis points out, crucial in establishing the building blocks that will define Derrida's own work: "it is imperative to understand what 'presence' means, to understand how the meaning of presence is such that metaphysics of presence is posed for delimitation, deconstruction. It is with the question of the meaning of presence that one can begin to construct the deconstructive square" (597). The challenge here is to extract from the large body of writing by and about Derrida, a schematic indication of those elements that might have bearing on Bonnefoy's adhesion to the idea of presence, especially insofar as they might be experienced by him as a sort of pre-emptive antidote to certain post-modern positions. Several axes are of particular significance: the first is philosophical, and lies in the challenge to the very notion of presence that Derrida brings to bear on Western metaphysics; the second is linguistico-semiotic and is related to the no less important question of the problem of language in its interaction with presence, particularly through the agency of *parole*, or speech; the third concerns a specific vision of community that would seem to be the endpoint of certain deconstructionist positions.

Like Heidegger, Derrida builds his thought on the grounds of Husserlian phenomenology,[34] initially seeing in it a positive interpretation of reality. He writes in his introduction to Husserl's *Origine* text: "L'attitude phénoménologique est d'abord une disponibilité de l'attention pour l'avenir d'une vérité qui, toujours déjà, s'annonce" (164). However, his criticism of Husserl grows out of the very question of presence. James Allison

[34] Indeed, it is well-known that his first serious publication (in 1964) was the extremely lengthy introduction to Husserl's *L'Origine de la Géométrie*.

shows succinctly the Derridian position: "the systematic development of Husserl's phenomenology [is] best demonstrated not in terms of a particular problem, but by the examination of a certain *prejudice*–namely, the epistemological and metaphysical value of *presence*—a prejudice that guide[s] the formulation of Husserl's entire work" (Allison, 90, emphasis in text). How does this prejudice function? Put simply, the phenomenological gesture purports to reveal, as we saw earlier, the essential truth of a being as received by the subject. In order for this action to function, however, both subject and object must *be*. And this *being* has, according to Derrida, always been conceived as a form of presence, not only the presence of the object to the thinking subject, but also, the self-presence of the subject to itself: in order to receive the truthful essence of the real or virtual object I am contemplating, not only must it become present to me, but I must also be present to myself. For Derrida, these unexamined presuppositions have a considerable impact, generating in their wake a series of binary oppositions that, he contends, are the subliminal fundamentals of Western metaphysics because they imply a value-laden relationship wherein one of two terms is positively perceived at the expense of the other: the grounding notion of *being*, for example, cannot avoid conceptually implying its negative obverse, *not-being*. Presence and absence thus form the matrix of metaphysics, but this pairing of opposite terms is, as Allison reminds us, replicated in a number of such sets: "among the many conceptual oppositions to be found there are those of matter (*hyle*) and form (*eidos*, idea), corporal and incorporeal, body and soul, animate and inanimate, signifier and signified" (*ibid*., 93). To this we can also add the crucial pair speech and writing.

These last pairs, the signifier and signified, but also the question of the pre-eminence of speech over writing, are inevitably connected to the question of language insofar as these terms are easily recognizable elements of the Saussurian paradigm. And Derrida will challenge two points: first, the Husserlian notion that the language we habitually use for communicating with

others is no more than outward projection of what really and ideally takes place in the immediacy of so-called "solitary mental life," and second, the logocentric idea that writing derives from speech and is no more than a temporally deferred image projection of a phonological speech act which is itself perceived as the more originary expression of thought. For both of these aspects, as well as the manner in which they relate to presence, the question of origin is paramount. And from a philosophical perspective, Edward S. Casey suggests in his article on Derrida and Heidegger that Derrida is passionately interested in the question of origins (602). Indeed, in some senses, the question of origins can perhaps be imagined to lie at the root of the type of reflection Derrida proposes, for contemplating the notion of origins frequently seems like a process of incessant deferral–presaging the well-known Derridian term,"difference,"—in which the object that appears to be originary inevitably cedes its place to an ever more distant origin. But this quintessentially Derridian position itself has a deferred origin and can be seen to have been obtained through the use of a number of tools that come from the structuralist toolbox.

Derrida uses several elements of the Saussurian paradigm to reflect on the question of origins and through them the unexamined nature of Husserlian presence, wherein individual subjectivity is presented as the center from which thought can emerge. This thought is itself conceived as an ideal meaning reduced to its unvarying elements: within solitary mental life, thought points to the real identity, or presence of the object and is a pure signified (*signifié*). And because it remains ideal, this meaning is untainted by the use of the signifiers that are needed for communication through language. To understand this position more effectively, we must refer to Saussure's well-known insight into language, which showed that although the link connecting the signifier and the signified is always arbitrary, the relationship between each signifier and its corresponding signified is unique and relies on difference, which is the fundamental condition of meaning ("In language itself there are only differences […] Although in general a difference

presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, *and no positive terms*" [Saussure 118, emphasis in original]). In other words, although there may be a plurality of similar signifiers, each of these apparently identical signifiers is differentiated from the others by its co-presence in several different paradigms (phonic, semantic, etc.) and thus by the unique link it has with its signified. To take an example, the signifier "bear" can point to an animal or to a variety of different actions, carrying, giving birth, tolerating, etc. In each case the sign "means" something specific because the signifier is associated with a different signified. Simultaneously, however, the Saussurian system postulates the stable and unvarying presence of the signified that the signifier points to: at the end of the noun "bear" there is *always* a specific type of animal that can itself be identified by the eidetic reduction proposed in the Husserlian model.

Using the Saussurian model itself as a springboard, Derrida brings into play the notion of difference posited by Saussure to reach the understanding that difference, or "non-identity," characterizes not only the relationship between different signs, but also, more fundamentally, the relationship between signifier and signified. He breaks the structuralist model apart by taking the reasoning further, proposing the even more destabilizing reflection that the signifier points not to a stable unique signified, but to a plurality of other signifiers. Guillemette and Cossette give a particularly illuminating example of how this process works when they analyze the indeterminate signified "water." "Lors de la lecture du mot « eau, »" they write, "on peut penser à des gouttes d'eau, à un lac, au symbole chimique $H_2O$, etc. On ne pense pas nécessairement à une image fixe de l'eau, à une représentation mentale universelle. Aussi, chaque concept (signifiant) auquel l'« eau » peut référer renvoie à un autre signifiant. Cette chaîne de signifiant à signifiant, infinie, se traduit par un jeu sans fin et ouvre le texte, le déplace, le rend mouvant" (section 2.2.1). In the light of this reorientation of the Saussurian model, Derrida reconsiders Husserlian eidetic

reduction wherein, as we saw, the signified is that part of the sign that must simply *be*, because the reduction itself has eliminated all the contingent aspects that have historically accrued to the object, and revealed its authentic presence. Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*, "In Saussurian language, what Saussure does not say would have to be said: there is neither symbol nor sign, but becoming-sign of the symbol" (47). In other words, once it is admitted that because their relationship is arbitrary there is no homogeneous unity allowing the signifier to call the signified into presence, it must also be admitted that the true relationship between signifier and signified is one of non-presence: the sign is the place that marks the absence of identity between its two constitutive elements, signifier and signified. Gayatri Spivak expresses this quality particularly well: "such is the strange 'being' of the sign: half of it always 'not there' and the other half always 'not that'" (xvii), meaning that the signified is never there because it is only imagined to be present in the concept we mentally create, while the signifier is obviously vastly different from the thing itself.

Husserl's solution to these perceived differences was to privilege the inner monologue wherein thought would "speak" meaning to itself without the interference of signs. Spivak gives the general outlines of his position, writing that "one way to satisfy the rage for unity is to say that, within the phonic sign (speech rather than writing) there is no structure of difference; and that this nondifference is felt as self-presence in the silent and solitary thought of the self" (xvi). But even Saussure, she says, was aware of the fallacy of the position because in reality there is "no necessary reason why a particular sound should be identical with a 'thought' or 'thing'; and that argument applies even when one 'speaks' silently to oneself" (*ibid*). Thus Saussure, she points out, recognized that the relation between meaning and speech was of a conventional, and not inherent nature. And yet Saussure, following the common acceptance of the difference

between speech and writing, cannot avoid positing the former as being more originary than the latter, and it is this point that Derrida will oppose.

Going from the idea that there is no originary presence that speech can point directly to, Derrida shows "la collusion entre la parole et une métaphysique de la Présence (du centre plein), en opposition à la problématique moderne qui est celle de l'écriture et du centre vide" (Brochu, 656). Indeed, because he was more interested in providing a systematization of language, Saussure accords less significance to speech, for he sees it as no more than the transient, individual production of language. Paradoxically however, because he perceives it as the "opposite" of writing, he gives the primacy of origin to speech along the generally received idea that speech is the immediate rendition of thought. Within the signifier-signified couplet established by Saussure, both speech and writing are signifiers, but speech is seen as being closer to its object, the signified, than writing. This primacy is challenged by Derrida, who will argue that […] le phonocentrisme se confond avec la détermination historiale du sens de l'être en général comme *présence* […] (*Grammatologie,* 23).

In the final analysis, then, the deconstructionist model upsets the very grounds of metaphysical investigation by indicating that the signified to which the signifier points can never be attained; its reality is always deferred in an endless web of signifiers. By the same token, there can be no origin, because "within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin" (61). Thus, Chin-Yi argues, "Derrida shows that the relation between eidetic reduction and the absolute origin is one of repetition […]. This origin is produced only retrospectively through the act of repetition, signalling to a presence that never existed" (80). This repetition is entailed by the fact that in order to convey meaning, the sign must fit into a paradigm that has already determined it:

the meaning of the word "table" is determined by its past, by all the iterations that have allowed it to become associated with a notion. As a consequence, this position calls into question many of the origins we habitually take for granted, most notably for Bonnefoy, that there can be a single determined author at the origin of a text.

A final element of the deconstructionist project that has resonance for the positions that Bonnefoy explicitly adopts, concerns the question of the relation between subject and community. Though Derrida himself denied evincing the subject as an entity from his own reflection, Elsebet Jegstrup writes, "Deconstruction is existential. It respects singularity, and, most profoundly, it recognizes otherness and the fact that we may not always be able to say what constitutes otherness. It realizes that although much experience can be shared, there will always be areas of experience, understood in physical as well as metaphysical terms, that cannot be shared" (2). This point is significant, for from numerous comments that he has made, it would appear that Bonnefoy takes his most solid stand precisely in the rejection of the Derridian idea that language itself constitutes a barrier to communication. In a frequently cited sentence, Bonnefoy writes: "En art comme dans la vie apprenons la parole de l'autre, et la terre adviendra, figure intense parce que lieu partagé. Tel me paraît le dessein de la poésie" (*EsP* 59). Comments of this nature highlight the importance that Bonnefoy accords to poetry in establishing a privileged relation with the other: it is a sharing of a common mental space that can, and indeed *must* be obtained in order to preserve a notion of community through moments of communion with others. In this, his position has greater resonance with Martin Buber, with whom he has at times been compared (see, for instance, Vernier *Les Mots comme le Ciel*, 17-18). Though somewhat lapidary in that text, Vernier's association of Bonnefoy's thought with that of Buber seems highly pertinent, not only for the notion of presence that emerges in the writings of both, but also for the notion of community and communion that is a leitmotiv of Buber's work.

## Another face of phenomenology: Buber and the Other as a presence

Buber's most well-known philosophical construction concerns the relation between the self and the other, both of which he conceives not as objects, but as boundless subjects. He famously identifies this experience as the relation between *I* and *Thou* and opposes it to the objectifying *I-It* construction: "When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. […] When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation" (4). It is difficult not to see this Buberian *I-Thou* relation as the kernel of a primary notion of community, particularly as Buber is at pains to point out that the acceptance of the other can in no way be associated with the dissolution of the self: "this does not mean the giving up of the *I* as mystical writings usually suppose: the *I* is as indispensable to this […] as to every relation, since relation is only possible between *I* and *Thou*" (78). This insistence on the importance of this relation with the other, of a shared experience is echoed in numerous statements Bonnefoy has made, and is an important consideration for the essay, for the notion of addressing—or even *creating*—a community is one that plays into the essay's subterranean objectives.

But if such community creation is the fundamental object of Buber's philosophical attention, the means to attain it lies in an experience that is essentially phenomenological in nature. Two points are important to the work of Bonnefoy. The first engages the axis of subjectivity and affirms that the *Thou* must be conceived in the larger sense of *being*, and potentially encompasses the contents of the whole universe. Concretely, this means that the experience of the other is not necessarily limited to other human beings, but can integrate all forms of true encounters. This point reverberates through Bonnefoy's celebrated description of an

encounter with a salamander. The second point is initially positioned along the axis of time and postulates that in contradistinction to the *I-It* relation, which is defined by closure and the past, the relation between *I* and *Thou* must always necessarily take place in the present. Buber writes: "The *I* of the primary word *I-It*, that is, the *I* faced by no *Thou*, but surrounded by a multitude of 'contents,' has no present, only the past […] in so far as man rests satisfied with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no present content. He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been" (12-13). Much later, we understand that the opening of the *I* to the present moment implies its own transformation in the reception of the other experienced as a *Thou*. Buber's development of this point demonstrates a vision of presence that is so strikingly related with the notion that Bonnefoy will develop and describe in his own writing that it is worth quoting extensively here. Buber writes:

> Man receives, and he receives not a specific "content" but a Presence, a Presence as a power. This Presence and this power include three things, undivided, yet in such a way that we may consider them separately. First, there is the whole fullness of real mutual action, of the being raised and bound up in relation: the man can give no account at all of how the binding in relation is brought about, nor does it in any way lighten his life –it makes his life heavier, but heavy with meaning. Secondly, there is the inexpressible confirmation of meaning. Meaning is assured. Nothing can any longer be meaningless. [...] Thirdly, this meaning is not that of "another life," but that of this life of ours, not one of a world "yonder" but that of this world of ours, and it desires its confirmation in this life and in relation with this world. (110)

This vision meshes so completely with certain elements of Bonnefoy's writing that, clearly, he must be considered as a closely meditated thinker for Bonnefoy.

Primarily, the point that conjoins the two thinkers lies in the notion of plenitude that is associated with a presence that is experienced not only as a relation, but also–significantly, given Bonnefoy's repeated equating of poetry with "un acte"—as an action. But even beyond that "fullness of real mutual action," Buber's rejection of another world or life, a "yonder" which would contain true meaning is one that appears frequently in Bonnefoy's writing, and constitutes, for example the most significant underlying theme of *L'Arrière-Pays.* Bonnefoy negatively

associates this dream of an "ailleurs" with an attitude that he terms "Gnostic" and which he develops extensively in his "Entretiens avec Bernard Falciola" (*EsP*, 79 *et infra*). Along the same lines, the idea that the outcome of the experience of presence is to provide a form of guarantee of meaning ("meaning is assured") is also one that is seen in Bonnefoy's own opposition between an authentic instance of presence and the closure and meaninglessness of what he calls "la mauvaise présence." As we saw in the analysis of the "Dédicace," these more general points are also buttressed by certain parallels between the language of Buber's description and elements we find in Bonnefoy's work, such as Buber's reference to "heavy with meaning" echoed in Bonnefoy's "aggraver."

Finally, though these points all seem to place Buber's description of presence in close concomitance with what Bonnefoy himself describes in his work, nevertheless an exception must be made for an element that Buber addresses only fleetingly, and that is his statement that "man can give no account at all of how the binding in relation is brought about." I would argue that Bonnefoy's essays can be seen as that very attempt to give an account of how presence can come about. And although Bonnefoy clearly privileges poetry as the only linguistic place where presence can be housed, it is in fact the particularity of the essay that allows it to engage with presence in such a way that it can attempt a double form of interaction with it. The following chapters examine those elements to see how the essay is differentiated from other genres in its ability to conjoin these perspectives.

# CHAPTER THREE –
# Visible Forms of Definition:
# Perceptions of the Essay as Genre

> Were one to compare the forms of literature with sunlight refracted in a prism, the writings of the essayists would be the ultra-violet rays.
> --Georg Lukàcs

Lukàcs's rather poetic image suggests that compared with more easily identified forms of writing, essays are an almost invisible form of writing, whose existence tends to fall off the edges of our perception. Invisibility might seem like a peculiar word to use for a genre that is so ubiquitous and seemingly so banal. Paradoxically, however, it is perhaps its very omnipresence that renders the essay invisible: its familiarity makes us feel that overarching attempts at definition are superfluous. This rather widespread feeling introduces one of the central questions of the present work, namely, in what manner do general definitions of the essay play into Bonnefoy's choice of the genre, and how do the capacities and constraints associated with it condition his writerly project? With *presence*, we saw that Bonnefoy seems attracted to notions encapsulating multiple impulsions that appear to pull in different directions. The essay, I would argue, demonstrates exactly the same characteristics, and the image that Lukàcs provides reflects rather precisely the axes of this chapter.

Using the Lukàcsian trope of visible and invisible forms of writing, this chapter attempts to formulate a description of the defining elements of the essay, seen both from the perspective of highly consensual, "visible" definitions, which include subjectivity, polymorphism, truthfulness, etc., as well as the more "invisible" issues, such as fragmentation, didacticism, and esthetics, all of which tend either to be less consensual or which remain indistinctly defined in the critical

domain. I have deliberately chosen this structure instead of separating definitions of the essay into the more usual opposition between form and content because my goal is to bring out the distinction between things everyone supposes they know about the essay, and those things that linger at a more subconscious level and might thus have perhaps an even greater influence on the form the writing takes. In addition, the choices implied in a writer's decision to use a certain quality of language–poetic, for instance, rather than more plainly communicative—are so inextricably related to choices that frequently remain at a subliminal level that it is extremely difficult to separate form out as an element wholly distinct from content.

Critic Laurent Mailhot locates the essay in a zone that is familiar to us from the discussion on the complicated interaction between deixis and the question of whether presence can really inhabit words. Mailhot writes:

> The essay–rather than the essayist—says "*I*"; it likewise says *here* and *now*; it shapes its own representation, one which is both current and situated. For it is against itself (and against the world as discourse) that the essay struggles. It drifts, it wanders in order to trace a map of its own questionings: its detours determine its contours. (76, emphasis Mailhot)

The terms Mailhot uses to describe the general outlines of the essayistic project suggest that the essay is engaged in same issues as those which subtend the deictical word. Indeed, it is impossible not to be struck by the fact that the identical *I-here-now* triplet used in Bühlerian terminology can extend to the essay and its generic status. This striking similarity, coupled with the insistent iteration of these selfsame terms throughout Bonnefoy's work calls for an analysis of the literary and theoretical specificity of the essay. Perhaps equally importantly, Mailhot's evocation of the image of the essay as an itinerant venture tending toward a form of cartography provides a promising means to enter into the specificity of Bonnefoy's essays.

While there can be no doubt that general definitions of the essay impinge upon the understanding readers have of the genre, they also orient–and perhaps even to a greater extent—

*writers* in their choice of the form. Indeed, surprising though it may seem, the essay can be perceived by essayists themselves in eminently negative terms. Thus critic Jean Starobinski (incidentally, one of Bonnefoy's close friends) had the following remarks to make when accepting the 1985 Prix de l'Essai:

> Évalué par un jury de thèse, l'essayiste est un aimable amateur qui s'en va rejoindre le critique impressionniste dans la zone suspecte de la non-scientificité. Et il est vrai que, perdant parfois de sa substance, l'essai a pu se muer en chronique de journal, pamphlet polémique, causerie à bâtons rompus. […] Disons-le crûment, si on déclarait que je pratique l'essayisme, je serais légèrement blessé, je le prendrais comme un reproche… (as quoted by Marielle Macé, 268)

The criticism Starobinski imputes to the essay is grounded on its "non-scientificité," and on its polyvalence, its habit of shifting shapes to become something else, a chat, a pamphlet, an editorial, etc. And yet, it is impossible not to note that despite the negative tone of Starobinski's qualification of the essay, he–like Bonnefoy—continues to rely heavily on it. Is there not some inconsistency in these positions? Examining the essay as a specific form of writing will help resolve a few of the contradictions between perception and practice and allow us to see how the very form and the capacities inherent to it enter into resonance both with Bonnefoy's thinking and his expressive needs.

All in all, my object is to suggest a means by which to expand on the notion suggested in the Introduction, namely that the essay is perhaps the only form that might allow Bonnefoy to fully attain his goals of poetic creation combined with ontological transmission. My approach is to examine characteristics identified by various theoreticians and use them to initiate inquiry into the main points that define the essay, notably the idea that the essay is a specific literary space with identifiable–though contested—parameters as well as the more theoretical and even philosophical considerations that emerge from stylistic possibilities proper to the essay. Invoking these defining parameters here will allow us to examine more efficiently how many of the philosophical and theoretical concerns that emerge from definitions of the essay mirror issues that

constantly surface in Bonnefoy's work and are transversal to a number of interrelated elements that appear both in his essays, and in his poetry. Some of the sources I use– such as Lukàcs, Adorno, and Nietzsche—were chosen because the metaphors and images these authors use to define certain concepts are the very ones that appear in Bonnefoy's work. These theoretical and practical definitions of the essay will allow us to broach the specificity of Bonnefoy's own essayistic practice in the final chapter, which focuses more particularly on the internal construction of his essays, the metaphors and images that drive them, and their relationship to one another in the various volumes of collected essays.

## Critical Approaches to the Essay

Conducting an overview of literary criticism devoted to the essay one is struck by several things. The first is that for a genre that nowadays appears so ubiquitous, the body of criticism is far from vast, particularly when compared to the enormous bibliography that genres such as the novel or poetry have. Indeed, apart from a smattering of texts that have appeared over the course of the past fifty years, it is relatively recently that the essay has begun to attract the attention of literary critics interested in defining and describing its particularities. Pascal Riendeau, for example, starts by stating that "il n'existe pas de grandes théories de l'essai" (91). He continues by saying that there are beginning to be a fair number of "*propositions* théoriques" (his emphasis), but as yet hardly any significant global overviews of the question. His comments notwithstanding, one notes that a small trickle of work on the essay has begun to appear. This awakening of interest is, needless to say, highly useful to my own work in examining the essays of Yves Bonnefoy and has transformed what began as a mere intuition on why the genre is

important for him into a more solidly anchored examination of how his essays fit into his work as a whole.

To return, however, to those elements that appear noteworthy in this newly developing body of criticism, a defining characteristic mentioned by virtually all critics concerns the difficulty of defining the genre. The fact that this characteristic is so prevalent in critical writing on the essay is interesting for the student of Bonnefoy mainly in the negative sense of its absence in his work. In other words, it is certainly intriguing that a writer as self-aware as Bonnefoy, and as conscious of the importance of the interconnections between different aspects of his literary production, has not explicitly addressed the notion what it means to write essays. Perhaps this derives from what appears as the self-evident nature of the essay: in some ways–just as for the seemingly transparent notion of "presence"— everyone knows what an essay is. But this familiarity can itself be viewed as a type of fallacy, particularly if we consider it from the perspective of the Hegelian framework that is so well-known to Bonnefoy. Bonnefoy's conversancy with Hegel, through his close work with French Hegelians such as Jean Hyppolite, hardly needs to be demonstrated: indeed, it is the selfsame Hegel who appears in the epigraph of *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve.* Hegel's thoughts on the notion of the "familiarly known" thus have particular resonance for thinking about Bonnefoy. In the celebrated preface to *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, Hegel comments on the relationship between familiarity and deception:

> What we are "familiar with" is not intelligently known, just for the reason that it is "familiar." When engaged in the process of knowing, it is the commonest form of self-deception and a deception of other people as well, to assume something to be familiar, and give assent to it on that very account. (29) [35]

[35] I only had access to the 1910 edition, but in her introduction to her translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology,* Gayatri Spivak quotes Baillie's later (1967) translation of the same text and it provides what seems to me a clearer understanding of the Hegelian phrase:

He adds that "something familiar to us, something "well-known" [is] something which the existent mind has finished and done with, and hence takes no more to do with [sic] and no further interest in. Hegel is referring to the graver objects of philosophical thought, such as "subject, object, and so on, God, nature, understanding, sensibility, etc." (*ibid*.), but we may extract from his comments the underlying notion that when we perceive the definition of some object to be self-evident, our very perception creates a certain blindness.

Of course, using Hegel's criticism of blind acceptance and linking it to Bonnefoy's silence on his reasons for writing essays may seem like a harsh judgment on a potential lack of self-reflexivity regarding his essays and their place in his writing. The comment is not, however, meant to be criticism of Bonnefoy himself, but meant rather to introduce the complexity of the essay which does, indeed, lack a significant amount of critical thinking on its generic status. It would seem that although Bonnefoy has given a great deal of thought to the relationship between language and poetry–and to the concomitant status of poetry as an expression in and through language—he has not given the same amount of attention to the generic status of the essay. This omission is certainly not without significance. I interpret Bonnefoy's seeming lack of interest in examining the role of his essays as an indication that their language tends, for him, in the direction of the transparency that Sartre claims for all non-poetic language. It is a "natural" mode of expression that allows the transfer of thought from one mind to another. As he indicated to me during a conversation, what is important for him in the essays is their *function*: they are place-holders, creating a space which poetry can come and fill, but they cannot themselves equal poetic creation.

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> What is "familiarly known" is not properly known, just for the reason that it is "familiar." When engaged in the process of knowing, it is the commonest form of self-deception and a deception of other people as well, to assume something to be familiar, and to let it pass on that very account. Knowledge of that sort, with all its talking around it never gets from the spot, but has no idea that this is the case. (17)

Taking as a starting point Bonnefoy's silence on the essay as a form of writing, we can now turn to more general considerations on the essay. Paradoxically, two almost antithetical concerns dominate thinking about the genre. The first we saw just above in the seeming absence of need felt by Bonnefoy to formalize a theoretical grounding and define his own predilection for the essay. But this position, concatenated with Hegel's comment on the misapprehensions commonly held about familiarly known objects, serves to define but one aspect of the problem. The second aspect seems to fly in direct opposition to this more common perception, and concerns the need that is felt in critical circles to pin down the essay, to tame it and render it more comprehensible.

In point of fact, the existing critical literature devoted to the essay reveals a strongly unilateral tendency dominated by attempts that focus mainly on circumscribing and defining it. This latter tendency underscores the impression of theoretical uncertainty–even, perhaps, anxiety—that surrounds the genre. Indeed, Riendeau, in the article cited earlier, suggests that this normative tendency reveals the general perception that existing definitions of the essay are inadequate (92). To address this definitional hiatus, while many critics turn instinctively to historical considerations, other suggestions have been put forth. Robert Vigneault, for example, has proposed defining essays along notions of "tone," or "register," thus enabling him to classify essays into four general categories: introspective, polemical, cognitive, and absolute. Though these classifications are perhaps not entirely satisfactory, indisputably, they shed an interesting light on the problem. Another useful vector has turned out be contrasting generic definitions of the essay with other genres, most notably poetry and the novel.

Indeed, it is striking–perhaps even more so for the reader of Bonnefoy's work—that the essay has been compared not only to the novel but also, significantly, to poetry. As I suggested earlier, one approach that I have found most fruitful in studying Bonnefoy's essays is the

theoretical debate that opposes Georg Lukàcs's and Theodor Adorno's radically different theoretical perspectives on the essay.[36] This opposition allowed me to begin thinking about the essay as a particular type of form endowed with certain specific characteristics, most notably through the intriguing notion that essay and poetry are somehow linked: Lukàcs writes, and Adorno reiterates, quoting Lukàcs, that "The essay form has not yet, today, traveled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago—the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics and art" (13). The notion of kinship between essay and poetry helps us perceive more clearly the transition between Bonnefoy the poet and Bonnefoy the essayist, and suggests that the distance is perhaps not so great. Further, this linking of essay and poetry helps in understanding better the reader's impression that for Bonnefoy, the essay is a natural mode of expression, and therefore not necessarily subject to examination. A pertinent complement to this putative relation between essay and poetry is the perception that because the essay is characterized by its lack of differentiation from fields as diverse as science, ethics and art, it becomes a writerly space open to infiltration from all sides, making of it, potentially, the "vrai lieu" which is such a recurrent trope in Bonnefoy's work.

However, the positive perception of the essay as an inherently open genre has as its negative counterpart the amorphous qualities that are also attributed to the essay. I have found it helpful, in order to mentally structure what critics have referred to as the so-called "protean" nature of the essay, to divide my approach into several component categories. This approach is by no means original; many commentators have evoked the idea that the definition of the essay has simultaneously to take into consideration not one, but at least two or three different characteristics. Françoise Berlan extends the number and further and evokes four different

[36] This opposition has obviously struck other critics: Claire de Obaldia's 2005 *Esprit de l'essai* relies substantively on it. Note: her book originally appeared in 1996 as *The Essayistic Spirit.*

expectations created in readers by Montaigne's *Essais.* Analyzing their intrinsic characteristics, she refers first to their unfinished quality; then to the subjective orientation that characterizes them; she also discerns in them perceptible narrative undercurrents; and finally, she addresses the complex relationship they entertain with fiction (10). Although she focuses exclusively on Montaigne, in many ways her very analysis can be extended to the essay in general, and to Bonnefoy's essays in particular.

Thus the rest of this section will focus on those characteristics of the essay about which there is extensive critical convergence—even if some form of dissent can be discerned along the margins of these definitions. The first of these attributes concerns the essay's polymorphism and encompasses the negative conception of the so-called "formlessness" of the essay that has perhaps led to its marginalization in literary circles. In its positive version, this notion speaks to the idea of an "open" form marked by a creative absence of constraints. Significantly, the formlessness of the essay is without a doubt the aspect that has been the most extensively studied. In its two interpretations –both positive and the negative—the idea of its formlessness is one which there appears to have widespread critical consensus: no analysis that I have seen upholds the position that the essay is a highly structured genre organized around monolithic expectations and obligations. Intuitively, one can imagine that for a number of writers, the possibilities offered by such a fluid notion of form and openness might unconsciously and positively condition their decision to write essays. Indeed, critic Robert Greene invokes a significant point when he suggests there that the writing of essays is the particular prerogative of many French poets (and, more incidentally, French novelists) of the 19$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$ centuries. Certainly, there is no shortage of names that spring spontaneously to mind: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry, to cite only the more conspicuous examples. Though Greene's primary focus, Bonnefoy's work on the plastic arts, is not one that informs my own study, I extrapolate a highly interesting point from his

analysis, which is that in order to write adequately about art, certain poets feel compelled to use a form of writing distinct from that very poetry to which they claim a primary allegiance.

A second defining characteristic of the essay addresses the notion of subjectivity and posits the necessary and explicit presence of a speaking "I" at the center of the text. For my analysis of Bonnefoy's essays, the significance of this originating subject is of such importance that all the subsequent categories of definition of the essay–truth, of course, but even the sense of a shared space, as well as the notions of didacticism, fragmentation, and belletristic writing—are derived from the crucial presence of the central "I." Here, as with the notion of polymorphism, critical analyses on the essay converge, and one finds general critical unanimity supporting the idea that subjectivity is one of its key defining characteristics. Whether a fictional construct or a true aspect of this genre–and the matter is of no little importance—without this central figure of an "I" presenting him or herself as the explicit guarantor of the position adopted by the text, an essay would take another name. A quick glance reveals a plethora of appellations –treatise, analysis, inquiry, dissertation, monograph, etc.—which correspond to specific forms where convention dictates that the central "I" withdraw and assume a neutral and impersonal role. The explicitly subjective quality of the essay is radically different in that it projects the necessity of a determined and determinable author as part of its grounding structure. And yet, it must be pointed out that despite general unanimity concerning the necessary presence of this authorial "I", different values can be given to its manifestations. In part, these variable shadings of the subjective presence are linked to the different varieties of essayistic texts: an almost absolute subjective presence in a truly personal essay, but a more filtered subjectivity in a critical essay.

This distinction between the personal and the critical essay is pertinent in the context of Bonnefoy's writings, perhaps even more so in the first volume of *L'Improbable* which is the object of the current study. We will return in greater depth to the differences that separate these

two forms of essay, but evoking them here enables us to introduce the third element of definition of the essay: the idea that one of its salient characteristics is that it somehow speak the "truth." This latter point, though germane to both forms of essay, is particularly apposite to the critical essay in the sense that its focal point is, by definition, some aspect of an exterior, identifiable piece of reality. As concerns the personal essay, the assumption there is of course also that the essayist speaks the truth about his or her inner perceptions and reactions; the notable difference lies in the fact that these perceptions are far more difficult to verify. Generally speaking, thus, this notion of the truth contained in the essay is pervasive and is, in point of fact, one that is evoked not only by a significant number of critics, but also spontaneously articulated by many non-specialists. It constitutes an important element in critical discourse on the essay, and thus would seem necessarily to impinge on a writer's choice to use it as a mode of communication. With the notion of truth, however, a greater degree of dissension enters the critical definitions, for though it is widely evoked to define the essay, essayistic truth has its share of detractors, particularly those who challenge it from the point of view of language and its capacity for transparency.

## Formless or protean? How to think the essay?

It is almost redundant to say that the essay suffers from a lack of definition, or rather, that the multiple existing definitions of the essay tend to be floating, almost amorphous, because this type of description is the starting point of so much of the existing literary criticism on the essay. It is frequently also defined as a hybrid genre that is difficult to classify because it partakes simultaneously of so many different genres. In belletristic circles, it has often been considered with derision because its pedestrian "workman-like" functions appear to remove it from the stratospheric circles of "true" literature. Indeed, reference to the dubious generic status of the

essay is prevalent in a substantial portion of critical analysis. Much is made of the fact that unlike, for example, the Petrarchan sonnet, or the roman à clef, the essay is not a monolithic genre governed by a well-established set of rules and customs. As Pierre Glaudes writes: "on chercherait en vain une formule canonique de l'essai, un modèle qui induise toujours le même pacte de lecture" (i).But beyond the reception of the essayistic text by the reader, it is, in fact, almost a truism evoked by most commentators and critics to say that the essay as a genre resists definition because the term itself describes something fluid and formless. Theorist Jean-Marcel Paquette outlines the problem of the genre:

> Sa relative modernité, de même que son caractère constitutivement informel, font que l'essai n'occupe aucun statut nettement défini dans la typologie des genres littéraires, tantôt considéré comme « le plus sérieux, le plus responsable des genres littéraires » (Marañón), tantôt relégué, dans une formulation plus récente, parmi les genres dits « mineurs. » (453)

Even among essayists themselves, historically, there has been very little consensus on a definition for the product of their pens. José Ortega y Gasset, in a celebrated aphorism, takes the essay in the direction of a type of systematization, saying of it in his celebrated *Meditaciones del 'Quijote'* that "El ensayo es la ciencia, menos la prueba explicita (318)." He continues by suggesting that the seeming absence of rigor given by the absence of proof is actually a sign of intellectual honesty: "para el escritor hay una cuestión de honor intelectual en no escribir nada susceptible de prueba sin poseer antes ésta" (*ibid*). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Samuel Johnson leans toward an organic, non-systemic definition completely devoid of notions of honor when he describes the essay in his *Dictionary* as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular, undigested piece." In reality–as most critics underscore—the essay is difficult to define because it is a catchall type of term. In current French literary classifications, for example, all literature published today is divided into two categories: "romans/fiction" and "essais." As a result, the writing categorized as "essay" encompasses vast tracts of subjects covering virtually every aspect

of human thought. The essay cuts a swathe through all disciplines and many possibilities of written expression; in its wake, however, what remains in the way of a definition?

## Grounding Definitions

One of the few solid points of reference is, of course, a return to the origin. Indeed, as so many critics point out, the very name of the genre was engendered in the work of Montaigne, who characterized the loosely-woven type of writing he was engaged in as an attempt, a trial, an "essai." And since, historically, the founding importance of Montaigne cannot be gainsaid, the lack of consensus on a modern definition for the essay tends to result in an evocation of Montaigne as a touchstone allowing the critic to speak of the essay from a theoretical perspective after examining the concrete production of its most well-known practitioner. Jean-Marcel Paquette indicates that the reference to Montaigne is by no means gratuitous, but is rather the result of a theoretical vacuum: "L'absence de tradition théorique chez les essayistes eux-mêmes justifie que l'on soit amené à se rapporter constamment à la pratique textuelle, notamment à celle de son fondateur; ce rappel obligé aux *Essais* de Montaigne est en quelque sorte constitutif de toute tentative de théorisation de la forme de l'essai et sert nécessairement de mesure" (452). Lukàcs himself follows this schema and evokes Montaigne during his discussion of the strange dislocation between the apparently limited subject given by the essayist and the greatness of his secret or unconscious aspirations: "Perhaps the great Sieur de Montaigne felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of 'Essays.' The simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy" (9).

Certain critics extend the seminal importance of Montaigne even further, suggesting that his essays are so individual and personal that they are, in fact, inimitable, and thus that his *Essais*

constitute a sort of generic hapax.[37] The corollary to this way of thinking suggests that the term "essay" is as diverse as the number of essayists and is therefore useless as a term of definition. Although this analysis had some impact in critical thinking about the essay some years ago, the work of recent theoreticians has begun to change the situation. It is currently admitted that though difficult to define, the essay does, in fact, respond to certain criteria that can be agreed upon. Critic Reda Bensmaïa even goes so far as to suggest that the essay might be seen as a sort of "Ur-genre" from which other genres derive their definitions: "on peut dire que l'essai n'est pas *un* genre comme un autre, et peut-être pas un *genre* du tout [...]. L'essai n'est pas non plus le mélange des genres. Il ne mélange pas les genres, mais les complique: dès lors, ce sont les Genres qui sont en quelque sorte les "retombées", les effectuations historiquement déterminées de ce qui se trame potentiellement dans l'essai" (124).

The historical determination of the essay and its current position in the literary world requires some analysis because both of these factors have conditioned the general perception readers have of it, and it is in these very perceptions that the essay obtains the value it clearly has for writers such as Bonnefoy who are searching for a means of expression consonant with their expressive needs. Along those lines, it seems important to underline the fact that it is precisely what Bensmaïa and others describe as the *potential* of the essay that makes it a useful genre for thinkers such as Bonnefoy. Earlier in this chapter, I referred to the ambivalence which is the hallmark of reactions to the essay: some see it as a supremely open inclusive genre, allowing for many different types of creativity; others criticize its "formlessness" as the tangible sign of the incomplete thinking that characterizes it. And yet, though the judgments on the essay differ, there is nonetheless a stable core of thinking that produces these different views. Most critics tend to

[37] Most notably, Peter Schon in his 1954 essay *Vorformen des Essays in Antike und Humanismus*, as cited by Claire de Obaldia, p. 12.

converge on the notion that the potential formlessness or openness of the essay derives from two interconnected elements. The first is linked to the almost infinite variety of subjects, both serious and trivial, along with all the intermediate shadings thereof, that can serve as the object of the essay, while the second is connected to the plethora of types and styles of writing that can comprise the essay, and this to the point of even co-existing within a single essay.

In parallel with the thematic freedom associated with the genre, the second element of criticism leveled at the essay is similar, but oriented along a more technical axis. For along with the freedom that comes from the absence of rhetorical constraints imposed on the essay (figures, forms, rhythms, themes), its essential formlessness can also be seen in the variety of discursive styles it can assume. One of the key indications of this discursive variability is clearly seen at the taxonomic level where the attempt to distinguish between different types of essays gives rise to ever more precise labels such as, for example, the philosophical essay, the polemical essay, the autobiographical essay, and so on. Claire de Obaldia is one of a number of critics who have noted this singular capacity of the essay: "Les occurrences concrètes du genre [...] soulignent bien l'aisance avec laquelle l'essai empiète sur les frontières de chacun des genres, mêlant et conjuguant leurs caractères respectifs. Un inventaire théorique des essais existants ne devrait pas ainsi uniquement inclure l'essai narratif, dramatique, ou méditatif, mais également l'essai historique, biographique, autobiographique, aphoristique, épistolaire et dialogique" (18). The technical, writerly corollary to the "formlessness" and taxonomic heterogeneity lies in the capacity of the essay to encompass a large variety of writing styles, inserting here a dialogue, there a narrative episode, an autobiographical fragment of memory or a few lines of poetry, or even presenting itself wholly in an epistolary style. This stylistic malleability reflects the a style of writing that has the potential to cross over many different boundaries and indicates precisely, it

seems to me, why this genre is of such interest to writers like Bonnefoy who seek to synthesize different types of thinking and experience.

All this flexibility and openness notwithstanding, we must bear in mind that Bonnefoy's choices did not occur in a literary vacuum. For although the essay may now appear to us as a natural literary space allowing for the synthesis of a number of different factors, in reality, it has shifted over time to occupy this area. Inevitably, therefore, Bonnefoy's choices are conditioned by the mental representations of the essay as a genre, and those representations can only be perceived over a relatively extended period of time. Indeed, as recently as a century ago, the essay did not hold the place it currently occupies. In order to obtain a valid historical perspective, it is useful to expand the parallel evoked above between the description of the essay as a genre with no thematic, rhetorical, and discursive constraints, and the similar accusations leveled at the novel.

In his analysis, Guy Larroux conjoins, in order to better criticize it, contemporary positions on the essay with Valéry's much earlier criticism of the novel.[38] Larroux writes: "l'essai n'a pas d'objet, pas de 'thème' à lui. Ou plutôt, il n'y en a pas qui lui soient interdits. Forte ici est la tentation du parallèle avec le roman. [...] La plupart des griefs de Valéry pourraient, *mutatis mutandis*, être retournés contre l'essai. A commencer, bien sûr, par cette déficience constitutive qui a pour nom arbitraire" (466). Valéry, it will be remembered, criticized the novel not only because of the absence of rhetorical structure that characterized it, but also because of what he perceived as the disproportionate amount of intentionality exerted by the author on the text which, when combined with the lack of *essential* constraints–that is, deriving from the essence of the genre—created a literary hodgepodge that he perceived as inordinately arbitrary. In his own

[38] See Valéry's essays in *Variété*. Cf. also Breton's well-known citation of the phrase attributed to Paul Valéry: « La marquise sortit à cinq heures ». In *Manifestes du Surréalisme* Breton cites the phrase as the pinnacle of the useless and petty form of determinism that characterizes the novel.

criticism of Valéry, Bonnefoy pinpoints precisely this overweening tendency in Valéry to favor the formal aspects of writing over a certain sense of immediacy that can emerge from a text. And as we saw in the previous chapter, he is particularly harsh concerning Valéry's "désir d'une discipline pour se retraire de ce qui est" (*I*, 120). However, his criticism is useful not so much in affording us a vision of his perception of Valéry, but rather in allowing us to situate a bit more clearly his own position regarding the underlying necessities that govern texts. By refraction, thus, it helps us gain a better understanding of the value the essay might have for him: a form that has the potential to allow for a level of immediacy perhaps not accessible through other forms of writing. For it is in its quality of inclusive openness that the essay most resembles the novel, which also has the capacity to integrate a variety of different types and registers of writing –up to and including the essay itself.

Along these lines, the problem of determining whether an essay that is integrated into a novel should still bear the title of "essay" is an interesting one. In his article "Is the 'Zerfall der Werte[39]' an essay?," Victor Ferré asks that very question. He states that within the field of German literary studies many critics have rather automatically qualified the philosophical and theoretical chapters of the novel *Die Schlafwandler (The Sleepwalkers)* as an essay, and he gives Proust as a similar example in French literature, for many critics contend that there is a symbiotic relationship between Proust's "Contre Sainte-Beuve" "essay" and portions of his *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu.*[40] Ferré, however, strongly argues against the idea that these theoretical texts inserted within the novelistic genre be considered as true essays. He writes: "As when Marcel Proust uses part of the "Contre Sainte-Beuve" (the project of an essay) in his *Temps retrouvé*: the

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[39] Translation: "Disintegration of values."

[40] It is important to note that the parallel is not complete for the "Contre Sainte-Beuve" never really existed as an essay and is a reconstitution based on extracts drawn from Proust's notebooks and organized into a text. There exist two very different versions of the "essay," dating from 1954 (edited by Bernard de Fallois) and 1971 (edited by Pierre Clerac).

pages do not have the same status if they stand outside the novel, the fiction, or inside" (3). This, he contends, is related to the fact that the subjectivity that is interior to a novel and the one that is exterior to it are radically different, and that "subjectivity is one of the features of an essay, in which the pronoun I refers to a real person, speaking in one's own name. It is part of the 'essayistic pact,' we might say (*ibid*)." Ferré's argument evokes the paradoxical stature of critical definitions of the essay. For although it can be equated with the novel in the all-encompassing capacity both have, the essay must yet be distinguished from it along other criteria which are themselves connected not to the world created within the essay, but are rather the reflections of the world that exists independently of the text. For our purposes thus, the critical conundrum created when an author integrates a fictional essay into the body of the novel helps us see that the interconnected questions of definition are among the determining vectors of the essay.

But before turning to an examination of the defining importance of subjectivity, a last point must be made concerning the parallel drawn between the essay and the novel. This point addresses the function that both essay and novel have held over time, and defines their potential for providing readers with the perception of obtaining an enhanced understanding of the world. Examining reader perceptions of the essay turns out to be productive, particularly in the French context, for it allows us to examine notions of resistance and opposition to certain modern trends that perceive science and the scientific method as the only means of procuring an accurate understanding of reality. As it happens, these tendrils of resistance are frequently present in Bonnefoy's work, and are particularly visible in, for example, the overt rejection of the very notion of concept that he initiated as early as the 1950s in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne," the first essay of the *L'Improbable* collection. Similarly, the ambivalence we saw emanating from statements he has made concerning the modern loss of the network of correspondences generated by "l'ancienne science" also partake in this wary assessment of scientific method. Within this

context, it is important, thus, to initiate some reflection on how certain forms of reticence toward scientific and conceptual principles shape the writing of essays.

## Science, Art and the Essay

Marielle Macé's reflections on perceptions of scientific thought and their relationship to the essay as a genre are extremely helpful in thinking about the relation between science and the essay. In her analysis, *Le Temps de l'essai: histoire d'un genre en France au XXe siècle* she proposes a very useful hypothesis concerning the indisputable importance that the essay has acquired over the course of the 20th century, particularly in France. Taking as her starting point the relative non-existence of the essay as a literary space in the 19th century (she quotes the 1912 edition of the *Catalogue de la librairie française* where under the heading "essai," the reference states: "Essais. Voyez Romans"), she attempts to analyze the reasons for the development of the essay into its current status as a dominant literary genre. Macé's extremely interesting hypothesis suggests that the current omnipresence of the essay is related to the development of what is called in France "les sciences humaines" and their novel vision of the place and determining characteristics of the human being. This new vision, she argues, was from the outset convinced of the validity of applying a scientific approach—that is, non-subjective, verifiable, reproducible—to all domains of thought, and thus forced a change in the way writing, and particularly literary writing could deal with reality. She maintains that from that point onward, the novel, which had long been perceived as a window into a true understanding of human nature, lost its central literary position. She writes: "Science et figure, savoir et fiction, essai et roman ont en quelque sorte, en ce début de XXe siècle, échangé leurs situations" (6). In her analysis, the essay, because of its closer relationship with the perceived neutrality scientific writing, and because of reader perceptions that it eschews fictional universes, seemed, from the beginning of the twentieth

century onward, better able to address issues that impinge upon reality. It therefore moved to fill the vacuum left by the displaced realistic or naturalistic novel of the 19th century.

And yet, as Macé points out, despite the kinship people perceive between the essay and scientific truth, the essay is crucially distinct from a scientific article in that it has within it the wherewithal to marginalize scientific discourse and favor more literary constructions. For her, the rejection of scientific discourse by the essay reflects an unconscious attempt for literature to maintain a position both in the construction of knowledge and in providing a valid interpretation for what is perceived as an ever more complicated understanding of reality. Simultaneously, and through this very process, the essay also works against the marginalization of literature in what is increasingly perceived by the literary community as a world that places value solely on the knowledge obtained through scientific method.

It is important to interject a quick caveat here: this reticence toward science is not, of course, meant to suggest that the literary community rejects the progress that science proposes. What is questioned, rather, is the universality of the methods associated with it, inasmuch as science predicates the validation of all knowledge on the repeatability of the method used. The scientific approach gives us to understand that scientific experiments produce true knowledge because they can be infinitely iterated, producing identical results with each iteration. Within this framework, however, the essay has the potential to create a literary space that is in and of itself a form of rejection of the scientific method of reproducible experiments. Indeed, knowledge produced in an essay can never be iterable, because it is conditioned by its central dynamic, to wit, the world translated through the filter of the impressions received by the essayist. And the value of the essay lies precisely in the fact that the information it transmits remains unique. As Georg Lukàcs points out, the essay is distinct from "critical writings which, like a hypothesis in natural science, like a design for a machine part, lose all their value at the precise moment when a

new and better one becomes available" (2). He uses this observation to explain the fact that people continue to find satisfaction in reading the critical essays of past essayists even though other essayists have since come along sustaining points of view that modify or even contradict the older essays. These comments serve as a springboard toward his central postulate, "Science affects us by its contents, art by its forms; science offers us fact and the relationship between facts, but art offers us souls and destinies," (3) which in turn creates the paradigm allowing him to attain the logical conclusion of his own essay with the statement: "now we may write down the opening words: the essay is an art form, an autonomous and integral giving-of-form to an autonomous and complete life" (18).

Lukàcs's–and Macé's—more overarching notion of the essay as a form of opposition to a scientific construction of the world is paralleled at the level of language by Pascal Riendeau, who underscores the fact that from the perspective of the essayist, the essay must primarily be considered as a writing experience which works toward developing "une parole originale qui refuse le langage factuel de l'information ou celui, plus abstrait de la science" (102). Furthering the notion of the essay as a form of writing that places itself squarely in opposition to scientific language and exists as a sort rampart against the diminishing importance of literature is the notion that the essay itself is, if not purely literary, at least proto-literary. Claire de Obaldia suggests as much when she argues that seen from a diachronic perspective, from Montaigne on through to Borges, the essay is a proto-literary genre in the sense that generically speaking, it can be read as leaning in the direction of fiction or even of the novel. In other words, she perceives in the developments that the essay has undergone over time an increasing capacity to absorb and integrate techniques that are specific to those created in fictional texts. Her analysis, following in the footsteps of Alastair Fowler (*Kinds of Literature*) and Michel Beaujour ("Genus universum" in *Glyph*), refers to the essay as "literature *in potentia*" because of its liminal position on the

horizon of more imaginative works of literature. She writes: "n'ayant pas (encore) atteint un statut littéraire à part entière, cette notion de littérature *in potentia* que l'essai incarne peut […] aller de pair avec l'amplification et l'éclatement des propriétés littéraires, avec le triomphe du supralittéraire comme essence de toute littérature" (48).

Both Macé's and de Obaldia's hypotheses provide useful tools for studying general definitions of essays and, through them, the essays of Bonnefoy. However, for me, the significant locus of interaction for the two interpretations lies in the notion of the central position of the writing subject and the desire to conquer a space for that subjectivity, whether at a general socio-philosophical level, as a reaction to the depersonalization that the sciences tend to promote in the name of objectivity and factual truth, or at a more personal level, as in the introduction of explicitly fictional segments leading toward the proto-construction of a novel that de Obaldia hypothesizes. But if de Obaldia argues that the essay, or rather, what can be qualified as the so-called "personal" essay represents but one stage in a process that goes from the pure presentation of facts to the *ex nihilo* creation of a fictional universe, we saw above that heterogeneity predominates even within the delimitations of the category of the essay. Earlier, we glanced briefly at the taxonomic distinctions advanced by those who would classify the essay according to its object or its style (autobiographical, philosophical, epistolary, etc.). Here, de Obaldia's reference to the personal essay addresses a point that will allow us to shift our thinking from the protean quality of the essay and seemingly boundless subjects it can address to the next point of this analysis, which is the core subjectivity so characteristic of the form. This point, namely the distinction between what is considered as a personal essay and what is preferentially qualified as a "critical" essay is highly pertinent in examining Bonnefoy's essays which–with a few notable exceptions—tend to fall into the latter category. And although the line between the personal and

the critical essay can occasionally be indistinct, the difference between the two is important in establishing a taxonomy of Bonnefoy's essays.

In addressing the question of the distinction between the personal essay and the critical essay, Georg Lukàcs proposes what is perhaps the most cogent definition of the seeming *necessity* of form for the latter, describing it as stemming from a desire for expression that can take several paths but which originates at the same point. He writes in the introductory essay to *Soul and Form*, that "there is an […] expression of the human temperament which usually takes the form of writing about the arts" (3). [41] He is talking, of course, about the critical essay, whose *point de départ* is the examination of a prior artistic work. However, Lukàcs continues by describing the originating feelings that lead to essays and says that

> there are many writings which are engendered by such feelings without ever touching upon literature or art—writings in which the same life-problems are raised as in the writings which call themselves criticism, but with the difference that here the questions are addressed directly to life itself: they do not need the mediation of literature or art. And it is precisely the writings of the greatest essayists which belong to this category: Plato's Dialogues, the texts of the mystics, Montaigne's Essais, Kierkegaard's imaginary diaries and short stories. (*ibid*)

His statement suggests that there is an undeniable formal difference between the personal and the critical essay. This essential difference notwithstanding, one conspicuous notion that emerges from the Lukàcsian description of critical essays is that they use the intermediary of art to address the same "life-problems" that philosophers and mystics address more directly. It is this particular aspect of Lukàcs's vision of the critical essay that is particularly germane to the study of Bonnefoy's essays. Lukàcs helps us see that despite the widespread criticism accusing the genre of being amorphous, there might be a unifying factor at the heart of the essay itself that reaches beyond the extraordinary variety of subjects it inhabits, to attain much larger issues. His

[41] Interestingly, in terms of the relationship that some critics have evoked between the essay and the notion of dialogue, Lukàcs' introductory essay to his collection of essays is actually a letter addressed to Leo Popper. This particular fact also has resonance for the fact that a significant number of Bonnefoy's essays were initially talks given at various moments.

comment thus allows us to look beyond the outward formal aspect of the essay which is predicated on diversity and address other aspects that show it to be much more unified in its ambitions and capacities.

For though the volume of material available on the notion of formlessness in the essay indicates its importance to critics, it can also be argued that this openness of the genre is merely the outward, "technical" manifestation of the real center of the essay, which is the explicit, acknowledged presence of an author within the text. The crucial importance given to the absolute necessity for an explicitly recognized author was already suggested in Victor Ferré's decisive rejection of the name of "essay" for any text that, though bearing all the hallmarks of the genre, might located within a novel. Following his line of thought, it appears undeniable that one of the truly salient characteristics of the essay is the obligatory presence of a speaking "I" at its center. A number of critics have, of course, pointed to this idea; it is important to address its more general form here in order to grapple in later chapters with the type of subjectivity that Bonnefoy introduces into his own essays.

## A subjective center: the "I" at the heart of the essay

The issue of the inescapable presence of a recognized "I" at the center of the personal/critical essay is fundamentally important to its definition, so important in fact that all the subsequent categories of definition addressed here are dependent on it. Numerous critics have, like Pascal Riendeau, pointed out that from the time of Montaigne onward, the essay has been considered as "un espace discursif subjectif où l'expression du moi [est] primordiale" (93). Because this perception of a necessary subjectivity in the essay is so firmly anchored in the collective consciousness, I have felt it not particularly incumbent to go at length over terrain that

has been so well examined, focusing instead more on the complicated matter of the different levels of truth that the essay is imagined to contain.

As concerns the subjectivity that is said to be inherently characteristic of the essay, it can be argued that at some level, any text–even, perhaps, all texts—have a ground level of subjectivity, even when this same subjectivity is masked or deliberately suppressed, as, for example, it so frequently is in a scientific article or a philosophical essay. Certain rhetorical devices, such as the use of citations or the subject matter of critical essays, expressly contribute to engendering the illusion of objectivity that various types of essayistic texts strive to have upon the reader. Paul Woolridge, for example, refers to the "scholarly ventriloquism" that academics commonly use to mute their subjectivity while simultaneously validating their claim to knowledge and authority. He writes about the use of citations in scholarly essays: "the 'as [so and so] puts it' construction, for example, is a common distancing strategy [...] in academic/scholarly discourse generally, [it is] a mode of depersonalization that mediates any direct contact the reader could have with the writer's personal voice" (3).

Another example of a distancing rhetorical function lies in the fact that the critical essay takes as its starting point a previously created work, be it of art, of literature, or even some other dimension of real life. The essay's reliance on a starting point that incontrovertibly exists outside its own rhetorical framework suggests a dual interpretation. Through the choice of subject, the writer points to an objective reality that the reader is expected either to recognize or be brought to recognize through the work of reading. Simultaneously however, the gesture of pointing to a reality lying beyond the boundaries of the text creates a distinction between outside and inside and suggests the possibility that the essay is not addressing that objective exterior reality, but merely bringing it within the circumscription of the essay. The pointing outward can thus

paradoxically serve to highlight the fact that the essay is no more than the expression of the author's choices. It thus suggests the limitations of the essay's ability to address objective reality.

These camouflaging techniques can serve to hide the subjectivity of the author. But these are mere possibilities, for perhaps what most characterizes the subjectivity one finds in the critical and the personal essay is not the voluntary absence of a speaking center so characteristic of a research article, but rather the open nature of the claim to identity the writer makes. But how, specifically, is this explicit subjectivity achieved? I would argue that the so-called "openness" of the essay provides subjectivity by the concatenating the two defining elements, namely, the absence of thematic constraints coupled with the speaking voice around which the essay is constructed. Together, these merge to create the fulcrum around which the essay operates. The importance of both factors in creating an impression of subjectivity is highlighted by Paquette in the very cogent definition he gives in "De l'essai au récit dans l'essai chez Jacques Ferron." He defines there the essay along four highly pertinent points, describing it as a type of reflexive discourse produced by a "1) JE non métaphorique, 2) générateur d'un discours enthymématique 3) de nature lyrique 4) ayant pour objet un corpus culturel" (623). Bracketing for the moment the question of how the enthymematic quality of the essay impinges upon our analysis of Bonnefoy's essays, the key element in Paquette's definition resides in his evocation of a non-metaphorical I, that is, the impression given by the essay that there is a real person who stands behind the text. For whether it is true or not, one of the essential postulates of the essay is the decisive co-incidence between the author of the essay and the subject who, within that literary space, presents his or her thoughts upon the cultural object that serves as the essay's starting point. It is this ostensible transparency that most dominates our mental construction of the essay and colors our definitions of it. This, materially, can be put in parallel with Victor Ferré's impassioned rejection of the name of "essay" for Proust's "Contre Sainte-Beuve." Indeed, it is precisely because of the

necessary presence of the non-metaphorical "I" at the center of the discourse that the generic expectations we have of the essay lead us inexorably toward the impression that there are no barriers between the reader and the writer. Perhaps it is this very characteristic that makes of the essay one of the genres of predilection for so many French poets.

And yet, could our acceptance of this seeming transparency not also be the sort of blindness that we saw Hegel addressing earlier? In thinking more closely about the first person singular that serves as impetus for the essay, it difficult not to avoid drawing some parallels with other genres, most notably, the autobiography. As Riendeau points out, "on a maintes fois insisté sur la subjectivité de l'essai, mais beaucoup plus rarement sur sa dimension autobiographique" (95). And yet, the autobiographical element seems clearly suggested by the fact that in both genres one encounters the deliberate identification between three different figures, the author, the narrator, and a character. As de Obaldia writes, "L'essai met donc au premier plan, plus peut-être qu'aucun autre genre, la relation privilégiée entre imagination et écriture, entre la personne même de l'essayiste en chair et en os et cette même personne en tant qu'elle se constitue à partir des seuls mots eux-mêmes" (33). The notion of self-creation, of building oneself out of words is further specified by Riendeau, who argues that the autobiographical dimension in the critical essay derives from the singular relationship that links the subject of the essay with a double object, which is simultaneously the essayist him or herself, and an exterior cultural object. And though recognizing the limits of his interpretation, Riendeau goes so far as to suggest that the indispensable otherness of self that the essay must exploit in order to exist provides it with a potential for conflation with what in French is called "autofiction" (*ibid*.).[42]

[42] Neither of the two English-language terms, "faction" or "autobiographical novel," seems to quite coincide with descriptions of the essay. The French term, because it seems to have a more generic axis, seems better suited to define the essay.

However, the essay's autobiographical tendencies are also contested. The dichotomy de Obaldia invoked when she described the flesh-and-blood essayist as potentially distinct from the person constituting him or herself out of words is pertinent. With that description de Obaldia showed us a possible breach in the apparently transparent "contract" the essay seems to establish between writer and reader by suggesting that just as in fiction, there is no absolute need for an exact identification between the author and the essayistic "I" that, for the specific purpose of the critical essay, assumes a point of view, recalls an event, or describes a painting. De Obaldia's caveat, however, is drawn along generic lines. Other critics reject the autobiographical nature of the essay on less formal criteria. Some return to the original meaning of the word "essai" and see in the tentative quality of the essay a rejection of the self-aggrandizement of autobiography. Pierre Glaudes, for example, argues that although the "I" of the essayist is omnipresent, this presence exists more as the authentication of a personal truth–"en tant que garant d'une vérité personnelle et mesure de sa portée"—than as a desire for autobiography or autoportrait (x). The ambivalent status of the essay's autobiographical potential is important for the analysis of Bonnefoy's work, for it usefully informs his conscious organization of his essays into structured collections.

## A Textual Space for Truth

In the previous section, we saw Pierre Glaudes suggesting that because a real subject stands behind each essay, overtly taking on responsibility for the discourse, the essay can legitimately profess its claim to truth. The fact that he prudently qualifies this truth as being "personal and limited" hardly alters the commonplace conflation between "real" and "true." It is this general perception that will allow us to enter into the thorny issue of the nature of the

relationship connecting the essay with reality and truth. Our contemporary mental landscape is, I would argue, conditioned by a pervasive sense of inextricable association between the three terms: even without much reflection on the matter, most non-specialists are readily able to express the connection. Literary critics, using perhaps a more technical vocabulary, say much the same thing, with Francine Belle-Isle Létourneau, for instance, writing that "L'essai littéraire est un discours critique qui a son point de départ dans le réel et qui entend prouver la légitimité de son signifié par la force de son signifiant" (49). To my mind, this connection with reality, and through it, with truth, is one of the really vital points that might have led Bonnefoy to choose the essay as a dominant form of expression, both from a practical and a philosophical point of view.

### Truth as an Unattainable Center

Just as with all the categories associated with Bonnefoy's writing–not only the essay, but also presence and deixis—the seemingly ineluctable relationship between truth and the essay can also give rise to divergent definitions. Indeed, Jean Sarocchi suggests the fundamental axiom grounding the problem when he states explicitly, "Le rapport de l'essai à la vérité est problématique" (24). Once again, the reason for the difficulty Sarocchi perceives lies in the multiplicity of valid interpretations. On one hand, as we saw above with Pierre Glaudes's comment, the so-called "situated" nature of the essay seems to guarantee the fact that the essayist can hardly do other than present the truth as he or she perceives it. On the other hand, the relation is problematic, Sarocchi suggests, because the truth in an essay can also be conceived as an unattainable center: "Peut-être," he writes, "faut-il, avec Maurice Blanchot, parler d'un 'centre' qui ne se laisse pas atteindre, d'un 'reste' dit-il dans *L'Espace littéraire*, 'non formulé de la pensée'" (*ibid*.).

Blanchot's "center" can be placed in parallel to a similar notion of a structuring, yet unreachable center that emerges in the work of a number of post-structuralist thinkers. This larger philosophical context serves also to demonstrate the affinity between essay and poetry. Indeed, in a lecture entitled "Poésie comme événement" (Ecole Normale Supérieure-Paris, May 2009), contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou explicitly referred to the Lacanian metaphor of the inaccessible center in order to broach the subject of poetry. Badiou evoked the vision of an originating "déflagration" which constitutes the heart of the poetic experience, and described the poetic act as the attempt, via four potential access points (which he defined as "le nombre, la lettre, le sensible, or l'infini") to attain this impossible center. Following his schema, one could extrapolate from it the notion that the truth of poetic experience lies in the deflagration itself, and thus that the "work" poetry does is an attempt to regain access to the place of the event.[43] In the thinking of Sarocchi and Badiou then, essay and poetry can be seen to have a similar focus, which lies in the attempt to regain a center that is perceived to be the place of a sort of primordial origin.[44] This analysis suggests that the critical or personal essay has a much closer kinship with poetry–and thus, by extension, with literature—than other forms of writing that are more inextricably bound to the linear enumeration of sequences, whether these be logical constructions, as in a philosophical text, or chronological orderings, as in more conventional forms of the novel.

Some writers even go further and suggest that the essay has a particular, almost unique relationship with this originating center. Adorno, for example, writes that "[the essay] owes its freedom in the choice of its objects, its sovereignty in the face of all priorities of fact or theory, to

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[43] It is interesting to note in passing that Badiou's apparently spontaneous use of the word "deflagration," which is indissociable from the notion of the rapid burning *away* of something, that is, of its complete consumption by fire, itself suggests the absence of the very thing that might have constituted the original center, thus rendering it *de facto* inaccessible.

[44] Once again, the occurrence of a reference to the notion of place is noteworthy for those familiar with Bonnefoy's insistent use of the notion of a "vrai lieu" in his poetry and essays.

the fact that for it all objects are in a certain sense equally close to the center" (19). This statement indicates that the perception of truth which emanates from the essay is–perhaps to an even higher degree than other more recognizably artistic forms of creation—independent of some exterior standard that validates the "suitability" of object to form. A banal example can illustrate the point and show that other forms of discourse might have to work much harder than the essay to address subjects that are perceived as lying outside their natural sphere: taking shoelaces or flypaper as an object of study might be virtually impossible in a philosophical analysis, difficult to manage in certain forms of literature, but far more easily conceivable in an essay or in a poem. The reason for this is that like poetry, the essay can take as its *point de départ* a seemingly insignificant element that becomes the foundation of a much larger construction. A second significant point is that for Adorno, the equidistance of the essay from a possible center is also linked to the fact that the real object of the essay resides not in the ostensible object of its study, but elsewhere. He himself equates that "elsewhere" with "the relationship of nature and culture" and suggests that the essay is always reflecting on the fact that cultural objects are no less apt than "natural" objects to provide access to truth (*ibid*.). Whether one agrees with this last aspect or not, the important element of his analysis is, to my mind, contained in his perception that the essay's claim to truth is intrinsic to itself, is simultaneously generated within and constructed by the essay itself. Paradoxically, this allows the truth to be everywhere: "the untruth in which the essay knowingly entangles itself," Adorno adds, speaking here about the ostensible object the essay seems to be reflecting on, "is the element in which its truth resides" (19). This latter statement suggests that it is the very approach of the essay that has the potential effect of making some form of truth accessible to the reader. And this "truth potential" resides precisely in the fact that the essay explicitly acknowledges the "truth potential" of any subject.

## Truth as Act

In his essay on the essay, Lukàcs confronts the problem of how the essay invites the truth to set up residence within its own boundaries. To explain his conviction that the essay must contain the truth, he draws a comparison between the essay and a painted portrait. In its struggle for conveying the truth, he writes, the essay resembles a portrait, which is engaged in the same struggle to convey the likeness of its subject. "Here too [in the essay] there is a struggle for truth, for the incarnation of a life which someone has seen in a man, an epoch or a form" (11). *In fine*, however, it is the distinction Lukàcs makes between "form and formlessness" that sets us on the path toward obtaining a better understanding of the relationship between truth and art and, by correlation, truth and the essay. In essence, the distinction he draws hinges upon a metaphor of materiality and deals with the substance out of which the essay is constructed. As he makes clear in his text, art has an almost magical power, creating something out of nothing. In contradistinction, the essay, and more particularly, the *critical* essay, is different, subsidiary. And, as we saw above, because it starts from a created thing, its inherently derivative nature imposes the obligation to speak the truth about its subject. Despite this clear line of argumentation, there is a certain contradiction in Lukàcs's position, for if we followed his line of reasoning to its logical end, we would be forced to conclude that art cannot be bound by the same moral obligations of truthfulness as the essay. But Lukàcs clearly eschews this conclusion, as witnessed by his description of the painted portrait which encapsulates the artist's struggle to represent a truth perceived.

A possible resolution of this apparent contradiction is obtained by focusing on the creative characteristics commonly imputed to artistic production. Art, in the Lukàcsian model, is *new*; the artist produces a new substance, a thing, whereas the essay simply uses that substance or thing to initiate its own thought. This position is particularly interesting because it echoes the demarcation

Bonnefoy makes between his essays and his poetry. As we saw earlier, he draws a clear distinction between them, saying explicitly on the one hand that poetry and essay are different. Simultaneously, however, he correlates them by explicitly associating individual essays with their companion volumes of poetry and by suggesting that his essays demonstrate some form of further reflection on the topics and themes that emerged more spontaneously in his poetry. For Bonnefoy, unlike for Lukàcs, the crux of the matter lies not so much in the notion of the truth involved in the two experiences of writing, as in the intervention of an intellectual structuring in the construction of an essay which he intimates is absent from the writing of poetry. In his discussion, Bonnefoy chooses not to foreground the intellectual character of the contrast he implicitly draws between poetry as a form generated out of formlessness and the essay, seen as a derivative form whose existence depends on a previous form. His disinclination to locate the distinction between poetry and essay along the fracture lines of truth is significant, for his position implies that both might have an identical capacity to express the truth of the subjects they address.

But if equating truth and poetic expression is completely consonant with the high value Bonnefoy attributes to poetry, it is interesting that critics should apply same value to the relation between the essay and fiction. Certain critics start from this comparison and go much further than Bonnefoy in making categorical distinctions between different genres. Duane Edwards, for example, unequivocally states his position when he writes: “an essay is subjective, and so it cannot be trusted as much as a novel” (137). He then goes on to quote D. H. Lawrence’s description of the novel as “the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered” (in Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 528, as quoted by Edwards 137). All this, suggests Edwards, is to be taken in contradistinction with the essay, for “being interrelated rather than absolute, that part of a book which is a novel cannot lie or be a lie. At the moment of inception, it is the process

of discovery for the author.[45] Like a flower, it is only what it is, in living relationship to its creator. The same cannot be said of the essay" (138). Edwards's rather categorical comment is, of course, correlated to Lawrence's own interpretation of the difference between novel and essay. It serves, however, to underscore the complexity of the relationship between subjectivity and truth, for the distinction established between essay and other "truer" genres (such as poetry or the novel) seems highly contradictory. On the one hand, the essay is taxed with deviating from the truth because it presents a potentially inaccurate subjective perspective inasmuch as the essayist constructs his or her own position from the "more originating" truth of the poetic or literary vision. On the other hand, the novel is perceived as being inherently truthful precisely because it is subjective and gives the reader a faithful representation of the world as perceived by the individual subjectivity of the author.

Edwards is, of course, aware of the tension between objective and subjective truth, and wonders whether the objective truth that Lawrence sees in the novel does not arise from the fact that great novelists remain faithful to their subjects because they cannot do otherwise. They cannot lie, nor do they invent, Lawrence suggests, "because the novels and poems come, unwatched, out of one's pen" (Lawrence as quoted in Edwards 137), thus sustaining the notion that at some level, there is no individual subjectivity in the novel or poem. This might seem rather startling at first glance. However, it is closely linked to an idea we have already encountered and which suggests that the essayist engages in what is essentially an intellectual process which he or she applies to the material chosen: a secondary shaping out of original forms. The essayist thus does no more than evaluate, interpret, give an opinion, etc., and this, for Lawrence, cannot be associated with the truth—or rather, as he probably intended it, "the Truth."

[45] Regarding this "discovery," compare Bonnefoy's statement at the Pau Colloquium: "l'écriture est une aventure de l'esprit dans laquelle ce qui se produit échappe très largement à son créateur" (5).

This notion is, of course, consonant with the idea of the poet or writer as a divine oracle whose function is merely that of transcribing a truth received. In that vision, then, the difference between poet and essayist lies in the fact that the poet or novelist is understood as simply showing relationships that *are*, that exist autonomously and thus truthfully, outside of him or herself, with the end result that, as Edwards writes, "the author [the essayist] *is* the middle of his subject" [italics Edwards] (138).

The problem, thus, of assigning valid and immutable values of truth to different categories of artistic production is an exceedingly troubling one. Perhaps the only way of out of this conundrum is to reconsider the notion of truth. For, despite the affirmations that Lawrence, Lukàcs *et al*. seem to make regarding the truth produced by artistic creation, readers nonetheless intuitively feel that an essay, any essay, has some sort of prerogative in expressing *a*, or perhaps even *the* truth. It is important to note that whether indeed the essay must really express the truth is, in some sense, immaterial. What is more significant is the awareness of the pervasive feeling associating essay and truth, for it is precisely this kind of general impression that might condition a contemporary author's desire to use this particular form of writing. As I suggested earlier, perhaps the perception we have of an intimate connection between truth and the essay is linked to the fact that the essay is generally classified in as "non-fiction." Consonant with this notion is, therefore, our feeling that it speaks of an authentic encounter and eschews the fictional constructs that would lead us away from the truth of the experience it presents. And though we might be dimly aware of the fact that the essay always carries within it the possibility of a non-coincidence between the essayistic narrator and the real-life author, somehow the presence of the "non-metaphorical I" grounding the essay seems to guarantee–or at least strongly suggest—the veracity of the text and its obligation to truth.

## Science and the Shift in Truth

One of the reasons underpinning our conviction that essays tend to reflect the truth lies perhaps not in the essay itself, but rather in the contemporary shift in the perception of truth. Indeed, it is almost a pious "lieu commun" to state that the truth is inherently subjective and indissociable from the instance of its utterance. The work done, for example, in the field of New Historicism stresses precisely that fact: that no discourse can attain an inalterable truth. And this question of viewpoint and the instability of truth is not the sole province of scholars and researchers: contemporary novels that have enjoyed broad readership such as Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, deal with exactly the same problem of narration and the fluidity of truth.

As it happens, the very nature of the essay embraces this contemporary perception of subjective truth, Paul Heilker, for instance, defining the essay as "an epistemologically skeptical quest for new visions of truth in an uncertain universe and world in flux" (in Glaudes, xx). More precisely, Marie-Catherine Huet-Brichard writes that "L'essayiste ne détient pas *la* vérité, il possède *sa* vérité" (37, my emphasis), which echoes Pierre Glaudes' comment about a truth that is a "mesure de [la] portée," an indication of the limitations of the essayist. In some highly significant sense, these statements are reassuring. And if we examine why, we realize the reassurance comes from the fact that they suggest a possible response to the modern anxiety regarding truth. This anxiety stems initially from our recognition of the possible absence of any absolute truth, but spills over into a corollary resistance to the imposition of any external measure of truth. If the essayist limits his or her ambitions to something that can easily be accepted by one and all as conditioned by that individual's existence, then as readers we are reassured about the fact that no exterior authority seeks to impose its dictates upon us. The essay thus brings a measure of security to readers, and paradoxically, even leads them to accept a circumscribed

form of truth insofar as it does not come into conflict with the scepticism they might feel regarding larger constructions of truth.

These new visions of truth, however, can only gain acceptance if they remain bound to the context that produced them. The value and attraction of the essay lie perhaps in the sort of re-contextualizing operation that seems to take place almost automatically within it. Glaudes alludes to this when he explains the relationship of the essay to truth to be contained in the essentially localized quality inherent to the genre: "le discours dans l'essai [est] toujours situé. La quête de la vérité y est sans cesse rapportée à une existence particulière et à une expérience vécue dans la durée" (vi). His point is well-taken, but must however be nuanced in order to better account for how generic perceptions of truth can colonize the essay. Notions of truth can thus be further refined into two distinct elements which, as it turns out, are perfectly integrated in the essay– indeed perhaps more so than in other genres. These two aspects lie in the distinction between what one might call "conventional" and "individual" truth. Succinctly, a conventional truth might be defined as one about which there is broad agreement, while an individual truth might be seen as being more eccentric (literally, ex-centric, decentered from social convention), more closely bound to the idiosyncratic inner reality of the individual. Using this rough classification, one can easily see that a scientific article, which is required to provide accurate descriptions of the scientific apparatus and the methods used must, in the majority of cases, limit its scope to conventional truth. Similarly, it is also fairly easy to see that a contemporary work of art has no such representational constraints and may present a wholly individual truth. An essay, on the other hand, and particularly a critical essay, must clearly integrate both of these aspects. As we saw Lukàcs suggesting earlier, it is clearly required to provide some measure of conventional truth in the form of an accurate description of a painting or of a passage in a novel or poem. But beyond that it can rely on reader acceptance of the conventional truth it presents to move toward

a more individual presentation of the truth that comes out of the essayist's reflections on the object of study.

Thus Glaudes's statement about the situated nature of the essay allows us to see that it is the very existence of the subjectivity that the essayist claims for it, conjoined with a diminishing tendency to impute an absolute value to the notion of truth, that allows the essay to provide a faithful reflection of what Wilhelm Dilthey calls the "fluidity" of our perception of the world. Indeed, though Dilthey was perhaps not the first to express the notion of the inherent instability of perception, he provides a clear statement of the problem when he writes: "La finitude de tout phénomène historique, que ce soit une religion, un idéal ou un système philosophique, et par suite la relativité de toute interprétation humaine du rapport des choses est le dernier mot de la conception historique de ce monde, où toute est fluent, où rien n'est stable" (15). Dilthey's suggestion that all interpretation is necessarily relative conditions our understanding of truth and its potential for expression in the essay.

Interestingly, however, he has another role to play if we return momentarily to Marielle Macé's hypothesis that the essay emerged as a dominant form in the 20$^{th}$ century because of the increasing "scientization" of ever greater swathes of thought. Indeed, Dilthey was among the first to attempt to create a specific theoretical model for what he called the "Geisteswissenshaften," or human sciences, arguing that the human sciences are distinct from the natural sciences, and require specific methods of analysis because they seek to understand reality in a manner different from that advocated by the natural sciences. Macé, as we saw, argues that with the rise of the human sciences, the latent anxiety stemming from increasing "scientization" of all aspects of existence generated a reaction of opposition which found its expression in the corresponding need for a discourse that had the potential to completely dissociate itself from scientific discourse. Certain passages in Bonnefoy's prose seem to bear witness to this very type of anxiety. He

recalls, in *Entretiens sur la Poésie,* his discomfiture with the then-recent discoveries in physics and biology*:*

> J'étais frappé par ce fait que la connaissance moderne, fondée sur la physique de l'atome ou la biologie, traverse sans le voir le niveau de nos objets d'existence, ceux que notre œil perçoit, ceux que nous pouvons aimer et qui nous aident à vivre, alors que l'ancienne science savait tout retenir et charger de sens dans le réseau de correspondances. (*EsP*, 114)

Bonnefoy's statement points to what he perceives as a glaring inadequacy in scientific method and suggests that this lack is related to a science's incapacity, or unwillingness, to perceive the world at a human level. Our human senses, he suggests, give us a world which resembles a network of correspondences linking us not only to each other, but also to the things that constitute the world. His use of the term "correspondance" is not without interest, for it evokes—perhaps deliberately—Baudelaire's celebrated poem and suggests a way of perceiving the world in terms of relationships which is particularly germane to Bonnefoy's own thinking, especially when one remembers that for him, Baudelaire is at the origin of "le vrai moment décisif" (*I*, 122) of modern poetry. It also implies that all meaning–and perhaps, all truth—is derived from the relationships that are found in the "réseau de correspondances," a point which Jean-Pierre Maulpoix also makes when he writes that "la relative difficulté de maints poèmes d'Yves Bonnefoy" is connected to the fact that "son univers est parfois difficile à appréhender en ce que le poème brouille ses propres contours ; il est une parole ambiguë, qui efface la limite, qui refuse de trop cerner l'objet, qui déjoue la séparation entre les choses au profit du rétablissement d'un ensemble de *correspondances*" (webpage 1, emphasis Maulpoix). This characteristic of Bonnefoy's poetry is echoed in numerous aspects of his essays, where the notion of correspondence informs not only the content, but also the structure of the texts and opposes them to a scientific reduction of knowledge.

In contrast with the positive notion of poetic correspondences, Bonnefoy argues that science fragments the world into different compartments that–despite their unquestionably accurate and truthful depictions of micro or macroscopic systems—we can no longer recognize as belonging to our own reality. He does not, of course, deny the validity of scientific understanding of the atomic constitution of matter, however, he raises exactly the same point as Dilthey when he wonders whether the truth that scientific methods leads to is, in fact, the only one, and whether this scientifically obtained truth has inherently more value than other types of meaning.

## Truth and Language

There is a larger framework for this anxiety, a framework that is grounded in the relationship between language and truth, and which colors our perception of how we may construct and express the world through the means available to us. Succinctly, this anxiety lies in the pervasive fear that language may not be an adequate tool to express the reality of the world. And although many thinkers have dealt with the issue of the non-coincidence between language and truth, I have chosen to use the Nietzschean formulation of the problem, as expressed in the well-known fragment from his *Nachlaβ*, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense." As I suggested earlier, my choice is conditioned not only by the close parallels between the Nietzschean text and many of the positions–and indeed, some of the images and metaphors—that Bonnefoy expresses in his own essays, but also, in large part, by Nietzsche's strong insistence on the esthetic dimension of his philosophical reflections. The esthetic quality of Nietzsche's writing is highly resonant with Bonnefoy's own essayistic practice, and certain parallels can also be drawn between the numerous critical reactions which note that for both writers the discursive difficulty of their texts is exacerbated by a poetic dimension which significantly complicates a transparent understanding of the message.

Like many others,[46] Nietzsche points to the arbitrary nature of the relationship between words and the things they designate. He uses this arbitrariness to question the value of language in expressing truth. In what is perhaps the strongest statement in his text, Nietzsche asks the apparently rhetorical question "what is truth?" and answers with a highly poetic text which denounces the falsehood inherent in any truth expressed in language. Truth, he says, is:

> a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms–in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (50)

This truth, he forcefully states, is unattainable for us because everything in our human experience conspires to hide it from us. Our very senses contribute to the lie in which we live since the exterior world is only accessible to us via the sensory images–visual, aural, tactile, etc.—that our nerve impressions transmit to us. However, these sensory images are themselves no more than a metaphor for reality. Consequently, language lies further yet along the chain of dissimulation, for the words we ascribe to these sensory images are even more distanced from the exterior world; they are hardly more than the tertiary elements of the chain. Speaking the truth, then, according to Nietzsche, that is, connecting the appropriate word with the image commonly associated with it, saying for example, *sky,* while pointing in the appropriate direction means "using the customary metaphors–in moral terms: [means lying] according to fixed convention" (*ibid*).

And yet, Nietzsche suggests that there is a way of emerging from the contradiction, a way of continuing to use language while simultaneously avoiding the trap of falsehood. But, Nietzsche cautions, that way is difficult, hardly suited to the "repose, security, and consistency"

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[46] Plato uses much the same argument in the *Cratylus*; de Saussure's explanation of the arbitrariness of language lays the foundations of his linguistic theory, and through it, many contemporary philosophical constructions.

(52) that most individuals want. It lies in remembrance and in the anxiety of a surplus of possibilities combined with too little certainty; it lies in remembering that man is himself "an *artistically creating* subject" (*ibid*, emphasis in original). Practically, then, the possibility of wresting some measure of truth back into language lies in the possibility of generating new metaphors to describe reality, in a word, in using poetic language. And even if Nietzsche's ultimate assessment of the possibilities inherent in art is negative because the possibility of failure is great, the *potential* nonetheless is given in his text.

And he himself clearly attempts the path, as is perhaps most conspicuously evident in his *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* where the highly poetic quality of the language used for what also claims to be a philosophical text is one of its most striking elements. Needless to say, such a possibility exists also for the essay inasmuch as its latent polymorphism allows for an even greater degree of writing latitude than the philosophical text. Indeed, a convincing link between the essay and the use of metaphoric language to express truth is provided by Adorno, who argues that the essay can take on a function similar to that of metaphor in undoing the arbitrariness of language: "[The essay] wants to heal thought of its arbitrary character by incorporating arbitrariness reflectively into its own approach rather than disguising it as immediacy" (19). By showcasing choices that appear arbitrary, the essay suggests the arbitrariness of the relation between truth and reality.

This suggestion of the potential truthfulness of writing residing primarily in metaphor and poetic language is, of course, highly significant for the reader of Bonnefoy's essays, for, as I indicated earlier, one of their more arresting characteristics is the markedly poetic quality of the language he uses to structure his arguments. This characteristic is so pronounced that it has been amply commented on, both by casual readers, and by theorists reading Bonnefoy critically. It forces us to rethink the function of metaphor in texts such as essays, which frequently are

explicitly associated with non-poetic forms of writing. For based on Nietzsche's observations, it would seem that introducing poetic elements into the critical and the philosophical essay via the agency of metaphor is not merely an esthetic choice, but can also be read as a means of grounding the truth of the text, of enhancing what one might call its "truth-value." And yet, allowing that the potentially poetic polarity of the essay grants it a privileged access to the truth inevitably brings up the corollary question of purpose. In other words, what is the underlying function of adopting poetic forms of discourse in a text that, whether obliquely or explicitly, seems to aim exclusively at expressing the truth? For if we read metaphors as a means to attain a greater goal of expressing truth then we must equate them with some form of rhetorical function. Accordingly, we have to ask whether the co-presence of poetry and metaphor in the essay exists in the service of some intention greater than merely esthetic. And if so, what might this larger intention be? These questions are more precisely addressed in the following chapter, which deals with those definitions of the essay that tend not to garner as broad degrees of agreement as the ones addressed in this chapter.

# CHAPTER FOUR –
# Invisible Forms of Definition:
# Counter-Perceptions of the Essay

The previous chapter addressed the more explicitly consensual definitions of essay and sought to show that while defining the essay along the double axis of form and subjectivity is relatively unproblematic, equating the essay with truth becomes a more ambivalent enterprise. This chapter concentrates on still more ambivalent characterizations that, while engendering disagreement, are nevertheless very present in the mental vision of the genre, potentially inciting writers to become essayists. Succinctly, these issues concern perceptions of the essay as a sort of mental meeting place; the didactic potential of the essay; and, finally, the more technical question of the essay as a battleground wherein the lines between unity and fragmentation are drawn. Interwoven through the various definitions addressed here, is the visible but complex issue of the poetic possibilities inherent to essayistic discourse. As the analysis of specific segments of Bonnefoy's work in subsequent chapters shows, all these elements play into the role the essay plays in his work.

## Shared Spaces: The Essay as a "Common Ground"

Some critical definitions describe the essay as providing a sort of common ground between the speaking and writing "I" on one side, and the reader on the other. On this subject, critic Michael L. Hall writes that "the experience of author and reader is central to the genre's rhetorical appeal" (82), suggesting thereby that the essay really must be perceived as a joint

venture. In some senses, this "works" because of the relatively subdued position the essayist adopts. Earlier, we saw Pierre Glaudes highlighting the essayist's modest acknowledgment of the limited nature of his or her "own truth" ("une vérité personnelle et à mesure de sa portée") which, for Glaudes, tended to abrogate any autobiographical tendency the essay might have. The combined notions of subjectivity, truth, and lack of self-aggrandizement invite the idea of the essay as a virtual common space whose focus is *not* on the "I." Indeed, for certain critics, the structure of the critical or personal essay suggests the statement "it's not about me" and points insistently instead to the "true" subject of the text. Accordingly, Glaudes sees presence of the "I" in the essay as serving the larger purpose of providing the means for an genuine interaction between writer and reader: "[l'essai]," he writes, "appelle à une rencontre et postule un authentique échange avec le lecteur" (x). In some senses, however, in order for this authentic exchange to occur, the text must itself provide a stable ground within which it can take place and furnish a place for both reader and writer to concurrently occupy. The essay is perceived as particularly well-suited do this because, as Guy Larroux says, of it, "c'est l'ouverture du présent qu'habitent ensemble l'énonciateur et le co-énonciateur, en contemporains" (467).

A number of critics have noted the essay's potential to create a space which knits together a community of readers, and conjoins it with the essayist, these critics at times going so far as to suggest that it is one of the rare examples of literary work to explicitly carve out a place for the reader. Glaudes, for example, writes of the essay that "il est dans la littérature des idées, un genre qui vise l'ensemble de la communauté, qui empêche les individus de s'isoler dans leur domaine de compétence ou leur espace privé" (x). His analysis is taken from the viewpoint of the essayist, while other critics highlight the particular relationship of the essay to the reader. Jean-Pierre Zubiate thus writes: "L'essai et la poésie en prose travaillent à se fondre dans les moments de crête où le discours *considère* le lecteur parce qu'il l'associe à une interrogation de ce que

l'expérience comporte d'étonnant en exhibant sa propre relativité" (395, emphasis in original). From the notion of "considération" one can derive an even closer relationship between writer and reader, as does critic Kuisma Korhonen, whose dense analysis is devoted to the *topos* of friendship as the federating element of essays. Korhonen uses the definitions provided by Aristotelian rhetoric to define the type of friendship the essay is trying to construct. He stresses the importance of the common ground the genre strives to create, writing that "one cannot understand either the aesthetics or the epistemology of the essay without first considering the ethics of writing, assuming that the ethics of writing are understood as a reflection on the conditions that make the encounter with the Other through written texts possible" (*Essaying Friendship,* 276). This, of course, raises the question of how such a common ground can be textually created. What are the tools and rhetorical strategies that enable such a relation?

## Rhetorical Figures of Inclusion and Exclusion

Jean-Marcel Paquette's pertinent description of the essay as an enthymematic discourse is a first indication of how essay suggests communion. In its modern acceptation, an enthymematic discourse relies on the assumption of a prior relationship between writer and reader, and is one patterned on the structure of the dialectical syllogism, but differing radically from the latter in the fact that where the syllogism posits two explicit premises and conjoins them to arrive at its logical, deductive conclusion, the enthymeme's foundational premise remains implicit.[47] The Aristotelian definition of the enthymeme describes it as grounded on the *probable* nature of its premises and hence aiming at persuasion rather than at logical demonstration. As a consequence, the enthymeme relies not just on the information contained in the text, but rather on the

[47] See, for example the well-known Aristotelian syllogism: "All men are mortal (major premise)/ All mortals die (minor premise)/ All men die (conclusion)."

suppositions that writer and reader can be imagined to share—the premise, for example, that all human beings are able to think, as seen in the often cited example of Descartes' "cogito, ergo sum," where the tacit proposition might be identified as something like: "thinking indicates being." Thomas Sloane stresses the importance of the audience in the effective functioning of an enthymematic discourse: "It is the audience in its particularity to which the rhetor must have recourse in constructing persuasive enthymemes, for these draw their premises from the common beliefs of the specific audience to be persuaded" (248). Taken as enthymematic discourse, then, the essay actively undercuts the value of deductive logic in order to aim for something that resembles more a desire to convince than the presentation of irrefutable proof. The same can be said about its relationship to the inductive reasoning of scientific experimentation wherein all facts are derived from repeatable observation. And if we recall Marielle Macé's thesis of the essay as a literary space that seeks to reclaim the intellectual terrain in danger of being taken over by the type of scientific discourse, we can see that even beyond counteracting the isolation of the individual, the essay potentially has the function of preserving a writerly space that can serve as a sort of a zone of free circulation. Indeed, Laurent Mailhot suggests something of this nature when he writes about the essay that "the essay is not an agent or a mediating genre, but rather the passage (the common ground) from one kind of narrative or one type of lyricism to another" (79).

Glaudes' comment regarding the essay's potential to break open the isolation produced by hermetic spaces suggests an explanation for why poets such as Bonnefoy might be attracted to the genre. Briefly, one can propose the idea that poetry has, through the centuries, undergone a transformation in the perception the reading community has of it. In a sense, this observation is linked to Marielle Macé's analysis of the change in the stature of the novel, and follows the idea that at discrete time periods, specific literary genres are perceived to be in resonance with or, on the contrary, as a barrier to a directly obtainable understanding of the writer's inner world.

Whereas in the mental vision of previous centuries–for example, the Renaissance period, with the Metaphysical poets in England and the poets of the Pléiade in France—poetry was perceived as being a form of writing that allowed the reader direct access to the thoughts and emotions of the writer, this particular vision of poetry has much more difficulty in gaining currency today. On the contrary, in the literary landscape that has dominated since the beginning of the twentieth century poetry is viewed as a particularly hermetic and intrinsically self-referential genre. There is thus a general perception that poetry can no longer provide a common space within which writer and reader attain a sort of communion; poetry is too often portrayed in the mainstream media as a genre written by specialists for specialists, and thus obtains the same status of relative discredit that Macé attributes to the novel which, not so long ago, was considered the dominant framework for literary expression of the human condition. By contrast, it is now the essay that is perceived as the literary space that appears to provide the clearest direct contact between writer and reader; it is, as Glaudes suggests, the literary genre that gathers the whole of the reading community under the spread of its wings.

And yet, despite the unifying potential attributed to it by Glaudes and Macé, even the idea of the essay as constitutive of a community is characterized by some level of ambivalence. Surprisingly, perhaps, it is the kinship between essay and its poetic potential that is accused of marginalizing the reader. De Obaldia, for instance, writes that "l'essai est 'poétique' en ceci que l'auteur semble s'adresser à lui-même plutôt qu'aux autres. L'essai poétique prend alors la forme caractéristique d'une méditation 'surprise à l'improviste' par le lecteur" (14). In her analysis thus, closure marks the essay, for while the reader does indeed seem to observe another mind at work, that mind feigns to ignore the potential act of reading that must necessarily come upon the heels of the writing of the essay. De Obaldia's comments, though certainly pertinent in analyzing the poetic qualities that can so easily inhabit the essay, must, of course, be relativized, for she is

referring to a very specific type of essay. And although it is true that the conflation between essay and poetry is not specific to de Obaldia– as we saw earlier, the relationship between the two forms lies at the heart of Georg Lukàcs's reference to poetry as "the sister" of the essay (13)—her comments make us aware that the potential introspection of the essay can also legitimately be interpreted as a form of exclusion of the reader.

Although de Obaldia's comment allows us to cast some doubt upon the initial hypothesis that the essay is intrinsically constitutive of a sense of communion between the essayist and a community of readers, there can, however, be no doubt about the fact that the author disposes of several techniques, allowing him or her to produce the impression of creating a literary space that acts as a enthymematic common ground upon which writer and reader can meet. The first of these "technical means" concerns the function of citations. The second, by contrast, is located at a more rhetorical, even grammatical level and addresses the manner in which the flexibility of the essay allows for a margin within which the first person singular can slide into a first person plural and thus include the reader.

As concerns the use of citations, Woolridge, cited earlier, referred to the tendency in scholarly articles to use quotes from other writers as a distancing mechanism allowing the speaking "I" to project the illusion of effacing itself from the text. However, Woolridge himself recognizes that the use of quoted material also implicitly inserts the essayist into a larger community. The author of the scholarly essay, Woolridge writes, "gets his point heard by using the words of another, by placing himself discursively in relation to the many voices within this discourse community" (3). In a shrewd observation, Woolridge continues with the comment that "in general, the psychology of this fact [the adhesion of the author to a community] often passes unnoticed in our everyday thinking on citation in academic discourse" (*ibid*). The critical essay would seem to have the same function, for its "cultural object" (painting, sculpture, text, etc.),

can similarly be perceived as an implicit recognition of a community comprising the observers of that object.

Indeed, from a historical perspective, it can be argued that Montaigne's own method of inserting a citation from a classical text, which then serves as a sort of *amplificatio* for his own ruminations, presupposes the idea of an ideal, but identifiable community of well-read people with a shared education. It is driven by the assumption that the reader will be able to identify the quote and mentally locate it, thus broadening the arena within which essayists can interact with their readers. A number of critics–most notably, Antoine Compagnon, in his *La Seconde main, ou le travail de la citation*—have incisively analyzed how Montaigne's use of the citation represents a shift from the medieval scholarly textual approach of *imitatio* to the more modern notion of critical questioning that is associated with the Enlightenment. Historically, of course, it is no coincidence that this development of a more assertive subjectivity coincides with the emergence of the essay: one way of rendering the essayist's statements more intelligible to readers was to couch them in the words of other writers, whose familiarity provided a springboard for connecting with the reader. And as we saw earlier, some elements of this process are clearly present in Bonnefoy's absorption and reiteration of the terms like "théologie negative," or "présence."

The second "technical" aspect in the analysis of the essay as "common ground" lies in the flexibility of the essay to shift from a solitary "I" toward the possibility of an inclusive sort of plurality, a "we" that seems to explicitly enfold the reader, inviting him or her to not only share, but actually partake in the experience of the writer. Indeed, certain critics consider what one might label the "we-potential" of the essay as one of its defining characteristics. Hence Larroux writes: "soyons justes, il est encore possible de rencontrer de vrais 'nous' d'essayiste. Dans les véritables essais, précisément" (469). Genuineness thus suggests inclusiveness; his statement

implies that "true" essays strive to encompass both writer and reader within the single space of a plural pronoun. Within this conception of the genre, the essay exists to create a relation. A parallel implication is the notion that the essay itself provides the literary space within which the subject can move from a singular perception of the world toward a plural relation with others. Larroux uses the example of Georges Bataille to suggest that one of the essential functions of the essay is the process of discovery that is exactly the movement allowing the singular "I" to move toward the plural "we." He writes: "l'essai peut-il éviter le 'nous'? Je note, par exemple, que *L'Expérience intérieure* de Bataille, s'enracinant d'abord dans un sujet (un 'je') absolument singulier se découvre, chemin faisant, 'pour autrui'" (468).

In spite of this unifying potential, however, the possibility for failure remains. And Larroux, it must be noted, is no naive reader. He clearly demonstrates that the presence of a "we" within a written text is not an incontrovertible guarantee of communion, writing, "le problème est aussi grammatical. Le 'nous' n'est pas forcément inclusif du destinataire. Dans l'essai savant, il conforte plutôt la relation verticale entre celui qui sait et ceux qui ne savent pas, ou savent moins" (*ibid*). Similarly, from a linguistic point of view, Bühler clearly attributes a double function to the deictic pronoun "we" when he writes that "sur le plan fonctionnel, on distingue […] le cas où, en disant *nous,* un locuteur inclut le récepteur des cas où il l'exclut" (251). To return, however, to the significance of the essayist's "we," several significant notions point to the potential for alienation and for a sort of manipulation that might be contained in the use of the "we." For the use of the first personal singular does not come without a cost. Though the "we" can obviously serve to bind writer and reader together in a symbiotic union, it can almost as easily alienate the reader if it evokes the particularity of a "we" with which the reader cannot identify and thus spontaneously rejects. Along those lines, Larroux cites Valéry's impossible beginning to *La Crise de l'Esprit*, "nous autres, civilisations, savons que nous sommes mortelles..." which serves, for

our modern perceptions, as the archetype of an essayistic "we" that we cannot easily accept, apposed as it is by Valéry to the term "civilisations."

To enlarge upon this potentially negative aspect of the first person plural, the transition from an "I" to a "we" can also be interpreted as an artificial construction whereby the author seeks–whether consciously or not—to manipulate the reader into sharing his or her point of view. The "we" thus becomes not the reflection of an existing community, but a technique employed by the writer to suggest a community that might not in fact exist. Isabelle Serça, in her keen analysis of Proust's use of the *je*/*nous*/*on* triplet, provides us a useful understanding of how the technique of using the first person plural allows the text to draw the reader into accepting the writer's own perceptions as markers for universal notions. She writes, referring to a moment in the narrative: "Du *je*, le texte passe à un *nous* [...] qui ressemble fort à ces saynètes fictives à valeur exemplaire que l'on trouve souvent dans l'Essai" (94). Her perception of Proust's tendency to pronounce general truths which have the flavor of aphorisms and which emanate from his use of a narrative element closely linked to the experience related by the "I" of the text can, she suggests, be extended to the generic category of the essay. In the Proustian novel, it is the fact that the narrative begins by recounting the emotions of the "je" that legitimates its shift to a "we" suggested by the emotion now shared between writer and reader, and in turn allows the emergence of the third person pronoun "on," which then takes on the burden of enunciating a general truth. The point is pertinent for the reader of Bonnefoy's essays. Indeed, Bonnefoy often uses the technique of providing a personal experience in the first person singular, and then suggesting, by the shift of the grammatical person, the inclusion of the reader into the framework of the experience described. This technique is particularly evident in, for example, the salamander episode analyzed in a later chapter.

The technique evoked above of using shifts either from the singular to the plural of the first person, or from the first person to the third is significant. Indeed, beyond being a building block in the creation of a common space, it has another notable function and purpose within the construction of the essay, serving to consolidate the impression of truth which emerges there. In his *Essaying Friendship,* Kuisma Korhenen, though focusing more specifically on the paradigm of power that governs the relation between essayist and reader, draws a tangible connection between the creation of a virtual common space and the reader's acceptance of the truth contained in the essay. His argument touches upon the fact that the essay, precisely by creating the perception of a common goal, contributes to generating the impression of truth of the text. He writes: "The author wants us to believe that the hermeneutic movement is governed by the will to truth and understanding, and that this common will that both the author and the reader share is more powerful than any single claim to power that the author makes" (20). The crucial factor for him is the sense of sharing created by the essay, which, for him, tends to strengthen the bonds of the virtual friendship created between essayist and reader.

The question latent behind these writing tactics is one of purpose. The creation of what both essayist and reader conceive as a meeting ground allows us to perceive the essay's capacity for providing a form of interaction between writer and reader that simply cannot be obtained as efficiently in other forms of writing. This perception is, I believe, important in understanding Bonnefoy's essays. And whether one considers that the strategies described tend toward a certain type of manipulation or one feels they succeed in creating the perception of a common terrain, taken by themselves they do not explain the reasons motivating the essayist to use them. Korhonen, we saw, suggests that the goal is one of friendship. His is perhaps what one might call the "angelic" vision of the goal. I would suggest that we must also give consideration to what could be identified as the didactic potential of the essay.

The issue of whether a didactic axis *in potentia* exists in the essay can be seen not only as conditioned by the prior subjectivity that qualifies the genre, but also as derived from the creation of a virtual common ground within the text, since such a didactic function can only operate efficiently if the reader–whether knowingly or not—agrees to collude with the essayist. The didactic thrust of the essay is rather infrequently evoked by commentators and the one on which the lack of consensus is particularly striking. As concerns examining why Bonnefoy chooses the essay as a frequent, almost standard mode of expression, its didactic aspect seems to me to be highly pertinent to the often unexpressed ambitions that form the substratum of his essayistic work. His use, for instance, of the word "affirmer" in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne" hints, as we saw, at a subterranean need to affirm and thus transmit a position.

## Poetry and Didacticism: the Essay between two poles

The close links connecting poetic metaphor with truth allows us an excellent means of entering into the examination of a more focused didactic ambition that might underpin the essay. Indeed, a small though non-negligible number of critics have highlighted the fact that the essay, despite its narrow association with tentative modes of thought, can also serve to bridge the seemingly insurmountable gap between poetic and didactic ambitions. In his article on essay-writing, "Un Concepto de Ensayo," Gabriel Vargas Acuña cites a 1917 text by Spanish critic and essayist Eduardo Gómez de Baquero. The latter, in a move that appears highly counterintuitive to us, addresses the relationship between poetry and a certain notion of didacticism, and links these heterogeneous domains through the essay: "El ensayo está en la frontera de dos reinos: el de la

didáctica y el de la poesía y hace excursiones del uno al otro."[48] For Gomez de Baquero, thus, the essay is a literary space open to infiltration by both poetic and didactic ambitions. This suggestion of a contiguous relationship between poetry, didacticism, and the essay, coupled with the the latter's potential for very naturally integrating highly poetic language into its own discourse is, I believe, yet another example of a structural characteristic that plays a significant role in showing how Bonnefoy's writing conforms to or diverges from standard definitions.

From a purely formal point of view, the didactic potential of the essay can be seen in the essayist's use of a number of more or less clearly definable strategies, of which perhaps the most important is the one evoked above, namely the highly poetic potential of essayistic language. This attention to language, conjoined with the complicated question of the lyrical subject that both poetry and essay are said to contain serves as a starting point for analysing the didactic capacity of the essay. Other more "technical", but no less significant factors include the argumentative and the performative capacities it can so easily assume. The notion of essay as performance will allow us to address another important–though often overlooked—element that might motivate the didactic impulse, namely, an underlying sense of *duty*. This latter notion concerns a sort of ethical imperative that finds its expression in the moral need felt by the essayist to share some form of knowledge or realization that he or she has acquired. The final element of this section will concentrate on the theme of paradox that, as we saw in the analysis of the "Dédicace," forms a significant substratum of the rhetorical techniques that enable Bonnefoy more easily to present the specificity of his ideas.

[48] "The essay is located on the boundaries of two fields, that of didactics, and that of poetry; it conducts expeditions from one to the other" (my translation).

## The Lyrical Voice

The role Gomez de Baquero assigns the essay, making of it the mediator between the realms of poetry and didacticism, introduces the close relationship between essay and poetry. This particular connection constitutes the focal point of Jean-Pierre Zubiate article,"Essai et Poésie au XXe siècle." Zubiate goes further than Gomez de Baquero, however, and argues for what might indeed constitute a symbiotic relationship between essay and poetry. He suggests that if, at the end of the nineteenth century, poetry and essay were perceived as two mutually contradictory means of understanding the world, that situation changed in the twentieth century, when poetry and essay began to be conscious of the fact that "non seulement ils s'épaulent mutuellement, mais, surtout, ce qu'on peut d'ores et déjà désigner comme une découverte du siècle, qu'un idéal commun d'intellection par le langage les fait converger vers une écriture d'un type nouveau où s'estompent leurs différences, entre lyrisme et médiation" (382). Zubiate develops this analysis further by suggesting that the essay, relying on the supposed objectivity of its primary function of mediation, can be seen as a means of recuperating and redeeming the lyric "I" from the discredit into which it has fallen since the end of the nineteenth century: "Dès lors [l'essai] acquiert la possibilité d'exprimer le moi en échappant à la mauvaise conscience propre au sentiment poétique moderne, qui voit dans une telle expression [du sujet lyrique] l'hérésie du mensonge romantique" (386).

But what are the characteristics of this so-called "lyricism" that has, as Zubiate suggests, devolved from poetry to the essay? And in what sense is this postulated lyricism a potential function of the didacticism that might also inhabit the essay? These questions are far from trivial, for the definition of the lyrical form parallels a significant number of the characteristics that the essay has developed over the course of the past century. Understanding the forms that the lyrical

voice uses thus can help us identify similar or even identical forms in the essay, and consolidates Paquette's suggestion that one of the defining features of the essay lies in the *lyrical* nature of the prose it contains.

In attempting to circumscribe this lyricism, Paquette writes: "nous pouvons définir le lyricisme comme *du langage* qui, par son code propre, indique qu'il tend vers *de la musique.* Il en résulte un *dé-sémantisation* du "message" au profit du procès récurrentiel qui s'édifie et s'établit à lui seul comme *sens*." ("Essai dans Récit," emphasis in original, 622). Though Paquette's"desemantization" suggests a form of reduction, another interpretation is possible which, rather than subtracting from the meaning that emanates from an essayistic text, adds to it. Indeed, putting aside the notion of an economy of exchange of meaning that is habitually borne by language, one can see a text as being poetic either by the quality of the language it uses–that is, language anchored in its own rhythms and sonorities—or by the goal toward which it aims, that is, the transmission of an esthetic experience—perhaps through images—that is relatively indifferent to meaning and signification. The-giving-of-meaning imparted by the lyrical qualities of an essayistic text can thus be seen as having a double role that is distributed over two areas: the abstract meaning carried by the words, and a secondary level of meaning that is derived from the material qualities imparted to the text by a language that is itself poetic. With this in mind, critic Fernand Oulette highlights the close relationship between essay and poetry and suggests that both can indeed have an identical function. Oulette writes:

> l'essayiste n'est pas un mage; il n'a pas de "force magique." De plus il n'aspire pas, contrairement au scientifique, au pouvoir. Sa puissance lui vient de sa concentration, de sa méditation, de l'efficacité même de sa parole. Son action n'est pas sensiblement différente de celle du poète. Du poème à l'essai s'opère en quelque sorte un renversement de milieu verbal : glissement d'un pôle à l'autre et recherche, entre le concept et le "son-sens," d'un équilibre fragile. L'essai comme le poème sont des faires et par conséquent des actes. (11)

Oulette's use of the notion of "act" to connect poetry and essay is all the more striking in that it resonates with Bonnefoy's numerous references to his poetry as an act. The word itself is

thus highly significant for the reader of Bonnefoy and has importance not only here, in the analysis of the links between poetic language and the essay, but also with respect to the so-called "performative" qualities of the essay. Oulette's analysis tends thus to confirm the links already suggested between poetry and essay within the context of a purely Bonnefoyian practice.

Now, to the question of why the essay might seek to integrate a poetic dimension into the language it uses, the more straightforward answer is, of course, for esthetic and stylistic reasons. I would suggest, however, that the use of deliberately poetic language can also be conditioned by a latent didactic ambition that motivates the essay. This statement might seem paradoxical, for we do not normally associate didactic objectives with the use of poetic language.[49] And yet, I would suggest that it is indeed this underlying ambition that can open the way for poetic discourse to enter the essay and assume a rhetorical function in addition to its "normal" esthetic role. For in the essay, as in other genres, the more obviously lyrical qualities of language can supplement meaning by allowing connections to be made through the echoes, repetitions, and sonorous and visual effects that could not be made through a reading limited to the strict meaning of the words. Even the layout of the page, the conscious visual organization of the text through different mechanisms such as its division into paragraphs and sections, the use of blank spaces, titles, citations, etc. could carry significance. And though such an analysis is doubtless exaggerated for the vast majority of texts, it is, as the reading of the "Dédicace" showed, highly pertinent to Bonnefoy's essays.

In the essay itself, the function of poetic language can serve to bind readers, engaging them and obtaining from them support for a position that they might otherwise not have adhered to as firmly, had it not been presented in a poetic manner. Within this interpretation, poetic

[49] With the possible exception of so-called didactic poetry, which continues to have an extremely poor reputation in literary circles.

language serves to enhance the validity of the more "thematic" position borne by the text, reiterating a point we saw earlier in Marielle Macé's suggestion that the essay can function as a means to reject the contemporary dominance of the value of factual, "scientific" language. The example of French naturalist Buffon serves as a perfect illustration of the change in status of language with respect to scientific knowledge, and shows how the intrinsic qualities of the essay might fight against the idea that lyrical language cannot provide accurate descriptions of reality. Buffon's *magnum opus*, his multi-volume *Histoire naturelle*, was highly successful in the eighteenth century not only because of the scientific reflections it contained, but even more so because of the lyrical style Buffon used to describe his observations. In point of fact, Buffon's acceptance speech for his induction into the Académie Française was entitled "Discours de style," and responded to the admiration that was generally felt for his model of writing. In it, he reiterated the importance of literary style in expressing scientific reality. And yet, Buffon's attachment to style proved to be his downfall. As time went on and style in scientific writing became synonymous with inaccurate description of material reality, Buffon's observations were increasingly discredited, not because they had no scientific value, but precisely because they were written in a style that was too lyrical. The example of Buffon demonstrates the importance–both positive and negative—of perceptions, lending credence to the idea that there are more or less adequate forms of language that serve to address particular topics. Macé's claim that the essay allows writers to equate lyrical style with an accurate and authentic expression of reality is thus particularly pertinent for examining the value of lyrical language in the essay.

Can we then use Macé's claim as a springboard and conjecture that the essay might knowingly engage in lyrical discourse precisely *in order* to further its didactic aims? But what then are the qualities normally attributed to lyricism, and how do these connect to the essay and its potentially didactic objectives? The answers to these questions are clearly identified by

Philippe Hamon, whose definition of the lyrical text as "un texte à effet de sujet," develops an analysis of the lyrical subject along three descriptive axes. The first of these is related to the notion of an individual voice, the locus of the lyrical "I" that expresses itself via the text: "la voix, véritable empreinte physique, [qui] dit à la fois « je suis ici » et dit, aussi, « c'est moi », est signature d'une identité" (21). By the form of expression it takes, this individual voice grounds "un site de parole, à la fois *lieu*, *centre*, *présence* et *identité*" (ibid, my italics). No serious reader of Bonnefoy can fail to react to these words, for they constitute the very core of the notions omnipresent in his work.

A second point evoked by Hamon concerns the "constant double movement" which inhabits the lyrical voice, and is a "movement d'oscillation entre intimisme, inspiration et recueillement centripètes d'une part, et dispersion, expiration et effusion centrifuges d'autre part" (ibid). For the reader of Bonnefoy, the most interesting feature of this aspect of Hamon's definition lies in the textual impact of the pendulum-like oscillation he notes. The lyrical text, he writes,

> peut aussi s'incarner dans des formes textuelles dont la tension, ou pulsion (au sens rythmique, et non psychologique du terme) travaillera le texte lyrique: « vaporisation » des lexiques et des signifiants par la métaphore filée, les descriptions proliférantes, les dérivations énumératives des lexiques, l'anagramme d'une part, « centralisation » par la logique, la causalité, le mythe, le récit qui suturent la diversité chronologique en l'unité d'une intrigue cohérente et centré sur un héros énonciateur [d'autre part].(22)

The double pole Hamon describes echoes some of the techniques Bonnefoy uses, both in his poetry and in his essays, most notably in the way in which the explicit segmentation of his texts is undercut by the flow of a language that "repairs" the breaks. A final point evoked by Hamon is a double view of the lyrical subject conceived either as a "chambre à écho," that is, someone who speaks, or as a "boîte à images," that is, someone who sees (23). This quality, too, merits expansion, particularly as concerns Bonnefoy's essays. Indeed, numerous examples–"Quatre Notes" (a subsection of *Improbable*), for instance, is entirely devoted to painting—demonstrate

that they tend frequently to take an element of the plastic arts as their "point de depart," thus interweaving both aspects of the lyric voice by being simultaneously the seeing and speaking subject.

These characteristics of the lyric voice are, however, not enough to adequately analyze how the poetic dimension of the essay can obtain a didactic objective. An important additional consideration is the so-called crisis of the lyrical voice evoked by Zubiate to buttress his claim that the essay has taken up the mantle of lyricism that poetry was forced to abandon over the course of the twentieth century. This "crise du sujet lyrique" was due, in part, to the problem of language and representation, and concerned the famous incapacity of a language used by all to truly express the deeply individual feelings of the lyrical subject. Along the same lines, the suggestion put forth by some thinkers indicating that language itself is not merely a barrier, but an actual distortion of the expression of the self, further compromises the possibility of a genuine and authentic transmission of the self through the medium of language. Finally, a last factor concerning the disfavour into which the lyric voice has been plunged concerns the negative view of its intensely personal quality. H.L. Tracy suggests that the lyrical voice is defined by the perception that it is "essentially an individual [voice], since the world of the lyric poet is himself first of all" (23). Tracy combines this with the notion that it is characterized by the expression of emotions that are highly personal: "the true lyric must be like a cry of joy or pain, and give the impression that it arises immediately from an experience" (*ibid*). The reverse side of these qualities lies in the latent danger of narcissism toward which the lyrical voice might tend, and this is the point on which Zubiate focuses in his analysis of the essay's recuperation of the lyrical space formerly held by poetry. He writes:

> l'essai est effectivement l'autre de la poésie après la crise du sujet lyrique pour autant qu'il intègre potentiellement ce sujet dont elle veut s'écarter. Mais dans la mesure où cette intégration est précisément ce qui aliène l'essai à des genres différents de lui, un point commun se dégage entre

> son idéal et celui des poétiques contemporaines : un identique sujet s'y cherche, à définir négativement, comme non narcissique. (388)

This rejection of the siren-call of narcissistic self-absorption is crucial to the essay's capacity to develop not only its difference from poetry, but also, incidentally, its didactic potential. Indeed, in order to successfully demarcate itself from poetry, the essay must take its inspiration from sources other than the highly personal ones used by poetry, thus leading, suggests Zubiate, to the essay's attachment to the things of the real world, its close concern with the "corpus culturel au sens large" evoked by Paquette. However, once this scission between the potential narcissism of the lyric voice and the voice of the essayist has been made, the value of remaining attached to poetic language changes: no longer perceived as a handicap for the essayist, on the contrary, it becomes one of the means by which he or she might engage the reader, thus engendering what might be a more serious commitment to the underlying point developed in the essay. The use of explicitly poetic language can even, in fact, serve to bind the essay to reality, and the suggestion of truth. For if language is the problem, it is also one of the possible solutions. Indeed this is without a doubt the conclusion at which Bonnefoy himself has arrived, for although modern linguistics and literary criticism have trained us to clearly see the tendency of language to conceptualize reality and thus cut us off from the sensual materiality which constitutes our true, lived experience of the world, the counterargument to these theories suggests that the very material employed to construct the text, that is, the words used to build the discourse, can also "redeem" (to use a very Bonnefoyian adjective) meaning. To reiterate a notion seen in earlier chapters, language itself can, precisely because of its intensely material qualities–the physical shape of the words, the sounds that they represent, etc.—also be seen as a means of escaping the conceptualization within which it tends to entrap writer and reader.

## The Didactic Value of Truth

Bonnefoy's numerous statements indicate that poetry's ability to escape from conceptualization indicates its attachment to reality, and thus, truth. But the essay has similar capacities, as Korhonen shows when he uses Maurice Blanchot's notion of the "double négativité" of poetic language to defend the idea that poetry and essay are identical in their use of language: "Due to this insoluble contradiction between idealisation and rematerialisation, the reader is forced to move incessantly between sensuality and ideality. This movement [...] defines both poetic and essayistic writing. Just like poetry, essayistic writing has confronted, from Montaigne onwards, the following dilemma: how can it name and define the world and its object, and still maintain its contact with the sensuality and materiality of the living experience?" (239). Korhonen's comment explicitly highlights the double ambition of the essay, showing at the same time a clear dichotomy: "sensuality and materiality" are presented as being tantamount to "truth," while the acts of "naming and defining" are confined to mere representations that might be intrinsically hollow as they engage neither reality nor truth. But if there is indeed a didactic potential to the essay, one of the crucial points on which it must inevitably rest concerns the essayist's keenly felt need to transmit some form of truth that the reader might be given. Truth is thus one of the grounding motivations for the didactic function of the essay.

Still, if imparting truth may be the original motor of the expression, other factors, such as the more formal points of definition touched upon earlier—the polymorphism of the essay; its subjectivity; the common ground it purports to create between writer and reader—all contribute to the form that this didactic axis can take. This didactic potential seems to me of fundamental importance in examining Bonnefoy's essays. It is, however, perhaps the one on which there is the least amount of critical consensus. Indeed, the very idea generates a certain amount of resistance

and leads to significant divergence among theorists of the essay. Marie-Catherine Huet-Brichard's comment, for instance ("l'essayiste possède *sa* vérité"), indicates reader rejection of an imposed truth and suggests that the essay is a literary means of resolving the problem of the fundamental absence of an absolute truth. It further proposes a notion that is widespread concerning the objectives of the essayist: the idea that essayists are themselves questing and that they have no particular desire to impose a particular opinion or *ethos* on the reader. Time and again critics return to the notion of freedom or lack of imposition, as for example Alfred Kazin does in his affirmation that the essay aims to express "the individual's wholly undetermined and freely discovered point of view" (x). And if Kazin's comment hews to the author's point of view in showing that the essay is a path of discovery, other critics indicate that an identical scenario is played out from the reader's viewpoint. Along the lines of rejecting the idea that the essayist seeks to transmit some type of knowledge, Riendeau writes: "on peut dire que l'essai n'est pas fondé sur un savoir, qu'il ne vise pas avant tout la transmission d'un savoir, mais bien qu'il valorise la contingence de tout savoir" (100). Even Jean-Marcel Paquette rejects resoundingly the conjunction of essay and didacticism in order to favour the idea that the essay is characterized by its attachment to the lyrical mode, which itself involves the expression of an inner world rather than the imposition of this particular vision on others ("Prolégomènes," 453). *In fine,* the dominant position is perhaps best expressed by Montaigne himself: "je n'enseigne poinct, je raconte." And, as so many critics have pointed out, "essai," the word Montaigne coined for what he was engaged in, itself suggests a tentative action, one that is trying out, testing, the ideas presented in the text.

## Between Persuasion and Performance

As I have already suggested, this received idea is at variance with the notion I would like to engage further here, which is that whether the writer chooses to highlight it or not, the essay can, *de facto,* function as a natural receptacle for integrating a didactic axis. We began this section by evoking Gomez de Barquero's juxtaposition of poetry, essay, and didacticism. Putting the three terms in parallel demonstrated that a common poetic language can potentially circulate through both poetry and essay. This "material" conjunction between poetry and essay serves as the grounding element for the more rhetorical elements we shall now turn to. Indeed, the suggestion that there might be such an "intention didactique,"–whether it is a conscious decision actively taken by the essayist, or rather a more subliminal orientation of the text—is a point that appears to me as truly crucial not only in thinking about the specific characteristics that Bonnefoy's essays demonstrate, but also in thinking about some of the motivations that might lead him to so highly favor the genre. They have resonance for Bonnefoy's writing, particularly in the pre-eminence one senses in his work of what appears almost as an urgent need to transmit some form of knowledge he himself has arrived at. One of the clearest suggestions of this urgency resides in the fact that a number of themes that are significant to him are treated in various forms of writing, moving from poetry to essay, and even to narrative, in order, it would seem, to have the greatest chance of finding an expression that will be understood by the reader.

More generally, as concerns its explicit anchoring of the text, the didactic function is, of course, plainly evident in certain types of essays, such as, for example, the philosophical essay. But even essays that do not bear that explicit stamp can be imbued with a certain philosophical "flavor" that some critics argue is the hallmark of the contemporary essay, particularly in France. In their collection of essays on the essay, critics Andy Stafford and Charles Forsdick borrow the

expression "accidental philosopher" to suggest that the term "captures the essential element of modern French essayism: the tendency to satisfy a deep philosophical need in today's world, in which philosophy is marginalized as a discipline" (9). Can we sustain the idea that it is perhaps this very philosophical need that motivates the essay to incorporate techniques that demonstrate a didactic pattern? As we saw in the Introduction, the philosophical thrust of the essay is a source of much ambivalence for Bonnefoy himself, as the uncompromising rejection he seems to express is continuously eroded, and even subverted by the recuperation of a number of philosophical terms and notions into his own essayistic discourse. Thus, one of the most interesting aspects of Forsdick and Stafford's claim of the latent philosophical thrust of the modern essay lies in the notion of "accidentality," in the idea that even though essayists do not explicitly position themselves as philosophers, that very ambition is indeed one of the underlying potential functions of the essay, particularly of the literary or critical essay. The very possibility that such a didactic axis might exist in the latter presupposes the idea that the essay's multifaceted characteristics serve to further a teleological goal that might even function the better for the fact that it always remains subliminal in the discourse that the critical essay is overtly engaged in. Consequently, positing the possibility of a didactic ambition allows us to rethink the dominant models that assign a tentative quality to the essay, most notably by taking into account its argumentative axis, and its so-called performative qualities in order to re-evaluate the prevailing position.

As concerns its argumentative potential, a number of scholars stress the fact that the essay must contain a demonstrative element. Pascal Riendeau, for example, despite his insistence on the absence of overt didactic ambitions contained in the essay, underscores the importance of this rationalizing element by defining the essay along just two fundamental principles, *subjectivity* and *argument* (92). Argument thus constitutes for him fully half of the definition, thus

highlighting its prominence in the essay. One manner of apprehending the "argumentative" element of the essay is to see it as the underlying writerly goal of obtaining reader acceptance of a postulate by means of some rhetorical element. Gilles Philippe, in his essay on the relationship between fiction and argumentation in the essay, uses a standard definition of argument ("l'argumentation est le lien qui unit entre elles plusieurs propositions selon le schéma suivant: une proposition *a* est admise de l'interlocuteur et l'on tente de transférer cette adhésion sur une proposition *c* par un lien de nécessité qu'exprime une proposition *b*" [63]). Philippe points out that unlike in scientific discourse, one of the rhetorical strategies open to essay is the possibility that the proposition uniting *a* and *c* need not be factual, but can, in fact, rely on fiction to be more convincing. He reminds readers of the impact of the Romantic insistence on the idea that fictional writing contains greater truth than factual historiography, and he follows these remarks up by concluding that "on tombe ici sur le *topos* moderne selon lequel l'exemple fictif se voit nécessairement doté d'un degré de représentativité supérieure à celui de l'exemple factuel" (74). This vision of the essay resonates, of course, with the earlier examination of the close links between truth and the essay. But more importantly, it also suggests the importance that form obtains in the essayistic discourse. Form thus becomes function in the sense that it serves to impel an underlying objective. Thus from positing the importance of form for certain types of essayistic discourses, a logical expansion of the notion suggests the natural possibility for the essay to integrate poetic language into its own discourse in order to further a goal that may not necessarily be itself poetic in nature. As Riendeau suggests, "ce qui prime dans l'essai, c'est davantage la forme que prend l'argumentation que la rationalité de son contenu ou la force de sa persuasion"[50](97).

[50] Here, of course, the expression "force de sa persuasion," must be taken to mean the logical persuasion of the argument advanced.

Returning briefly to the definition Jean-Marcel Paquette gives of the essay as a prime example of an enthymematic type of discourse provides us a functional means of addressing the question of the crucial importance of the specific forms the writer adopts to further the argument potentially contained in the essay.[51] When we encountered Paquette's definition in earlier sections of this chapter, we were more concerned with seeing how the nature of the enthymeme contributed to constructing a type of discourse wherein both writer and reader set forth from a point they both share. Here, we will focus more on the vision of the enthymeme as a type of logical argument, whose structure coincides with the forms of logical demonstration, but whose locus lies elsewhere. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics Aristotle provides in his *Rhetoric* of the enthymematic type of syllogism resides in its persuasive character: the enthymeme grounds its argument on underlying principles that are perceived as being true because they are known to be widely shared. From a logical point of view, however, this stance has been denounced by numerous thinkers as having no solid basis in truth, insofar as common acceptance of a position can never be assimilated with anything more than what is *probably* rather than irrefutably true.[52] *In fine,* then, the force of the enthymeme's argument lies more in persuasion than in a logical demonstration of an incontrovertible nature.

This point is an important one, because it allows us to reflect on the didactic ambition that must subtend the enthymematic discourse: for if the aim of such a discourse is to persuade, then it follows that there must also be some element that the writer wishes to persuade of. This notion returns us to a more focused consideration of the writer, who becomes the key actor in this desire to convince the reader of the validity of a point of view. As Gilles Philippe points out: "l'essai

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[51] Paquette himself derives the notion of enthymematic discourse from a note in Roland Barthes' "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," wherein Barthes establishes a provisional typology of discourse, dividing it into "trois grands types de discours : métonymique (récit), métaphorique (poésie lyrique, discours sapentiel), enthymématique (discursif intellectuel)" (53, note 9).

[52] This notion, frequently rendered in French by the term "vraisemblable" is, as we saw in the "Dédicace," highly pertinent to the set of words that have significance in the Bonnefoyian universe.

bâtit son *ethos* autant sur la fermeté de conviction d'un sujet face à un état du monde que sur la valeur de ses constructions argumentatives" (82). One might even advance the hypothesis that the stronger the writer's feeling is, the more the essay will tend to use rhetorical devices to bring the reader to accepting the writer's position. Hence we see a celebrated essayist such as Baudelaire writing: "pour être juste, c'est-à-dire pour avoir sa raison d'être, la critique doit être partiale, passionnée et politique, c'est-à-dire faite à un point de vu exclusif, mais au point de vue qui ouvre le plus d'horizons" (78). And yet, subjecting Baudelaire's argument to the cold light of analysis reveals that the passion he exhorts critics to feel can also be seen as no more than another type of rhetorical device. Indeed, as Korhonen suggests, essays are constructed on rhetorical devices. The fact that these devices may, in general, be perceived as artificial does not suppress their use, but tends instead only to modify their appearance. He writes: "The essay has, by necessity, a certain rhetorical and persuasive level, and the attempts to overcome rhetoric tend to create new forms of rhetoric instead of just getting rid of the old" (*Essaying Friendship,* 51).

The combination of the author as actor and the use of argument as an instrument in creating the vector of persuasion allow us to see that another important point in the didactic axis of the essay lies in what one might call its "performative" function, to which Guy Larroux refers explicitly when he writes that "En effet, l'essai accomplit la plupart du temps quelque chose, ou vise en tout cas à le faire. On ferait facilement apparaître cet acte de langage sous-jacent: expliquer, rectifier, diagnostiquer, prévoir (ou prophétiser), avertir, réhabiliter, défendre" (468). But what is the nature of these tasks that the essay sets itself? And in what sense can they be assimilated to the general notion of performative language? Indeed, the latter, despite its increasingly broadening scope, remains closely connected to the ground-breaking linguistic analyses proposed by Austin, especially those associated with his theory of the speech-act. We briefly saw in Chapter One how his description of speech acts could pertain to the notion of

dedicating a text inasmuch as he demonstrates that certain types of discourse have functions that go beyond mere descriptive statements; certain words, by the mere fact of being spoken under particular conditions, perform specific actions and thus can themselves have an impact on the world (5). Indeed, to extend his analysis a bit farther, it is useful to focus not on the oft-studied illocutionary acts he describes,[53] but rather on the impact of the so-called perlocutionary acts, for it is in this last sense that Larroux's reading of the essay's potential to *do* things is particularly germane, both in terms of general definitions of the essay, and in thinking about how Bonnefoy positions his essayistic writing with respect to an underlying agenda that might also be present in his work.

In the distinction that Austin makes between different types of speech-acts, he gives a particularly telling example, saying that "we can distinguish the locutionary act 'he said that…' from the illocutionary act 'he argued that…' and the perlocutionary act 'he convinced me that …'" (102). Extrapolating from Austin's typology, Larroux's intuition that the performative element of the essay is easily identifiable ("on ferait *facilement* apparaître" [my italics]) seems to corroborate his statement that the essay frequently contains a performative aspect. And if we accept Larroux's analysis, it becomes clear that despite its ostensibly tentative nature, the essay must be seen as potentially imbued with relatively solid ambitions to transmit a particular point of view or a particular vision of how the reader might best apprehend the position presented within the text.

A second point which seems to me important in thinking about the specificity of Bonnefoy's essays is that Larroux's terms remain strictly circumscribed by what Austin identifies

[53] Austin, it will be remembered, draws a distinction he between three different types of speech-acts: he defines a locutionary act as roughly equivalent to uttering a sentence with meaning; an illocutionary act as "sentences which have a certain (conventional) force"; while the term perlocutionary is reserved for utterances that "bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading." (109)

as the illocutionary type of speech act. Indeed, within the litany of words Larroux selects to describe the operations the essay performs, he says that it "explains, corrects, diagnoses, prophesizes, warns, rehabilitates and/or defends" (*ibid*, my translation). It is significant that none of these terms venture beyond the illocutionary aspect of speech acts, that is, they engage the behaviour of the writer, who performs an act by writing them, but not the transformation of the reader. In point of fact, it seems to me important to introduce here the idea that the nature and structure of the essay allow it great leeway to embrace stronger positions, namely perlocutionary speech acts (obtaining agreement, convincing, persuading, etc.), which strive to obtain a change in the behaviour of the interlocutor. For this, we have to envision the essay's potential for being a specific type of act that hopes to engender a specific type of response. As we saw earlier, this very possibility of becoming "actantial"[54] can enter the essay specifically through the poetic language it integrates, and will enable us to better address the idea of writing as "act," which is, as we have seen, consonant with notions that Bonnefoy presents throughout his writing.

Finally, a last point in the performative quality of the essay examines it from the perspective of the actual performance and addresses the question of whether the act generated in the essay through its use of poetic language can also require a wider audience to maintain its performative dimension. In his analysis of Michel Foucault's paradoxical stance concerning his own speech-text, *l'Ordre du discours,*[55] Robert Crawshaw provides an interesting approach to the problem of the essay as performance. Crawshaw pinpoints several elements that are particularly relevant also for Bonnefoy's essays, most notably the fact that like Foucault's *Ordre du Discours,* a number of Bonnefoy's essays were originally lectures addressed to audiences ("Leçon

[54] To co-opt a Greimasian term that renders particularly well the notion of the *function* of different elements of a text.

[55] The text itself is the published version of Foucault's "leçon inaugurale," the conference traditionally given by each newly inducted member upon entering the Collège de France.

inaugurale" for the Collège de France, "Poésie et université," etc). At a very material level these texts originally were performances, but for Crawshaw, it is the transfer from spoken to written text that is of interest. Two questions engage him particularly. The first addresses the relationship between a spoken discourse and its transformation into a written essay; the second concentrates on his perception that the transformation itself is a sort of "performance," which he identifies as one of the defining features of the modern essay.

Crawhaw argues that the "relationship between 'essay' and 'performance' is complex yet not as contradictory as might appear" in the sense that "the essay conforms to clearly defined institutional conventions [and] exemplifies what Foucault refers to in *L'Ordre du discours* as 'doctrine' (1971, 43ff), one of the main instruments whereby the epistemological structures of knowledge ('disciplines') are sustained and communicated to others through education as a vehicle for the exercise of power" (222). The term "exercise of power" is highly connoted and perhaps too specifically Foucauldian, suggesting a rejection of institutions that is not a characteristic of the Bonnefoyian universe. In terms, however, of the threads of didacticism that one finds woven throughout the fabric of Bonnefoy's essays, this notion of transmission merits some attention for, as Crawshaw suggests, the very idea of transforming what began as an ephemeral voiced object whose only persistence lay in the memories of the few who heard the talk, is radically transformed by converting the spoken text into a printed essay. Such a transformation suggests rather strongly the need felt by the essayist to transmit to a broader community some form of information, knowledge, or understanding that he or she might feel vitally important.

## A Sense of Moral Obligation

Foucault links the notion of transmission with the goal of maintaining existing structures of power, but this is far from being the only possible understanding of the reasons motivating the writer to turn to the essay. Indeed, one could also interpret it as a moral obligation, an obligation such as the one given, for example, in the Zen transmission of knowledge. Without delving too deeply into the extremely complex subject of Zen Buddhism, it noteworthy that certain aspects of Buddhist practice are particularly resonant with positions Bonnefoy has adopted, notably the Zen method of acquiring knowledge through meditation on pre-existing texts, as well as the Zen focus on imparting the knowledge obtained through such meditation. Both are important, but if the notion of acquiring knowledge is perfectly consonant with Western perspectives, the idea of an obligation to transmit that knowledge is rendered more equivocal perhaps by the less spiritual perspective of the modern Western world. Indeed, if in the contemporary Western frame of reference, individuals cannot–for obvious ethical reasons—do more than encourage others to adopt a mental attitude propitious to acquiring the premises of a specific type of knowledge, it is far more difficult for them to impose that acquisition of knowledge upon them. This position does not, however, nullify the moral obligation felt toward others. Though contemporary thinkers and writers may be primarily guided by their disinclination to impose a particular point of view, they may, on the other hand, feel a strong sense of duty to share, or at least set forth, the fruits of the knowledge they may have acquired through their own reflection.

In parallel to the notion of a latent sense of moral obligation, it has been argued that some of the themes that recur in Bonnefoy's writing seem to echo patterns that can also be discerned in Zen Buddhism. In his 1984 *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy,* John Naughton was among the first critics to draw attention to the parallel between Bonnefoy's thinking and certain positions

characterized by Zen Buddhism.[56] Naughton compared the experience of presence described by Bonnefoy in his poetry to the Zen experience of *satori* wherein the narrow boundaries of the individual self dissolve into the plenitude of a total experience of the surrounding world (165). In the case of Bonnefoy's essays, however, just as important as the experience of *satori* is the question of moral obligation that devolves to all those who have attained some form of enlightenment through their own meditation. Indeed, because of the value placed on the internal realization of the self through meditation in Zen, the role of the teacher is capital in guiding the student to attain this inner self-realization. The forms of teaching can, of course, take place during oral communication between teacher and student. But this oral communication can itself be fixed in the form of written commentary or even other more creative written forms, such as poetry.

Hence, critic Anja Pearre takes up Naughton's premises regarding the relationship between Bonnefoy's writing and Zen positions and highlights the complementarities between Bonnefoy and 17th century poet Bashō, whose work also freely mixes prose and poetry (171).[57] Indeed, Bonnefoy has written extensively on the work of Bashō and has expressed great admiration for the latter's haikus, and especially for the manner in which these poems engender a direct and simple contact with the things of this world. Clearly, this interest is of an enduring nature, for in March, 2009, Bonnefoy participated in a three-day interdisciplinary colloquium on the subject of the haiku at the University of Lyon III. His own talk involved the distinction between the "moi" and "je," which he feels is the operative mode of thought in the Western world. The haiku form, he said, has value because it allows Western poets to overcome their

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[56] See also Richard Vernier, *Yves Bonnefoy, ou les mots comme le ciel*, pp. 29-34.

[57] Most notably in the travel narratives of the itinerant poet, such as the celebrated *Oku no hosomichi,* variously translated as *The Narrow road to Oku, The Narrow Road to the Interior,* or *The Narrow Road to the deep North.* Pearre notes the parallels between Bonnefoy's title *La Vie errante* and statements found therein such as "nous suivons un étroit sentier" (171).

obsession with the "moi" more easily than through other forms of poetry. Interestingly, Pearre links Bonnefoy's fascination with the haiku directly with Zen modes of transmitting knowledge. She describes the nature of the haiku as Bonnefoy's own personal *kōan*, writing that "on dirait que Bonnefoy traite le problème du haïku comme son *kōan* particulier dont la solution dépend d'un paradoxe" (174). The *kōans,* are of course those aphorisms and their adjoining texts that traditionally form the basis for the relationship between the Zen teacher and student.[58] They are celebrated for the paradoxical nature of the statements they provide. The teacher guides the student toward enlightenment by means of meditation on the paradox contained in the *kōan.* And because the student is frequently given not just the aphorism alone, but also the adjoining commentary (further texts or even poetry) inspired either by the original *kōan* or engendered by subsequent interpretations, the Zen *kōan* can also be considered as–to adopt Paquette's definition—a "culturally constituted corpus of knowledge" that serves as the ostensible object of a deeper form of reflection.

An additional factor of parallelism between *kōan,* essay, and the didactic thrust both can contain lies in the fact that mediation on the *kōan* is perceived as a dynamic activity that aims to be transformative: its very performance should have the function of transforming the subject. Victor Sogen Hori, one of the few Westerners to have extensively studied Zen meditation from a practitioner's point of view, writes: "a monk first thinks a *kōan* is an inert object upon which to focus attention; after a long period of consecutive repetition, one realises that the *kōan* is also a dynamic activity, the very activity of seeking an answer to the *kōan*. The *kōan* is both the object being sought and the relentless seeking itself" (50). The essay, it could be argued, partakes of a similar process, as Kuisma Korhonen indicates when he defines the essay as "a mimetic discourse

[58] There are, of course, a great number of *kōans;* among the most famous in the Western world is the *kōan* that asks what the sound of one hand clapping is.

describing the process of human thought, or […] the progression of some conceptual ideas in the consciousness of the essayist […], the actions then being the changes in his (and maybe the reader's) conceptual field" (75). The operative word in Korhonen's statement concerns the notion of change coupled with the fact that this change comes about through the text. At a very minimum, thus, essay and *kōan* share the goal of transforming the practitioner, whether monk or essayist. However, Korhonen's evocation of the transformation of the *reader's* conceptual field takes the transformation farther, clearly indicating the didactic potential that both essay and *kōan* have in effecting a change in the reader. Korhonen's comment thus confirms the notion that essayistic language can encompass Austin's perlocutionary functions: if essayistic language has the wherewithal to "obtain agreement, persuade, convince, etc.," and perform these modifications on the reader's behaviour, the essay must have some level of didactic function.

However, as was suggested earlier by Zubiate's comment on the negative alchemy of didacticism on the essay—transforming a noble text into something baser—the power of this underlying didactic function can only be well-served if it remains latent, never really appearing as an overt goal. Several techniques allow the essay to draw down to a subliminal level any didactic ambitions it might harbour. We can return here to Korhonen's extremely pertinent analysis of the trope of friendship as the central dynamic which allows the reader to subscribe to the underlying theme of the essay. He writes:

> After the speaker [the essayist] has created a trustworthy ethos, one that gives the impression of friendship and hospitality, the hearer (the reader) is ready to accept his/her invitation to the inside, ready to enjoy the safety and pleasure of the conceptual closure that the argument creates by eliminating the outside." (68)

And once this rapport of confidence has been established, it is far easier for the essayist to diverge from the language of pure reason and use the divergence itself not only to impart additional meaning to the text, but also to encourage the reader to admit or accept a particular

point. Therein enters the essay's potential for meaningfully integrating poetic language and paradox.

## Maintaining Possibility through Paradox

To reiterate the significance of the *kōan*, which Pearre so explicitly links to Bonnefoy's reflections on poetry, it would seem that the overall "attitude" of paradox linked with the *kōan* is one that is highly apposite to his essays as well. Indeed, as demonstrated in the examination of the "Dédicace," paradox is all-important to Bonnefoy's approach. A case in point is the word "improbable," which, as we saw, transfers the paradox initiated in the "Dédicace" not only to the title of the first collection of essays, but extends it to other volumes of *L'Improbable*. Likewise, Bonnefoy's play on the plural levels of meaning contained in the word *présence* can be seen as analogous to the function of paradox, allowing him, in a manner similar to the *kōan*, to activate several ideas, maintaining each one simultaneously present in the mind of the reader.

But as concerns the didactic potential of the essay and its relationship to paradox, these issues lead us to wonder: can there indeed be a didactics of paradox? In some sense, I believe there can, for the notion of paradox expressed as an intellectual opposition to either/or binary processes lies at the very heart of Zen teaching, and is completely consonant with one of the underlying objectives of Bonnefoy's writing. Victor Sogen Hori offers the following non-dualistic approach to understanding the role of *kōans:* "A much better way of approaching the *kōan* is by way of the 'realizational' model […which] entails a 'realization' in the two senses of the term. By making real, i.e., by actually *becoming* an example of, the nonduality of subject and object, the practitioner also realizes, i.e., *cognitively understands* the *kōan* (9, emphasis in original). It is precisely this rejection of the duality between subject and object that appears so

paradoxical to Western frames of philosophical reference, where cognitive understanding tends to pass through the perception and expression of a clear distinction between concept and thing. Indeed, it has often been argued that Western philosophy has been marked, from the Platonists onward, by the clear domination of conceptual over material reality. This very primacy is the point that Bonnefoy so resoundingly rejects as, for instance, "Anti-Platon" clearly demonstrates.

In contradistinction to the dualistic mode of Western thought, the Zen approach to resolving paradox involves not only accepting and integrating it into a larger whole, but also somehow reproducing it in order, precisely, to provide access to this larger vision of reality. Along these lines, the "making real" or "becoming an example" that Hori refers to reiterates the notion we saw earlier, describing the text not as an inert object, but as an "act" which is so consonant with the practice Bonnefoy claims for his writing. And it is from this perspective of act and action that paradox can assume a didactic function within a text. Indeed, expanding on the notion of language as a type of realization, or even, as an act, closer analysis of paradox shows that it can be a linguistic tool whose function dovetails perfectly with a number of themes that circulate through Bonnefoy's writing. A first important point is that paradox can almost literally be materialized in language, with the text itself, or portions thereof, *becoming* a paradox that the reader must resolve. Within this perspective, resolving the paradox is an act engaged upon by the reader, with the necessary corollary that this act can itself serve to effect a change in his or her behaviour. It is largely in this sense that the essayist (or Zen teacher's) active use of paradox can be read as having the didactic function of imparting some form of knowledge to the reader (or student.) Beyond the intellectual action of seeking its solution, the paradox can also be seen from a more poetic point of view that is not dissimilar from the surrealist notion of a verbal shock

revealing what Breton called "le réel absolu."[59] The paradox is arresting and engages the reader by means of its surprise value.

Additional functions of paradox echo themes we have already encountered, namely the notion of truthfulness and its relation to the essay's connection with various types of discourse. More specifically, these functions concern not only the capacity of certain kinds of language to express the truth, but also the potential resistance that both paradox and essay can throw up against the domination of scientific language. From an etymological perspective, *para,* the prefix "against," combined with *doxa,* "opinion" is precisely that which goes against received opinion. Cleanth Brooks notes in *The Well Wrought Urn* that "paradox is a device for contrasting the conventional views of a situation, or the limited and special views of it such as those taken by scientific discourse, with a more inclusive view" (257). Paradox, his statement suggests, can be seen as a tool for broadening a vision that scientific language tends to constrict and reduce, thus making it difficult not to ascribe a didactic function to paradox as well, particularly since Brooks also suggests that paradox is more than just a means of rejecting the domination of scientific knowledge in favour of poetic language. He specifies that this rejection comes not out of a need to confer esthetic value, but because paradox is indeed the *only* way of expressing a certain type of truth. In a comment that is highly interesting to us because both paradox and truth are significant themes in Bonnefoy's writing, Brooks contends that scientific language disdains paradox because "it is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; […] the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox" (3). His

[59] Compare the high value Breton places on the association of incongruous images as a tool permitting us to access reality: "l'immense intérêt de maintenir à l'état dynamique le système de comparaison, ce champ illimité, dont dispose l'homme, qui lui livre les rapports susceptibles de relier les objets en apparence les plus éloignés et lui découvre partiellement le symbolisme universel" (*Arcane 17*).

statement thus reiterates the idea that in contradistinction to the truth assumed to be reflected in factual language, truth is, in fact, similarly, or even to a higher degree, contained in paradox.

## The Essay: Thinking in Fragments

This final section of the chapter is linked to a concrete aspect that is frequently associated with the critical essay, namely its concision, which seems indeed to be one of the more conspicuous formal characteristics of the genre. But brevity is, of course, a relative matter; the critical essay is only brief with respect to other more discursive forms of writing, such as, for example, those texts with which it is so frequently contrasted, like the novel, or the philosophical essay. The question that will interest us here is whether this brevity is itself an expressive choice; and if so, whether this choice itself is integrated within a larger vision of the relationship between writing and perceptions of reality.

One of the more frequent interpretations attached to the brevity of the essay is the suggestion that this brevity is inextricably linked with an overarching notion of fragmentation. Numerous critics point to the fact that the essay can be distinguished from other, more homogeneous narrative structures by its predilection for fragmentary forms. Thus Pierre Glaudes expands on Korhonen's analysis of the essay's creation of the trope of friendship to suggest that the ethical obligation felt by the essayist impinges on the very form the essay takes. He writes that "tout naturellement, cette orientation éthique a une incidence sur l'écriture de l'essai, qui se refuse à la linéarité des discours persuasifs canoniques et aux structures dialectiques fermées, pour privilégier une esthétique de la fragmentation, des disparates et de la rupture, dans laquelle la déconstruction des arguments l'emporte sur l'affirmation d'une doctrine" (xviii).

Fragmentation in the essay is thus viewed as a morally valid choice. In contradistinction to the notion of imposing any form of doctrine on the reader, it is seen as the exact figure of literary openness. In terms of the potential didacticism of the essay, the use of a genre that is itself characterized by fragmentation can thus be seen as the materialization of the essayist's conscious rejection of didactic intentions. This rejection is closely linked with the idea that manifestations of fragmentariness in a text can be seen as the embodiment of an underlying aversion to systematisation. Indeed, fragmentariness can even be seen as the ideal form of expression for the essayist. Thus Marie-Catherine Huet-Brichard writes: "l'essayiste est convaincu que tout souci d'organisation trop rigoureuse mutilerait sa réflexion: d'où, pour reprendre la formule de Stendhal, 'la forme singulière' de l'essai qui se construit le plus souvent par addition ou par agglutination" (43). The high value placed on the model of successive additions, opposed as it is to a starting point given by a unified thought process, suggests that if any impression of totality is conveyed by the essay, then this perception can only emerge in what almost seems a *post facto* construction. Overall meaning in the essay would thus seem to be grounded in juxtaposition, that is, in the meaning constructed from the accumulation of fragments. This perspective also plays into the notion of a sort of continuous and almost fortuitous type of discovery that juxtaposition creates, and leads to the corollary idea that it is the very process of writing that creates the text, suggesting even perhaps that the latter is at least in part created by the reader insofar as he or she must impart meaning to any "gratuitous" juxtapositions encountered in the text. The notion of fragment and fragmentation would thus seem to parallel many of the themes that we have already seen associated with the essay.

And yet, these obvious parallels notwithstanding, it seems far too neat a solution to say that the essay is fragmentary by nature because fragmentation is its most appropriate form of expression. Indeed, the whole structure can appear so tautological that one is tempted to ask, but

what does it mean to be fragmentary? The answers are not so simple, for the notion of fragmentation has multiple theoretical and philosophical extensions that reach far beyond the realm of form in literature. And as concerns Bonnefoy, a number of the more theoretical developments of fragmentariness are highly relevant to the writerly task he seems to set himself in his essays, especially because the use of fragmentation combined with the desire for its opposite, unity, is one of the substantive tensions underlying much of his work. This tension appears perhaps most clearly in his essays precisely because of their generic connection with the notion of fragmentariness. More telling yet are the various images of fragmentation, such as the single leaf seen as a broken fragment of ivy, that also appear as important tropes in Bonnefoy's writing. Finally, certain definitions of fragmentation echo the plurality of *présence* in that the fragment itself creates, or rather exists in, a sort of suspension between multiple possibilities. Thus Philip Beitchman writes "A fragment is the kind of statement that is neither an affirmation nor a negation" (62). And because it is neither, it can be both, just as Bonnefoy's *présence* is neither a philosophical concept, nor a religious term, and yet encompasses both.

## Crisis and Fragmentation

In her analysis of the literary fragment, critic Françoise Susini-Anastopoulos notes that the fragment is ineluctably associated with modernity, for the idea of incompleteness carried by the fragment links it, she argues, with many of the themes that are at the heart of matters that modernity continues to struggle with: "le recours à la forme fragmentaire s'inscrit dans le sillage d'une triple crise aux manifestations déjà anciennes, et à laquelle on peut identifier la modernité" (2). Among the issues that determine the use fragmentary forms of writing, she cites the "crise de l'œuvre par caducité des notions d'achèvement et de complétude" along with the "crise de

totalité, perçue comme monstrueuse" (*ibid*.). These manifestations of modernity have been widely examined and are doubtless as present in Bonnefoy's work as in the work of any of his contemporaries. More interesting, regarding the essay, is Sousini-Andopoulos's assessment of the fragment as a response to what she calls the "crise de généricité." She argues that this extremely modern questioning of the value of traditional genres has allowed fragmentary writing to assume the value it currently holds: it is this latter crisis "qui a permis au fragment de se présenter, en s'écrivant en marge de la littérature ou tangentiellement par rapport à elle, comme une altérnative plausible et stimulante à la désaffection des genres traditionnels" (*ibid*).

Sousini-Andopoulos is, of course, referring to the fragmentary text *per se*, but certain aspects of her analysis are particularly apposite to the essay, especially with regard to its instable definitions and the fact that it tends to be assimilated with catchall notions that respond to Sousini-Andropoulos's "crise de généricité." Indeed, the essayist's choice of form can almost be perceived along negative lines: the decision to write an essay might more accurately be interpreted as the decision *not* to use another, more clearly defined form of writing. In similar fashion, the fragment, indicates André Guyaux, is predominantly defined along negative lines. These definitions are characterized by the fact that they tend to be "privative," that is, negative, "not-this" definitions rather than positive formulations. He writes: "Le fragment […] s'imprègne mieux encore des soustractions virtuelles dont il résulte. L'étymologie du mot persiste à dénoncer la coupure, la séparation, pour ne pas dire la blessure ou l'opération, qui fait d'un fragment ce qu'il est: un être échappé de tout ce qui n'est pas ou n'est plus, distrait du néant" (8).

Guyaux's development of its etymology furnishes a useful means to reflect on the theoretical ramifications of fragmentation. Indeed, etymology does suggest an anterior totality inasmuch as "fragment" is, of course, the substantive formed from the past participle of *frangere,* to break. The word fragment can thus be seen as the metalepsis of the whole: it exists in

metonymic relation to a larger action, "to break," but this action itself can only function with respect either to a prior whole or, by extension, to the perception of a future whole built upon the current fragment. Blanchot recognizes the mental priority we tend to give to the notion of the whole when he writes:

> Qui dit fragment ne doit pas seulement dire fragmentation d'une réalité déjà existante, ni moment d'un ensemble encore à venir. Cela est difficile à considérer par suite de cette nécessité de la compréhension selon laquelle il n'y aurait connaissance que du tout, de même que la vue est toujours vue d'ensemble: selon cette compréhension, il faudrait que, là où il y a fragment, il y ait désignation sous-entendue de quelque chose d'entier qui le fut antérieurement ou le sera postérieurement. (451)

For him, the real critical struggle lies in rejecting these binary positions and shifting the categories of positive value to other points: "il faut essayer de reconnaître à « *l'éclatement »* ou à la « *dislocation »* une valeur qui ne soit pas de négation" (452, emphasis Blanchot). And yet, considering the fragment as a free-standing literary term, is a singularly complicated matter that forces us to reflect on the more theoretical, and even philosophical, implications it contains.

From the perspective of literary history, the fragment can be seen as a relatively recent phenomenon. To be sure, a number of critics introduce their reflection on it by recalling the existence of the fragments of Heraclitus of Ephesus, or of Pascal, and by referring to the aphoristic work of the eighteenth century moralists. However, the majority of theoreticians see in the early Romantic use and theorization of the fragment a significant break from historical tradition. Hence we see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy arguing in *L'Absolu Littéraire* that the fragments produced by the Schlegel brothers adopt the very form that is in symbiosis with the philosophical theories that subtend them. As we saw in the Introduction, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy defend the idea that the Romantics were the first to completely integrate the notion of philosophy with an esthetics of literature. But this amalgamation was, they suggest, more than a simple theoretical fusion of the two dimensions. On the contrary, its signal characteristic was that it *became* the writerly practice of the Romantics: "le romantisme n'est ni

'de la littérature' […] ni même, simplement, une 'théorie de la littérature' (ancienne et moderne), mais *la théorie elle-même comme littérature* ou, cela revient au même, la littérature se produisant en produisant sa propre théorie" (22, emphasis in original). The specifics of Romanticism are only tangentially useful here, but what is rather more interesting is the perspective that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy open up by suggesting that the Romantic paradigm forms the unconscious substratum of much that is considered to be purely modern: "il y a aujourd'hui, décelable dans la plupart des grands motifs de notre 'modernité,' un véritable *inconscient* romantique" (26, emphasis in original), which is particularly powerful, they suggest, because it is sublimated, that is, it is masked by a conscious rejection of the modalities and esthetic imperatives of the Romantics. And yet, despite this overt rejection, many elements subsist, continuously resurfacing in more modern esthetics. Thus they see in the *Athenaeum*'s characteristic use of the fragmentary form and the subsequent development of the fragment, particularly in 20th century literature, an indication of the enduring quality of the problems the Romantics began to address, which is certainly borne out in the writing of a certain segment of French writers: for Blanchot, of course, but also Barthes, in, for example, his *Fragments d'un Discours Amoureux,* as well as a number of other contemporary writers, the fragment would seem to have become the only possible response to the problem of reconciling writing and existence.

## Fragmentation and Moral Choices

There are several reasons for these collective decisions, having to do with notions of totality and the very possibility of totalizing visions of the world. From a purely writerly point of view, the absence of totality is linked to a problem that continuously resurfaces in our reflections on the essay, and that is the problem of language and its ability to express reality. If we follow

the arc linking the contemporary world back to the Romantics, in some sense, the truly modern feeling discernible over that time period is the development of a certain lack of faith in those institutions whose function it is to guarantee transmission of thought processes and ideas and provide an overarching sense of meaning. The attraction for the fragment reflects the contemporary perception that its very form expresses some of the anxieties latent in modern consciousness. Further, it is felt that the fragment might even provide a means of reconciling some of the greater contradictions felt by modern writers regarding language. Philip Beitchman writes, regarding Blanchot's use of the fragment: "the power of the fragment is thus founded on its ability to express certain profound incompatibilities in the nature of things–first of all between man and his power to communicate (his inability to express himself), and also between the universe that we live in and 'the world where writing (which means for Blanchot nothing less than *freedom*) calls us'" (62). The suggestion therein is that the fragment allows writers to do certain things and maintain a particular type of relationship with language and meaning that are far more difficult to preserve through other forms of writing.

Moreover, fragmentary writing can also be seen as a response to a problem that is simultaneously political and philosophical. The great cataclysms of the 20th century produced an ambient feeling that any form of totalization is potentiallydangerous because it tends toward ideology, that is, toward systems whose object is to provide an explanation for the totality of the world rather than providing more limited hypotheses on discrete segments of reality. The more traditional forms of writing, novels, philosophy—but perhaps most of all, poetry, with its tendency to create entire self-sustaining worlds within individual poems—have traditionally attempted to describe entire structures, and it is for this reason that they have difficulty in abstracting themselves from giving what now appears as morally prescriptive systems. And

added to this mistrust of overarching moral structures is the perception that the very notion of moral value has been displaced over the course of the twentieth century.

Poetry demonstrates perhaps most clearly the ethical criticism that literature can inspire, and the contemporary disaffection for it can also be seen as derived from the fact that it appears as the most visible form of the literary rejection of political reality. For if poetry is considered as form of writing that places the highest value on the esthetic worth of writing, a more "politically responsible" position asks whether we can even consider esthetic matters to have value after the barbarism we have witnessed. Within this vision, esthetics becomes trivial, when compared to more crucial problems of reality. There is thus a sense in which fiction and poetry are perceived, in the Pascalian sense, as mere distractions, as objects that deflect our attention from more important matters anchored in reality, and which should be the real focus of our concern. It is in this vein that Sousini-Anastopoulos sees the increasing legitimization of fragmentary forms of writing. She writes: "Trouvant une nouvelle légitimation dans la crise du texte long et fictionnel et dans la difficulté croissante de l'expression poétique, il [le fragment] est sollicité comme une forme de plus en plus compréhensive et hospitalière" (23). The fragment thus represents a morally responsible and perhaps even psychologically "safe" solution not only to the problem of representing reality, but also to the trauma of that reality itself.

The corollary to this perception of a morally responsible approach to reality emerges in a modified understanding of reality itself. Indeed, if the fragment can be seen as rejecting totalizing systems from a political perspective, it can also be seen as the very figure for an underlying reality. In *L'Entretien infini,* Blanchot begins by wondering rhetorically if we should not see "dans la discontinuité un signe du malheur de l'entendement et de la compréhension analytique, plus généralement un défaut de la structure humaine, marque de notre finitude" (11). The conclusion he draws suggests that rather than being the signs of our misunderstanding of the

world, the discontinuity and finitude that are the marks of our human condition are instead perhaps indications of the true nature of reality: "pourquoi l'homme, en supposant que le discontinu lui soit propre et soit son œuvre, ne révélerait-il pas que le *fond des choses* auquel il faut qu'en quelque façon il appartienne, n'a pas moins affaire à l'exigence de la discontinuité qu'à celle de l'unité" (*ibid*, emphasis in original). The fragment, thus, because of its explicit and almost visceral claims to discontinuity, is perhaps better equipped than other forms of writing to represent reality more authentically. It can be seen as having a salutary function; confronting us with the truth that our understanding of reality can only be partial, and forcing us by its form at least to gaze upon that truth, even if we choose not to accept it.

The essay engages in many of the same reflections and suggests a similar discomfort with a more discursive textual length that might tend toward prescription and systematization. Adorno highlights the sense of rupture the essay provokes, reflecting on the way it confronts problems associated with those notions of modernity evoked by Sousini-Andropoulos: questions of identity, of totality, of fragmentation. For him, the essay's attachment to these issues separates it decisively from other forms of writing: "The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary form" (9). But at the same time, it is clear that even though it might tend in that direction, the essay is not a fragment in the same way as are, for example, the fragments of the *Athanaeum*. How then does fragmentation enter the essay, and what are the technical means for its presence? And perhaps more importantly, can one discern the type of function that fragmentation might serve within the text? In other words, what impact does essayistic fragmentation have upon the perceptions of readers who, naturally, remain outside the text? And does this impact itself condition the choices essayists–themselves also readers—make?

## Brevity and Limitation: Fragmentation in the Essay

From a broad formal perspective, the notion of fragmentation enters the essay through two characteristics that define its shape and content: brevity and lack of exhaustiveness. Indeed, as Lukàcs suggested, these notions are materialized by the fact that "the title of every essay is preceded in invisible letters, by the words 'Thoughts occasioned by…'" (15). The subliminal message carried by this tactic underscores the idea that the essayist seems to want the content of the essay to be seen as a series of juxtaposed elements that have no ambition to be a complete thinking process, reminding us thus of Huet-Brichard's description of the essay as a series of agglutinated elements. For the essayist, the primary object of this strategy is doubtless to suggest a certain humility of approach, coupled with a latent mistrust of systems that present themselves as complete reflections on a given subject.

As concerns brevity, in definitions, particularly of the critical or the personal essay in English, brevity appears as a general constraint that the essayist must comply to for the text to be recognized as an essay: a five-hundred page document would be difficult to qualify as an essay. Arguably, however, brevity taken for itself is a less useful defining characteristic, particularly since it is, as we saw, perceived mainly in relation to other types of writing. However, seeing brevity as a *figure* for discontinuity is perhaps a more effective way of analyzing the essayistic text. In his article on the relationship between Foucault and the essay, Robert Crawshaw suggests that because the essay exists "on a relatively small scale, it exemplifies discontinuity and thereby accommodates an exteriorised, fragmented identity on the part of its author that is expressed through its character as a 'event' ('événement') rather than necessarily being part of a wider narrative structure or series" (224). Crawshaw's comment builds on the notion of discontinuity by integrating several complementary notions, to wit, the connection between brevity and event,

and then the idea that brevity allows the very identity of the author to assume a fragmented quality.

The most crucial aspect of Crawshaw's definition describes the essay as a discontinuous form, that is, as an autonomous piece of writing that begins and ends with itself. This, of course, suggests not only the essay's openness to poetic structures, but more significantly, the idea that the essay shares some of the motivations that subtend poetic discourse. The conflation between essay and poetry is already apparent at the level of what constitutes the "appropriate" object of the discourse. There, one finds the suggestion that brevity, though constraining from a formal perspective, paradoxically allows a greater range of freedom to the author: the essayist is seen as being less constrained than might be the writer of a longer, more discursive text, for with brevity and discontinuity come a certain lightness in the choices made. Indeed, the general perception suggests that one can speak and write briefly about a vast number of things, whereas a longer text seems intrinsically more limited in its range of subjects. The brevity and discontinuity of the essay would thus seem to allow it, like poetry, to benefit from the nebulous feeling that all matters are pertinent to it, an impression that is perhaps less often vouchsafed to the novel or to the philosophical text.

A second aspect of discontinuity lies in Crawshaw's reference to the idea of "event," understood as a singular moment demarcated from a larger temporal or structural framework. Crawshaw's perception of the relationship between essay and event is particularly interesting, for it reiterates the close parallels between essay and poetry. His reading suggests that the structure of the essay mimics an isolated incident inasmuch as its discontinuity sets it apart from what he calls "wider narrative structures." Thus if materially the essay can be read as an event because it stands alone, mimetically it appears to be the literary equivalent of an event. In this, the essay strongly resembles a poem, for both have the possibility of existing as independent units that

need not have any connection to a larger framework. Indubitably, both *can*, of course, have this connection; indeed, it is precisely the relationship between individual essays contained in the various collections that is one of the focal points of the chapter on Bonnefoy's essays. But in contradistinction with a chapter of a novel, or a section of a philosophical text, which cannot easily exist as free-standing units, neither the essay nor a poem *needs* this connection in order to be comprehensible. Finally, the essay can also use the notion of event as a catalyst, thus amplifying what Crawshaw sees as the singularity of the essay, and taking it in a direction distinct from other forms of writing. This is particularly visible if we recognize that latent in Crawshaw's attention to brevity and discontinuity is the suggestion that because the essay has no obligation to be integrated into larger structures, its relation to event can allow it to focus on that which is minute, or particular. Hence the essay is seen as having a greater capacity to take a small isolated incident (or, in the case of critical essays, a specific painting, novel, poem, etc.) as its *point de départ*, again inciting comparison with poetry, which is also viscerally attached to the idea of giving an account of the particular.

The insistent parallels between essay and poetry allow us a better understanding of how fragmentation can be consolidated within the essay. Indeed, certain forms of poetry have no difficulty in incorporating not only the notion of fragmentation, but even more tellingly, fragmentation itself. Emmanuel Hocquard describes the two contrasting visions of poetic fragmentation, describing it first as the figure of a lost unity: "la vie du poète élégiaque classique est une vie au passé et une vie au passif. Elle a été brisée et l'élégiaque en recueille, gémissant, les fragments, les bouts, les débris, les morceaux… Ces fragments représentent pour lui ce qui reste d'un état originel disparu auquel ils le renvoient incessamment" (281). Simultaneously, however, the very same fragments potentially "ne renvoient ni à un tout, ni à une origine ni à un contexte disparus qui garantiraient leur sens. Ce qui fascine dans les fragments, ce n'est pas leur

lien causal avec les événements de [l]a vie passée, c'est plutôt qu'ils sont si vivants qu'ils soufflent tout contexte biographique antérieur. Ils brillent au présent d'un éclat inouï, d'un éclat qui leur est propre" (*ibid*.). Paradoxically, perhaps, *both* values of the fragment are highly pertinent to the mental structures that govern Bonnefoy's poetry and essays. The sense of his alternate allegiance to each of them points to a tension that is omnipresent in his work, appearing in a fugitive manner both in his poetry—in, for instance, *Dans le leurre du seuil*, where the notion of fragmentation is thematized in the long sequences of dots that seem to suggest the absence of text—and in the interstices of a number of his essayistic texts, where a deliberately fragmented structure is constantly undercut by a discourse that "mends" the breaks.

I would thus maintain that Bonnefoy's apparent need to integrate the values of both fragmentation and its opposite, unity, clearly conditions the forms his writing takes. This point, conjoined with the value of the brevity and discontinuity embodied by the essay, allows us to address the means by which fragmentation appears through the genre's explicit claim to its own limitation and its voluntary circumscribing of its range. The most striking point associated with this claim is the conscious abstention from any notion of exhaustiveness: the essay presents itself from the outset as a fragment of knowledge excised from a larger perspective that lies beyond its scope. But this choice is deliberate. Hence Adorno writes: "The essay reflects what is loved and hated instead of presenting the mind as creation *ex nihilo* on the model of an unrestrained work ethic. Luck and play are essential to it. It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say" (4).

Adorno's very interesting anthropomorphizing of the essay (a tactic that would merit its own study) hints, through its reference to luck and play, at what might almost appear as the random quality of the genre. Earlier in the same passage, Adorno conjoins–in order the better to

demolish that conjoining—the essay with the vagaries of a childlike mind that flits from one thing to another instead of remaining focused on larger, more important perspectives. *In fine*, however, he will argue that the fragmentariness of the essay corresponds to a conscious intellectual rejection of certain perceptions of reality. For the apparent randomness of the essay can be seen as a calculated strategy designed to further the intellectual stand which suggests that all subjects are equidistant from a central notion of truth. The essay's rejection of exhaustiveness and the fragmentation associated with that rejection allows it to materialize another truth, namely the idea that we cannot know everything about a subject. The fragmentation of the essay, its propensity to end whenever the essayist chooses, is thus the marker of this position. Hence the essay's integration of fragmentation through its avowed rejection of exhaustiveness allows it to integrate the very same philosophical claims made for the fragment.

We saw earlier that the fragment challenges the ideas propounded by more totalizing philosophical systems which suggest not only that reality is continuous, but also that it can best be defined by means of conceptual models. For the essayist, adopting a form of discourse that tends toward fragmentation thus can be the materialization of a solution which demonstrates concretely the repudiation of the hypothesis that reality can be defined as an unbroken continuity. The essay's acceptance of fragmentation through its insistence on brevity and its rejection of exhaustiveness thus thematizes the philosophical break it seeks to project. This vision of the essay as being intrinsically hostile to philosophical systems emerges in the production of a number of essayists. Hence Kuisma Korhonen argues that the fragmentary form of the essay "can be seen as a challenge to all philosophical systems or dialectical advancement of knowledge," (235) reiterating thus the suggestion that in contradistinction to the longstanding tradition of the Western dialectical method of philosophy, knowledge cannot be constructed by synthesizing oppositions.

And yet, we can wonder if the challenge that essayists offer to philosophical method is truly an all-encompassing one, or whether they do not target more specific aspects of philosophical discourse. Phillip Beitchman suggests as much in his analysis of Blanchot's defence of the fragment. Beitchman writes: "the break, or rupture, demanded by fragmentary writing, implies a separation from traditional thought–the major defect of which [is] its tendency to be frozen into systems that give us the illusion of understanding and dominating existence" (61). Blanchot's position dovetails perfectly with Bonnefoy's own violent denunciation of the illusion of understanding that is suggested by absolute systems of thought.[60] The fragmentation of the genre thus allows the essay to be open to a concern that is deeply important for Bonnefoy, namely his rejection of the concept and of conceptual systems. By embracing fragmentation, the essay can be seen as fundamentally anti-conceptual, a point which Adorno explicitly highlights when he writes:

> The essay does not play by the rules of organized science and theory, according to which, in Spinoza's formulation, the order of things is the same as the order of ideas. Because the unbroken order of concepts is not equivalent to what exists, the essay does not aim at a closed deductive or inductive structure. In particular, it rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy—that old justice done to the transitory, whereby it is condemned again in the concept. (10)

The terms Adorno uses (philosophy and philosophers, ephemeralness, concept, existence, etc.) merit close attention, not only because they mesh precisely with positions Bonnefoy expresses throughout his writing, but because Adorno's explicit association of them with the essay allows us to rethink it in terms of Bonnefoy's preoccupations. More globally, it allows us to see that the genre itself seems, through its relationship with fragmentation, to be particularly open to reflection on the issue of conceptuality, seen both in Adorno and in Bonnefoy through the prism of philosophical thinking and perceptions of existence.

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[60] Regarding the intellectual proximity between the two writers, Mario Maurin indicates that: "To look at [Blanchot's] essays is to discover, inexorably sought out, the central problem and sometimes the very wording of Bonnefoy's poetry" (21).

Still, the intellectual rejection of the concept by adopting and giving value to the fragment can itself encounter stumbling blocks in the essay, and these impediments appear through language. Indeed, it would appear that the rejection of philosophical systems embodied in the rejection of the concept can itself be couched in language that points first toward unity, and through this unity, toward something that might resemble philosophical thinking. Blanchot, as we saw above, was aware of this insidious tendency we have to consider the whole as primary, or even as origin. Beitchman, reading Blanchot, goes further and links it to the very act of thinking: "The weakness of thought [of thinking, that is], for Blanchot, is a weakness that is inherent and ineluctable: it tends to unify whatever it touches" (63). This problem can be seen as particularly pertinent to the essay, particularly in its differentiation from other genres such as poetry or the novel. The essay need not employ with the same continuity the high density of rhetorical and formal figures (metaphor, alliteration, metonymy, etc.) that typifies poetry, and it is typically characterized by an absence of the diegetic structures fundamental to the novel. The combination of these two factors–no plot with its own internal logic that must be respected; a limited use of poetic images that point outside of themselves—conjoined with the external subject that serves as ostensible catalyst for the personal or critical essay makes it seem as though the essay is less a creative use of language than the pure expression of thought. This is but a variant of the issue of the general perceptions of the essay which tend to see it as the genre that allows for the most direct transfer of ideas from writer to reader. In some sense, the very matter it manipulates and gives form to is thought, as Adorno himself suggests when he writes that "the essay is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts" (5). The conundrum is clear: the essay can reject conceptualization through its incorporation of fragmentation, but at the same time, the medium it must work with is that very conceptualization. Within this paradigm, we can see that Blanchot's

anxiety regarding the proclivity of thought to tend toward unity is equally problematic for the essay.

I would like to suggest that the tension between a text presented as fragmentary but which reintroduces unity through subterranean means is truly one of the significant potentialities characterizing the essay, and is one that appears particularly insistently in the work of Bonnefoy. Daniel Oster suggests that the fragment can only be accurately defined through a double polarity. Thus he writes of the fragment that: "Il est coupant en tant qu'il figure l'interruption, un ordre brisé, la défection d'une cohérence dont il garde pourtant la mémoire, qui reste inscrite en lui. Toute réflexion sur le fragment rencontrera cette tension entre la figure de l'œuvre, exhibant les signes de sa cohérence, et ce qu'elle cache, réprouve ou avoue" (*Universalis:* Fragment*)*. Oster's definition demonstrates that all considerations on the fragment must ineluctably take into account its Janus-like opposite, unity, because the two terms are conceptually inseparable. This vision of fragmentariness has equal application to the essay, with the caveat that the forms of unity are more difficult to discern. This problem is not specific to the essay alone. Indeed, even from a more general perspective, the notion of unity benefits from far fewer formal elements identified with it: conceptually speaking, it is neither simple nor self-evident to single out precisely what constitutes the unity of a text. These mechanisms also vary from genre to genre.

As concerns the essay, a few means for seeing forms of unity in it can be proposed, first by opposing it to other genres, and then by returning to some of the definitions specific to it. Lukàcs was perhaps the first to suggest the idea that the difference between poetry and essay lies precisely in an ancient model of unity that poetry, unlike the essay, was able to discard. He writes that "the essay form has not yet, today, travelled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago; the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art" (13). The unity he sees in the essay lies thus in the connections it maintains with

other fields of knowledge. Whereas poetry was able to cleave exclusively to the path of art, rejecting all else as outside its province, the essay has continued to take these other domains into consideration.

Adorno, we know, reads Lukàcs's comment as a criticism of the essay, which is derided for its lack of independence. But is this criticism necessarily valid? For we can also read Lukàcs as suggesting that the division of knowledge into different fields of interest or study is an artificially imposed creation that is itself unrelated to reality. Indeed, this reading plays into the fact that for Lukàcs, in spite of the plethora of subjects open to the critical essay, its ostensible subject is somehow immaterial. Each essay of this type has the same transversal object, an object which Lukàcs calls "life-problems." He writes: the essayist is "always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life" (9). Though Lukàcs's insight obviously does not have the same pertinence for all critical essays, it is important to evoke it here because it has great resonance for the essays of Bonnefoy, particularly in the manner in which their subject choices consistently aim at the transmission of a particular vision of the world.

Lukàcs's perception of the versatility of the essay in incorporating highly diverse subjects allows us to reintroduce the notion of the polymorphism of the essay, which also plays into the sense of unity that the text can project. Hence Pierre Glaudes writes: "Modulable à l'infini, [l]a forme ductile [de l'essai] permet de mettre en relation différents champs disciplinaires dans un grand arc herméneutique, qui relie ce que le langage des savants a pour habitude de dissocier ou de fragmenter" (x). Regarding Glaudes's point, it is useful to recall the Bonnefoy comment quoted earlier wherein he expressed his discomfort with modern science, whose approach to reality concentrates on the atomic or molecular level rather than that of the human senses. Here, Glaudes's comment makes clear that the essay can also contribute to bringing together elements

that certain forms of knowledge tend to cut up and disperse. Along those lines, it should not be forgotten that Bonnefoy's initial training was as a mathematician and that he later took up formal studies in philosophy. Is it possible to impute to his exposure to these different fields an openness toward broader perspectives that might find an echo in his propensity to use the essay? Though an intriguing proposition, it is difficult, from a critical perspective, to anchor it in textual practice. The suggestion does, however, engage our attention on the impact of a personal trajectory on writerly choices, and thus brings us to focus our interest on those qualities specific to the writing subject.

On the question of subjectivity, it is useful to return briefly to Crawshaw's evocation of the brevity of the essay. Crawshaw's final point, it will be remembered, concerned the impact of the discontinuity of the essay upon the author. His comment suggested that because the essay is brief and discontinuous, the identity of the author is fragmented over the multiple subjects that constitute the objects of study for the critical essay. In other words, because the essay is brief, it can be multiple, and this very multiplicity forces the essayist to adopt different perspectives that fragment his or her identity through the texts. This perception is certainly pertinent in terms of the variety of the subjects available. However, if we take into consideration the Lukàcsian analysis examined just above, we can see that the variable subjects that the essay can address are *in fine*, no more than pretexts for far less mutable underlying considerations. Thus unity, far from being fragmented in the different subjects addressed, is, on the contrary, projected through the author. Rather obviously, this sense of unity is connected to the fact that despite the plethora of subjects, there is a single intelligence at the source of the essay, organizing the information collected, manipulating it, structuring it. Even in those essays that seem to rely most heavily on juxtaposition to propel their subject, the selection of which elements to juxtapose is not, of course, random, but the result of deliberate authorial choices. This matter is particularly crucial to

Bonnefoy's essays, especially in terms of the various forms of determination that operate at different levels of his work. Because a great number of his essays are grouped into the different volumes of *L'Improbable*, and because these volumes themselves have resonances between each other, the structuring choices available to him concern not only discrete segments of essays, but equally the choices made in juxtaposing certain essays. It thus becomes clear that his individual essays can—and perhaps even *must*—be read as fragments of a larger totality, which itself fits explicitly into a larger structure.

This suggestion of an infinitely sliding scale conjoining fragment with totality brings us to a final element concerning the fragment, which lies in its capacity to become in and of itself a whole. André Guyaux indicates the potential conflation between the fragment and the whole. He writes:"L'être partiel du fragment, détaché d'un être total, assimile ce qui lui manque au néant, au grand rien, et le fragment devient un tout, et tout devient fragment" (8). In part, the polysemous potential of the fragment reiterates the responsibility of the individual person inasmuch as it can only be identified as such through the point of view adopted to analyze and contrast them. More technically, however, the mechanism whereby the fragment can become the whole is, Guyaux suggests, essentially a metonymical one, in the sense that the literary fragment can be seen as a part that figures the whole. Bonnefoy's "Dédicace" to *L'Improbable*, it will be remembered, functions essentially thus, as its functional goal is to help us to better read the whole to which it serves as gateway. Similarly, the characteristics of the essay examined in the past two chapters allow us entry into the practice of Bonnefoy's writing in the following chapters.

# CHAPTER FIVE –
# To Preserve Language and Thought:
# Bonnefoy's Présence as a Philosophy in the Making

Nous sommes des êtres doubles, à la fois langage et existence.
—Yves Bonnefoy

The preceding chapters provided a theoretical grounding both for the notion of presence and for overarching definitions of the essay as a specific genre, with the object of demonstrating a trajectory connecting the received notion of presence with the praxis observed in Bonnefoy's essays. The remaining chapters build upon those more abstract definitions to see how his choices can be defined in terms of them. I have said over the course of the previous chapters that in contrast to the prevailing criticism on Bonnefoy's work, I believe that it is not only his poetry, but indeed equally his essays that are shaped and motivated by the notion of presence, making it necessary to examine in what ways Bonnefoy's own reading of the notion of presence has taken form within his thinking and acquired a specificity that correlates with his own imperatives.

As we saw in earlier chapters, the notion of presence bears a range of meanings that necessarily predated Bonnefoy's choice to inhabit that particular word and make of it the touchstone of his poetry and writing. Ineluctably thus, it would seem that its historical theological and philosophical substructures cannot but serve as a key to understanding what facets of the term might have attracted Bonnefoy to using it in such a conspicuous and insistent manner in his own work. And yet, as we saw, his explicit disavowal of these theological and philosophical allegiances emerged as a patent subtext in Chapter Two. This rejection is conditioned perhaps by the fact that these approaches appear to him to limit the true scope of the *présence* he feels driven

to transmit. With that background in mind, I propose now to follow the more specific thread of Bonnefoy's development of a notion of presence contoured to his own concerns, particularly as seen in the way in which his own term conjoins with or retreats from the theological and philosophical notions evoked in the earlier chapter. Consequently, a significant vector of inquiry here is that of determining to what degree some of the specific encounters in Bonnefoy's own intellectual history and background have combined to provide him with the impetus to reinvest the historical notion of *présence* with his own brand of moral and philosophical weight.

## Early Connections: Theology, Philosophy, and Biography

Despite Bonnefoy's stated hostility toward the notion of "philosophizing" as well as his reticence concerning theological doctrine, research into his work has long stressed the importance that both of these have had in the construction of his thought.[61] But where the theological aspect of Bonnefoy's writing is rather diffuse, the philosophical dimension of his work is more readily apparent for readers.[62] And yet, as we saw in the Introduction, Bonnefoy's rejection of a philosophical approach, expressed primarily in the denial of the possibility for conceptual systems to account wholly for reality, indicates that such an approach appears to him antithetical

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[61] As concerns the theological tenor of Bonnefoy's thought, see for example, the discussion on the theological dimension of Bonnefoy's writing in Ronald Giguère as well as the numerous and substantive references to Bonnefoy in Pierre-Jean Jossua's *Pour une Histoire Religieuse de l'Expérience Littéraire*. Further, the recurrence of the specific evocation of "le sacré" in the questions asked during interviews with Bonnefoy highlights the impact that this dimension of his writing has had on the critical community. For developments specific to this question of the "sacred" see, for instance, the fourth section of the Pau Colloquium, "Yves Bonnefoy, l'Univers et le Sacré," which contains Y. A. Favre's talk/article, "L'Expérience et l'Expression du Sacré dans la Poésie d'Yves Bonnefoy."Along the same lines, the "Entretien avec Bernard Falciola," the "Entretien avec John Jackson," as well as other interviews reprinted in *Entretiens sur la Poésie* can also be consulted.

[62] The "Problèmes métaphysiques" section of the 1983 University of Pau colloquium on Bonnefoy, or the more fully developed "philosophie" section of the 2006 "Colloque de Cérisy," as well as the 2007 *Poétique et Ontologie* colloquium devoted to Bonnefoy clearly grapple specifically with this aspect of his work. Along similar lines, critic Patrick Née's *Rhétorique profonde d'Yves Bonnefoy* presents itself specifically as "l'étude systématique des postulats philosophiques et littéraires" of Yves Bonnefoy.

to the expression of the *présence* which remains the explicitly stated goal of his writing. Developed quite early in his writing, starting with "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne," the first essay of *L'Improbable,* Bonnefoy's refusal of conceptual structures has garnered no small amount of attention as critics have increasingly engaged in examining the philosophical underpinnings of his work. And the reason for this widespread interest is, as I suggested earlier, the fact that the notion of *présence* has a totalizing dimension in the sense that it positions itself both a complete way of being, and a means for understanding the world, and in that it resembles nothing so much as philosophy and theology, both of which also tend to provide all-encompassing models, not only for thought, but also for action. And it is precisely this totalizing aspect which produces Bonnefoy's strong *prise de position*, along with the natural corollary that derives from such a stand, namely a certain moral imperative which he finds urgent to communicate.

Bonnefoy's problem, it is clear, is rooted not only in the ephemeral and elusive nature of the *présence* that he is trying to capture in his writing but also in the parallel problem of finding a form of writing adequate to house it. Attempting to reconcile these two imperatives inevitably leads to a form of paradox, as Arnaud Buchs so aptly indicates:

> le concept doit être dépassé pour aboutir à ce que Bonnefoy appelle la présence—aussi écrite Présence et le problème affleure ici plus nettement—voulue comme la saisie de l'objet tel qu'il est hors langage. Déjà surgit un premier paradoxe, une première aporie de la poétique conçue comme pure réflexivité du langage; critique du langage par le langage, dénonciation du concept par le concept (car l'Un, la Présence, mais encore l'Image et d'autres grands vocables de la poétique de Bonnefoy, que sont-ils en fin de compte sinon des concepts?), la poétique n'a, semble-t-il, pas les moyens de sortir du cercle. Elle est, au contraire, une fuite en avant vers toujours plus de langage, alors qu'elle désire pourtant retrouver quelque chose comme une saisie pré-linguistique de la réalité. (12-13)

Buchs pinpoints the problem with precision, locating it in terms of a certain duality contained within presence, particularly with respect to language's incompatibility with a "direct" experience of reality. This duality is important to keep in mind, for it provides a useful tool for

thinking not only about the problem of presence and language, but also about the value of the phrase "ce qui est."

Though the matter of theology is more diffracted, appearing mainly at the lexical level, the linking of Bonnefoy's intellectual position with a philosophical intent has far more concrete roots, and is amply supported by the examination of Bonnefoy's intellectual *parcours*. My approach has been to eschew more personal matters and concentrate on the impact of intellectual encounters on Bonnefoy's thought, partly because this yields a more cogent analysis, and partly because he himself does not consider incidents of a biographical nature to have much significance in the interpretation of a writer's work. Indeed, the greater part of his essays, even when these pertain specifically to stages in the development of his thought, are significantly devoid of personal anecdote, except insofar as personal experience has led to an intellectual revelation as, for instance, in the opening essay of *Un Rêve Fait à Mantoue*, or in the salamander episode of "L'Acte et le lieu de la Poésie," which is the object of more detailed analysis in a subsequent chapter. In fact, it is almost amusing to see that one of the few changes in the third (1990) edition of *L'Improbable* is the addition of the briefest of biographies contained in seven pithy sentences.

> Né le 24 juin 1923, à Tours.
> Etudes secondaires, puis de mathématiques et de philosophie à Tours, Poitiers et Paris
> A Paris depuis 1944. Voyages, notamment en Méditerranée et en Amérique.
> Travaux sur l'histoire des formes et des moments de la poétique. Invitations de diverses universités à partir de 1960. Depuis 1981, professeur au Collège de France. (*I*, 9)

Its brevity is tellingly eloquent of Bonnefoy's discretion, his strong desire to avoid mingling his personal life with the type of interaction he has established with the world through his writing. More profoundly perhaps, it also connotes a philosophical gesture which tends to subsume the personal in the universal, or, as he suggests in *Entretiens sur la Poésie*: "qui nous vaut ainsi, dans l'assomption même de notre rien, d'accéder à l'universel" (*EsP*, 82). An

interesting counterpoint to the rarity of personal anecdote in Bonnefoy's work is a comment by Patrick Née, who knows Bonnefoy personally and well. In his *Rhétorique profonde* Née writes regarding the covert referentiality present in all of Bonnefoy's work that "de l'aveu même d'Yves Bonnefoy—, il n'y a pas une mention, même apparemment non référentielle, qui ne corresponde à un lieu du monde" (7). He gives as an example Bonnefoy's poetic description in "Dévotion" of the "ville des cerf-volants et des grandes maisons de verre où se reflète le ciel" (*Poèmes*, 180), suggesting that it refers to New York. The relationship between experience and writing in Bonnefoy's poetry is thus, suggests Née, one of metonymy, or contiguity between an experienced reality and the images that appear in the writing. And though this situation is perhaps entirely germane to the generalizing tendencies so frequent in poetry, it is far less true of the essay, which can so easily integrate a highly subjective vision. Thus, from a reader's perspective, what is notable in Bonnefoy's essays is the relative paucity of biographical anchors. The real-life contiguity that might be plainly perceptible from the writer's position is virtually impossible to see from the exterior, giving his essays a universal character, perhaps more commensurate with poetic forms.

Clearly, this position is a choice. From a methodological point of view, I have thus avoided searching exhaustively for clues in Bonnefoy's personal history to explain the construction of his poetry and prose. Occasionally, nonetheless, in the interstices of his discussion of more general matters, a smattering of biographical details emerges, and Bonnefoy allows us to catch glimpses of those elements of his past which might furnish a better understanding of some of the factors motivating his work. By and large, these brief instants of connection between past experience and present thought pertain to starting points or moments of intellectual change for him. For example, in an interview on the influence of surrealism, what emerges clearly from an older Bonnefoy's memories of his adolescence is the recollection of a

longing for some larger experience than that of the limited world of his native province. He evokes his youth "[…] dans ma ville de province, où faisait loi ce qui n'attire pas le regard, ce qui se perpétue sans devenir, sans gêner aucune habitude, —et où les librairies étaient vides" (*EsP*, 109). From this description of a rather barren intellectual environment, Bonnefoy lets us glimpse the attraction that poetry, in the form of the heady excesses of surrealism, initially held for him.

This thirst for wider horizons led him, in the early 1940's, to pursue his mathematics studies in Paris. And it was at this juncture that Bonnefoy began to turn more seriously toward the poetry that was to become his greatest preoccupation. Concurrently, he also began to develop the interest in philosophy which would eventually come to inform all his thinking. Among others that he read at the time, he cites Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, Hegel and Plotinus, but also Georges Bataille, Etienne Gilson, Henri-Charles Puech, and Léon Chestov as being of greatest importance to him (*EsP*, 77). Regarding this latter philosopher, whom he read in Boris de Schloezer's translation in 1944, Bonnefoy is specific in placing him at the center of his intellectual development. He recalls in an interview: "fut pour moi décisive […] la rencontre peu prévisible, sans doute pour un jeune surréaliste, d'un théologien, si ce mot a du sens pour lui, le russe Léon Chestov" (*EsP*, 118). Bonnefoy, it will be remembered, explicitly advised me to read Shestov's *Potesta Clavium (Le Pouvoir des Clefs*) in order to better understand his own intellectual position.

Later, more formally, Bonnefoy studied the philosophy of science with Gaston Bachelard, Hegel with Jean Wahl and Jean Hyppolite. He maintained a close contact with Jean Wahl for quite a number of years, eventually writing for him a thesis conjoining poetry and philosophy, and which bore the title "Baudelaire et Kierkegaard."[63] Jean Wahl was also Bonnefoy's thesis director for a project entitled "Le Signe et la Signification," and he later helped Bonnefoy enter

[63] Bonnefoy was to destroy this text some years later.

the Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques (C.N.R.S) as a "stagiaire de recherches." The research he carried out there—on English and American "théoréticiens de la signification," such as I. A. Richards, William Empson, Kenneth Burke—produced an article, "Critics—English and French and the Distance between them" that appeared in *Encounter* in July 1958. This early article established Bonnefoy's nascent opposition between critical language and the language of poetry. Alan Boase, in his 1963 riposte to Bonnefoy's *Encounter* article, clearly indicates his conviction that the French poet had misunderstood the significance of the work of these Anglo-American theoreticians. He writes, however, "Ces observations de Bonnefoy vont au cœur d'une philosophie du langage et concernent la nature même de la critique" (159). This early interest in sign and meaning has been maintained as an omnipresent element of Bonnefoy's reflection on the capacity of language, and serves as driving factor in the philosophical tenor of his reflections.

More concretely, Bonnefoy's early poetry demonstrates clear links with the philosophy of signs of these "New Critics." Indeed, a connection can be suggested between the theatrical metaphor of the "dramatistic pentad" (act, scene, agent, agency, purpose) suggested in his *Grammar of Motives* by American critic Kenneth Burke, and some of the themes (*théâtre*, *geste*, *scène*) that appear in Bonnefoy's roughly contemporaneous *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve*. Burke suggests that equating life and theater is a literal and not a metaphorical perception of reality and that all forms of communication can be perceived as an iteration of some form of drama. In striking parallel, the first of the five sections of Bonnefoy's poetry collection is entitled "Théâtre," thus leading certain critics to suggest that *Douve* can be considered as a drama in five acts.The importance of this internal title has been underscored by a number of critics, with Jean-Yves Debreuille suggesting, for example, that "comme tout titre, et d'autant plus qu'il est bref, 'Théâtre' suscite d'assez nombreuses représentations" (*Pau*, 435). Going back a little further, Bonnefoy has described the genesis of the whole *Douve* poem cycle, giving as its origin a short

novel entitled *Rapport d'un Agent Secret*, which he abandoned because it spontaneously metamorphosed into a series of poems. The characters of the novel–Douve, Plaque, and Ruine—are clearly metaphorical, even allegorical, as is their task of "dismantling the facade of representation" (*EsP*, 94). Bonnefoy specifies that it was the enigmatic name "Douve" which became the vector impelling the shift in genre from novel to poetry: "je reconnus dans le mot 'Douve' assez consciemment, je crois, l'emblème autant que l'agent de la transgression qu'il faut toujours accomplir" (*EsP*, 96). And it is the poems inspired by the agent Douve that directly engendered the "Théâtre" section of *Douve.* Certainly the omnipresence and insistent repetition of the verb *voir* associated almost exclusively with the speaking "I" of the poems is consonant with the notion of spectator and theater (see Debreuille, 435 in *Pau*). The image of theater is one that demonstrates the osmosis between the different forms of Bonnefoy's writing because it is further materialized in his contemporaneous (1959) essay, "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie," wherein he writes: "Je voudrais que la poésie soit d'abord une incessante bataille, un théâtre où l'être et l'essence, la forme et le non-formel se combattront durement" (*I*, 127).

Finally, Burke's attendant notion that literature produces meaning that can (and indeed, must) in turn serve as a guide for life, finds echo in some of the currents underlying Bonnefoy's work, reappearing particularly persistently in, for example, the essay "Lever les Yeux de Son Livre," wherein Bonnefoy begins by explicitly mentioning the "close reading" current of criticism associated with New Criticism, and continues by enjoining readers to "interrupt" their reading in order to turn toward the world and engage more actively in the communication suggested by the text: "*l'interruption*, dans la lecture d'un texte, peut avoir valeur essentielle et quasiment fondatrice dans le rapport du lecteur à la poésie […] Car l'interruption, c'est bien ce qui se produit dans cet instant où on perçoit qu'à écrire on ne fait que se vouer à quelques images; et où on suspend ce rêve, pour se souvenir qu'il y a, au-dehors, du temps, du lieu, du hasard, des

choix à décider, de la mort, mais aussi bien, en cela, un monde" (*EsP*, 229, emphasis in original). This urgent reminder that both reading and, by corollary, writing have a function that is by no means solely esthetic reinforces the idea that the Bonnefoyian goal has a philosophical dimension consonant with the idea of providing readers with a template to guide life.

Still, despite his obvious intellectual interest in the subject of philosophers and philosophy, these tend not to appear explicitly in Bonnefoy's *poetry*. In part, this reticence appears natural, since the poetic arena is of difficult access for the intellectual abstractions of philosophy. Nonetheless, one notes in Bonnefoy's work the occasional interweaving of pure philosophy into the poetic text and paratext. For example, in "Anti-Platon," the 1947 poem mentioned in earlier chapters, the title itself is an explicit positioning of the text. Similarly, the fact that the epigraph to *Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*, is drawn from Hegel,[64] cannot but orient readers towards a philosophical superstructure that at least partially conditions their understanding of the text. But at the same time, if an absence of explicit references to philosophy characterizes Bonnefoy's poetry, the same is not true of his essays, which clearly demonstrate that his early interest in philosophy did not wane as he became a more established writer: beginning in the 1950's, throughout much of his essayistic work the names of philosophers and thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Plotinus, Bataille or Shestov appear continuously, either as counterweights, or as reference points to Bonnefoy's own position. Understandably, therefore, much critical work has already been done on the philosophical position which informs Bonnefoy's writing.[65] Certain critics have even gone a step further, and have investigated the explicitly philosophical ideas that derive from Bonnefoy's

[64] Albeit ironically, as Bonnefoy indicates in an interview with John Jackson collected in *EsP,* 83.

[65] Here one thinks, in particular, of the work of John Naughton, Richard Stamelman, and John Jackson, although theirs are but a few of the numerous pieces of writing and thinking on the philosophical aspects of the work of Yves Bonnefoy.

work.[66] Jean-Claude Pinson, for instance, even goes as far as describing Bonnefoy's work as "poésophie" (11).

For the reader, the crucial problem concerning Bonnefoy and philosophy crystallizes not only around the necessity of identifying precisely what the term "philosophy" means for Bonnefoy, but also of determining the context within which our own use of a so-called "philosophical approach" might allow us to enter Bonnefoy's texts and comprehend their positions more easily and fruitfully. In some highly significant sense, recognizing the underlying philosophical intent that motivates Bonnefoy's writing is essential because this recognition enables us to understand some aspects of his writing that might otherwise remain unclear. Thus, to say that Bonnefoy seeks to convey a philosophical stance allows us better to grasp the gravity with which he approaches the issues that are at stake for him. These stakes are necessarily high, because he is striving to transmit a position that contains an ontological, even profoundly moral, dimension. The moral quality of Bonnefoy's writing has been evoked by a number of critics; it plays a significant role in the function of the essays.[67] And as we saw in the preceding chapters, one of the latent characteristics of the essay is its potential to assume a didactic cast driven, rather naturally, by a form of moral imperative. Bonnefoy's essays frequently demonstrate this didactic quality.

In a sense, the didacticism of his essays can be interpreted as the natural result of the strength of his convictions about the essential and incontrovertible truth of his vision of the world and, in particular, his understanding of *présence*. We have already seen an example of the

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66 Briefly, we note here the existence of articles such as Pierre Dubrunquez' "La fonction ontologique de l'image chez Yves Bonnefoy," Graham Martin Dunstan's "Yves Bonnefoy and the Temptation of Plato," or Steven Winspur's three articles on Bonnefoy, "Bonnefoy cartésien?" "Three Strikes Against the Sign," and finally, "The Poetic Significance of the Thing-in-Itself." More recently, the work of Patrick Née or of Concetta Cavallini has tended in the direction of examining the work of Bonnefoy through the prism of the philosophical constructions it contains.

67 See, for example the chapter "La Conscience de la Poésie" in Richard Vernier's *Mots Comme le Ciel* text.

didactic thrust of Bonnefoy's writing in his use of the verb "affirmer". The example of "affirmer" is subtle; it operates at the level of vocabulary. More interesting is the fact that a similar didacticism also motivates the semantic content and choice of themes and images in his writing. This "prise de position" as a standard of judgment is particularly evident in Bonnefoy's evaluation of the "success" (or lack thereof) of the works and artists examines in his essays. His comments on Paul Valéry, to whom he devotes several rather ambivalent pages in *L'Improbable,* show perhaps best this characteristic of his prose writings. He says of Valéry in the uncompromising first sentence of the essay: "Il y avait une force dans Valéry, mais elle s'est égarée" (*I*, 99). Here, the sense of losing one's way is mitigated by Bonnefoy's acknowledgement of the strength of Valéry. The real condemnation comes later: "Valéry a méconnu le mystère de la présence" (*I,* 100), and points directly at the heart of Bonnefoy's criterion for judgment: the all-important notion of *présence*.

Similarly, but in a positive light this time, Bonnefoy's comments on a painting by the artist Balthus point toward the central role that *présence* assumes in his examination of works of art. Writing on the painting *Le Passage du Commerce*, Bonnefoy describes a child depicted in the painting: "En vérité, cet enfant est un autre mode de l'Etre, ou plutôt son autre moment. Au-delà du monde spectral, encore obscurci par ses brumes, il signifie la présence qui a repris dans l'absence" (*I*, 55). Balthus, the reader understands, is an artist who has succeeded in capturing the transcendental nature of *présence* by his commitment to its ephemeral nature. Even more specifically, Bonnefoy's comments on the watercolors of Raoul Ubac show how capturing the dynamics of *présence* might be achieved within the static frame of a painting. Through the suggestion that presence emerges not just through the use of color, but rather through an intention that color serves, Bonnefoy gives crucial importance to the *primacy* of presence. Indeed, when he writes that "Ubac semble poser d'emblée par cette couleur qui domine, la catégorie de présence,

et n'y inscrire qu'ensuite la variété des choses terrestres," (*I*, 298) he also suggests that in this particular instance, presence precedes its more representational manifestations.

Statements of this type have a dual function. Specifically, they serve, of course, to situate Bonnefoy's position. But at the same time, the fact that all meaning in the texts above rests upon the one word *présence*, underscores yet again the idea that this word represents in a telegraphic manner the whole of Bonnefoy's intellectual and philosophical interaction not only with the natural world, but also with the representation of the world through the plastic arts and writing. And it is precisely the ubiquity of the notion of *présence* which brings us to a dimension which clearly indicates its philosophical intent, namely, its *universality*. By universality I mean something quite specific, and which is a dominant characteristic in Bonnefoy's writing: in the body his work, presence appears both as *telos* and as *tool*. Let me expand. Presence–particularly in the poetry—can be read as the subject of the writing in the sense that Bonnefoy identifies the very function of his poems as being one of providing access to presence. Presence can thus be seen as the quiescent subject underlying each poetic image. In parallel, and more frequently used thus in the essays, presence also appears as an object, that is, the tool which serves to provide an analysis of different aspects of reality. Because of this double function, I would contend that *all* aspects of Bonnefoy's writing can be defined as a means to express *présence*.

Our present concern is with his essays. A quick shorthand definition of them would argue that their principal characteristic lies in the fact that they are organized around the notion of a quest for *présence*, seen in things both ordinary and extraordinary: in the broken dying leaf on the ground as well as in the most painstakingly created work of art. In other words, although Bonnefoy's essays take as their *point de départ* a great variety of subjects, ranging from an examination of mortuary ornaments in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne," to Yeats and the notion of place in "Byzance," or even the question of temporality in the paintings of Quattrocento artists,

their central question is always the following: has this work of art, this artist, this object, this person accounted for *présence*? If so, how? And if not, where has he, she, or it failed? The general orientation of the essays is thus determined by Bonnefoy's attempt to investigate, develop, and finally express the specificity of this vision of the world.

But presence, as we saw earlier, has its own contours and existence; it is a notion that began, and to a large extent remains, external to Bonnefoy's co-opting of it. What then are the particularities of the way in which it functions in Bonnefoy's universe? And what are the elements that might have caused Bonnefoy's development of his own notion of presence to set against the multiple meanings that have historically devolved to the term? To return to the idea suggested a few pages ago, Bonnefoy's understanding of the world did not emerge out of nothing. Chapter Two gave a glimpse of the tentacular nature of definitions of presence, suspended as they were shown to be between theology and philosophy, and articulated around the linguistic tool of deixis. But if Bonnefoy's incorporation of the term into his own thinking must be measured against the various meanings latent in the term, it must also be juxtaposed with the ideas with which he himself has come into contact. Indeed, it is only by comparing Bonnefoy's *présence* with a certain number of ideas that have come to characterize the intellectual activity of the last half-century that one might glean a better understanding not only of the specifics of his standpoint, but also a feeling for how this position conforms to, or retreats from other intellectual positions with which many readers are familiar. Unsurprisingly, a great number of intellectual currents have nourished the development of what one might define as Bonnefoy's own philosophy. The Bibliothèque Nationale's catalogue to its exhibit on Bonnefoy–which was closely supervised by the poet himself— mentions some of the more esoteric texts which, because he found them to be "naturellement poétiques," had an impact on him: "le *Popol-Vuh*, livre des Indiens de l'ancien Guatemala, […] et le *Livre des morts* des anciens Egyptiens" (*YB*,

55). But it seems clear that in Bonnefoy's intellectual landscape, even those texts which are naturally poetic must be met and joined by other texts which have the life of the mind and the moral development of the individual as their point of reference. He writes in his essay, "Sur la fonction du poème," "Mais j'étais aussi, dans ces années-là, lecteur de Kierkegaard, de Chestov, qui m'enseignaient la valeur, fondatrice, du rapport qui oriente le moi vers les autres êtres, dans l'ouvert, le risqué du temps vécu, où le destin se décide" (*NR*, 271).

It is his response to several of the more firmly established intellectual movements of his time that will interest us here, for one can glimpse in Bonnefoy's retreat from these powerful and seductive lines of thought the outline of the system he proposes against them. Surrealism, of course, is unavoidable, particularly because his connection to this movement is openly avowed by Bonnefoy, making it the focus of a certain amount of critical attention. Less obvious are Bonnefoy's connections with structuralism, notably in its linguistic aspects, especially insofar as these shade off into the more full-fledged doubt on the capacity of language for true communication proposed by the deconstructionist vision of the world. In parallel with these fields, some attention must be given to the impact on Bonnefoy's *présence* of the more purely philosophical ideas proposed by some phenomenological thinkers. Here, the relationship is perhaps a more nuanced one than that one can see in Bonnefoy's fairly marked rejection of surrealist and structuralist/deconstructionist positions. For while surrealism and structuralism contain the seeds of what will eventually germinate into Bonnefoy's development of the notion of *présence* and its potential for expression in language, the phenomenological investigation into the nature of the relationship between subject and object provides an understanding how this presence can appear.

As concerns surrealism, there is certainly no question about Bonnefoy's temporary allegiance to the movement: his relationship with surrealism has been examined and commented

upon by a number of critics, and the poet himself addresses the issue in a series of interviews with John Jackson reprinted in *Entretiens sur la poésie*.[68] Consequently, the influence of surrealism on the young Bonnefoy cannot be doubted. As he writes in "Sur la fonction du poème," many years after his first contacts with surrealism, "et si mes premières lectures, du romantisme aux sentiments altruistes ou du classicisme aux transparences apparemment maîtrisées, m'avaient peu aidé à l'entendre, la poétique surréaliste, qui fut mon lieu de maturation aux problématiques modernes, quand j'eus un peu plus de vingt ans, ne pouvait pas ne pas m'y conduire" (*NR*, 271). Structuralism, on the other hand, and even more so deconstructionism, present different problems with relation to Bonnefoy's thought. In a sense, the very notion of associating Bonnefoy's name with that of structuralism is an equivocal endeavor. In part, this is due to the fact that structuralism is an intellectual movement which has neither the cohesion nor the accepted platform that typified surrealism. Still, because of the way Bonnefoy positions his own examination of the capacity of language, combined with his incorporation of linguistic terms into his own discourse, it is clear that he accepts some of the fundamental structuralist notions. This is not the case for, however, for his interaction with deconstructionist thought, regarding which his criticism is patent.

To recapitulate, I would argue with many of Bonnefoy's other commentators, that surrealism was instrumental in allowing Bonnefoy to initiate his construction of the notion of *présence,* largely through a rejection couched in almost theological terms of the fundamental premises expressed by the more viscerally committed surrealists. In parallel to this, the positive form of presence, particularly through the perception of an intimate connection between subject and object, cannot but recall some of the themes common in the phenomenological thought developed over the course of the twentieth century, and which are necessarily familiar to

[68] Most notably Buchs, and Jackson, among others.

Bonnefoy. During a colloquium at Pau, he himself indicated the following: "D'abord, je voudrais apporter cette précision: pour moi, après le surréalisme ce furent précisément ces pages de la *Phénoménologie de l'Esprit* qui ont été un des ébranlements fondateurs de ma réflexion poétique, ces pages sur l'ici-et-maintenant" (45). This comment conjoins the importance of phenomenology and the no-less important focus on deixis that characterizes his own thinking. And finally, I would suggest that Bonnefoy's explicit integration of certain key structuralist notions into his own perception of language and its potential for transmitting meaning, coupled with his fundamental opposition to some of the underlying premises of deconstructionism, have provided the impetus for his own thinking on language as a "vrai lieu" within which *présence* might appear. As concerns the essays, then, I would suggest that one can read them as markers for the milestones in the development of his thought, for they present the chronological construction of a mental process. Thus while the more thorny problem of the expression of *présence* in language emerges only later in the collection of essays, "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne," the first essay of *L'Improbable*, appears to be specifically structured around a demonstration and explanation of the notion of *présence.*

## "L'oiseau qui s'est dépris d'être Phénix": Surrealism and the Emergence of *Présence*

Despite his undeniable allegiance to certain thinkers and philosophers, Bonnefoy began quite early in his career to establish his own vision of the world and of the relationship between writing and representation. Through his early and short-lived association with the surrealist movement, he came to the attention of Jean-Paul Sartre. As indicated in the Introduction, Sartre, who harshly criticizes the surrealists, favorably quotes the young Bonnefoy as being one of the

few among them who recognizes that "L'imaginaire pur et la praxis sont difficilement compatibles" (Sartre, note 6, 302-303). Indeed, as early as 1947, Bonnefoy took his distance from surrealism, asking in an article which appeared in *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, "Le recours à l'imaginaire, qui est critique de l'état social, qui est protestation, et précipitation de l'histoire, risque-t-il de couper les ponts qui nous relient en même temps qu'à la réalité, aux autres hommes?" (cited by J-P Sartre, *ibid*. 303). These comments point toward Bonnefoy's then nascent preoccupation with the necessity of maintaining the links between the self and the world, and his growing realization that the exclusive attention to the imagination preached by the more dogmatic surrealists might not suffice to maintain these links. When he finally refused to sign the 1947 Surrealist Manifesto, *Rupture inaugurale*, the distances between Bonnefoy and the surrealists were already sufficiently established so that the final break was hardly the occasion of high emotion. In a later interview with John E. Jackson (1976), Bonnefoy states that "tout s'acheva sans les drames de l'espérance déçue. Breton se contenta à la sortie du café de ne pas me tendre la main, il n'y eut ni exclusion ni injures" (*EsP*, 71).

What then, if anything, did Bonnefoy take from surrealism? In the article entitled "La Nouvelle Objectivité," a very early piece published in *La Révolution la Nuit*, his review of short duration (two issues, 1945-46), Bonnefoy grappled with the relationship between surrealism and science. Impressed with the then-recent discoveries in the physical and biological sciences, Bonnefoy was nonetheless perturbed to find that the scientific eye penetrates the real objects given in this world and then intellectually discards their holistic presence in order to address the particular or atomic existence which constitutes them. He recalls his discomfiture in the passage from *Entretiens sur la poésie* that I quoted in an earlier chapter, and where he notes that contrary to the modern sciences, "l'ancienne science" could maintain all aspects of reality in an integrated network of correspondences (*EsP*, 73). By contrast with the blindness of science and its

apparently deliberate rejection of the reality perceived on a human scale through the apparatus of the human senses, Bonnefoy appreciated in surrealism the hallmark term of "merveilleux," or openness and attentiveness to the juxtapositions and coincidences of the things of the world, and which was already a first step toward *présence* in poetry. But even more than the watchful readiness which itself indicates a sort of communion with the world, Bonnefoy found in the techniques that surrealism proposed—specifically in automatic writing—the possibility of transferring the openness of the "merveilleux" into a written form. As he later wrote in a letter to John Jackson,

> si j'ai aimé le surréalisme, c'est parce qu'il révélait —et paraissait même rendre immédiatement et facilement praticable— ce qu'on a nommé plus tard l'écriture, c'est-à-dire l'écoute que l'on peut faire durer, dans les mots que nous traçons sur la page, de la pluralité des voix qui hantent notre inconscient et troublent d'ailleurs déjà notre parole ordinaire. (*EsP*, 90)

And yet, surrealism also failed Bonnefoy. The "network of correspondences" to which Bonnefoy refers, many decades after his initial allegiance to the surrealist movement, turns out to be as absent from the surrealist vision as it is from the scientific approach to reality. More precisely, the problem of surrealism lies in what Bonnefoy perceives as its inadequate grasp—or even distortion—of reality. Daniel Leuwers notes Bonnefoy's position in his monograph *Yves Bonnefoy*: "L'image ou l'objet surréalistes, [...] eux qui se proclament à la recherche de plus de réalité [...] finalement n'opèrent qu'un trou dans la réalité et retranchent ainsi à cette réalité même" (13). This rather abstract position is rendered somewhat clearer when one juxtaposes it with Bonnefoy's appreciation of certain surrealist works. Although he admired Breton's *Les Vases Communicants* and *L'Amour Fou* his disappointment with *Nadja* derives from his perception that instead of being an open attentiveness to the reality and rhythms of other individuals, *Nadja* is rather a solipsistic imposition of Breton's own viewpoint on the personality of the main character: "Breton est tout dans cette souveraineté illusoire où Nadja, qu'il croit

reconnaître pourtant comme une présence libre, n'a pas droit pour autant à sa vérité, qui est trop simple, trop ordinaire" (*EsP*, 123).[69] The reference here is, of course, to Breton, in *Nadja*, bitterly reproaching the young woman for giving free rein to her own "propos oisifs, et non pas les autres qui m'importaient tant" (*Nadja*, 157).

From this type of comment one easily gleans the fact that at least in this specific instance, Breton imposes rather than reads reality and this, in Bonnefoy's eyes, is a clear perversion of the attitude we should have toward the world. Finally, while it is true, as Leuwers says, that surrealism was problematic for Bonnefoy because it espoused a skewed, and ultimately, fundamentally inadequate vision of reality, the question seems only later to become much more clearly defined in Bonnefoy's mind in terms of a philosophical rejection of the premises of surrealism. In 1947, it appears from his later comments that he was primarily disturbed by the "occultist" direction that Breton and the inner circle of the surrealists were taking:

> je m'imaginais que le surréalisme était tout le contraire d'un occultisme, autrement dit qu'il ne tendait qu'a révéler les richesses du monde qui tombe sous les sens, et de la vie possible en son sein, sans croire à des puissances cachées. […] Voir, dans ces conditions, Breton et ses nouveaux amis se passionner pour la magie, faire de Léonie Aubois d'Ashby une sorte de démon, se préparer à lui dresser un autel à l'exposition prochaine, c'était déconcertant. (*EsP*, 72)

It is useful to examine Bonnefoy's rejection of surrealism, even couched as it is here in a primary rejection of "l'occultisme," for even though the comments cited here were made many years after the initial break, and may thus reflect a more developed position than actually existed at the time, they also indicate the importance for him of his passage through surrealism, and his desire to establish this passage firmly within the continuum of his thought. He warns John Jackson about the potential unreliability of memory and thought, saying that

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[69] In point of fact, it is clear from Bonnefoy's later comments that Breton's work never held a primary place in his heart. Of the two books of surrealist poetry which he says affected him the most, Tzara's *L'Homme approximatif* and Eluard's *L'Immaculée conception*, neither is wholly by Breton, since the latter text was a collaboration between Breton and Eluard.

> Il est malaisé […] de revenir ainsi sur des époques anciennes, même et surtout s'il s'agit de ce qui a compté le plus dans la formation de notre pensée. Je ne tiens pas de journal, je ne note rien de ce qui fut, j'oublie beaucoup, je cours donc le risque de recomposer à partir de mes valeurs d'aujourd'hui ce que j'ai vécu jadis de façon confuse et contradictoire, et avec peut-être d'autres tendances que je méconnais sinon refoule. (*EsP*, 76)

Noteworthy here is not only the intellectual honesty of his caveat, but also the explicit concession that the period associated with surrealism is one "qui a compté le plus dans la formation de [sa] pensée." Consequently, despite the brevity of Bonnefoy's contact with the surrealists, this connection has continued to interest his commentators. This is not without some justification, for, as I suggested earlier, in the rejection of surrealism also lies the discovery of its embryonic replacement, and thence, the establishing of a "prise de position" that will eventually inform all of Bonnefoy's writing. This replacement, needless to say, is the first intimation of what Bonnefoy will eventually come to call *présence*, incorporating and refining the term to the point of eventually predicating all meaning in his work upon it.

The first element of importance is that the emergence of *présence* from the ashes of Bonnefoy's contact with surrealism cannot be reduced to a simple negation of all the basic tenets of surrealism in order to erect something wholly opposed to it. Rather, the connection between Bonnefoy's developing thought and the precepts of surrealism as they were enunciated by Breton in his succession of *Manifestos* resembles much more a dialectical relationship wherein the initial rejection of the original surrealist notion is replaced by a more nuanced and richer synthesis derived from the original idea conjoined with the reasons which brought Bonnefoy to reject that idea. Thus *présence* surely takes something from surrealism, even if this something is only the first step on the path of its own affirmation, and similarly, something remains of the initial allegiance, even in the face of its refusal, as John Jackson notes when he comments to Bonnefoy: "je vois que nous touchons ici au centre de votre pensée du surréalisme, où l'on perçoit aussi bien un attachement qu'un refus" (*EsP*, 74). My approach, thus, is to examine the tensions between

surrealism and nascent structure of *présence,* not only because it is the collision between these two visions of the world which eventually led to Bonnefoy's definitive repudiation of surrealism, but also because the reasons he gives themselves shed light on several important aspects of *présence*.

## Theological Grounds of Opposition

The clearest element of Bonnefoy's opposition to surrealism is based neither on a point of poetic technique—automatic writing, for example—nor on general definitions of what constitutes poetry—prose or verse, presence or absence of rhyme, meter, etc. Rather, his opposition turns on what is almost a question of theology, expressed by him in terms of a "unity" that allowed him to turn away from surrealism and move closer to a form of attachment to the sacred which, naturally, cannot but evoke religious connotations:

> C'est elle [l'unité] qui nous demande de nous confier à la finitude, parce qu'il n'est de totalité que dans la reconnaissance réciproque des parties, laquelle est limitation, par essence: mais qui nous vaut ainsi, dans l'assomption même de notre rien, d'accéder à l'universel. Et là est l'acte que je dirais religieux, là le sacré en puissance, —et là de quoi se détacher du surréalisme, dont l'erreur fut au total de ne pas avoir foi dans les formes simples de la vie, préférant le déploiement de l'imaginaire au resserrement de l'évidence, la roue du paon aux pierres du seuil. (*EsP*, 82)

Bonnefoy accuses surrealism of having been in error, but this error itself springs from a deeper problem, that of not having kept the faith ("ne pas avoir [eu] foi") because of its fundamental incapacity to perceive the unity that forms the linking web of reality. This question of faith and unity is highly apposite to the notion of *présence*, particularly as the theological acceptations of the term shade off into its more philosophical ramifications. Indeed, it is important to bear in mind that Bonnefoy's two main centers of interest reproduce the constant equilibrium that *présence* maintains between theology and philosophy. One of the chapters of the Bibliothèque National's catalogue of its Yves Bonnefoy exhibit–significantly entitled "Les Livres

qui ont compté"—clearly indicates the importance of the theo-philosophical axis to Bonnefoy's thought. Discussing his readings of Plotinus, Shestov and others, the text asks: "Ces lectures étaient-elles de philosophie […] ou plutôt de théologie?" The answer is telling: "Les plus importantes furent en tout cas aux confins des deux domaines" (*YB*, 54). Still, what Bonnefoy drew from those texts is not without its own ambivalence, when one remembers the statement quoted in Chapter Two, where we saw Bonnefoy saying squarely in an interview with Bernard Falciola, "je ne suis pas chrétien […] je n'ai pas de foi" (*EsP*, 45-6). And yet, he adds in the same breath, "je trouve précieuses […] de nombreuses notions chrétiennes […] et j'ai à des moments, non une foi, bien sûr, mais une foi dans la foi possible" (*ibid*.). Is it this vision, or even yearning for a possible faith, that leads Bonnefoy to adopt so many terms that are the central components of a religious vocabulary?

Indeed, in his initial comment, he links "unity," (clearly an early avatar of *presence*) and surrealism through the mechanism of a vocabulary which cannot but have theological reverberations: "sentiment religieux," "le sacré en puissance," "ne pas avoir foi," etc. Numerous similar lexical instances are scattered both his written work and in comments he has made, with a few notable instances including the unequivocal title of the poem "Dévotion," his description of poetry as a form of "résurrection" (*Pau*, 132), or his attribution, in *L'Arrière-Pays*, of the quality of "péché originel" to language. The list could be lengthily extended. His use of this type of vocabulary, when coupled with statements such as: "Qu'on le sache ou non, qu'on le veuille ou pas, on est toujours engagé dans ce qui est par essence contradictoire, et qu'il faut bien appeler, d'un mot aujourd'hui suspect, notre dimension religieuse" (*EsP*, 41), strongly suggests that the theological element which is such an integral part of the historical notion of presence is substantially assimilated into Bonnefoy's own form of it. Thus critic Svein Eirik Fauskevag indicates of Bonnefoy's poetry that "L'ambition que traduit cette poésie et qui vise à exprimer

universellement et à figurer multiplement une présence ontologique, la rapproche en effet d'une fonction de l'eucharistie" (*Pau* 466).

Further, the conjunction between Bonnefoy's *présence* and a certain theological quality appears clearly in the vocabulary used by the critical community to describe Bonnefoy's term. Richard Stamelman, for instance has proposed the following way to think about Bonnefoy's notion of *présence*. In his article "The Presence of Light/ The Light of Presence: Yves Bonnefoy," Stamelman defines *présence* as "an ephemeral experience of unity, a fleeting vision of the One, and an encounter of almost epiphanic intensity with the absolute, all transpiring in the most mundane situations, as they occur within the multiplicity of the world's transitory reality" (45). This definition, along with Stamelman's use of vocabulary often associated with religious matters ("the One," "epiphanic intensity," or even "the absolute,"), clearly replicates a theological direction and gives credence to the idea that Bonnefoy's choice of the word *présence* is perhaps no more than the most obvious materialization of an insistently theological undercurrent in his work.

Given Bonnefoy's explicit ambivalence regarding Christian theology, however, the more significant question is that of determining why this religious aspect is so insistently present in his work. I would suggest that one of the most important consequences of this theological dimension is the suggestion of a moral imperative which incites Bonnefoy to take a position that is both critical and didactic with respect to the positions of other thinkers. Earlier, we glanced at his very oriented analysis of Valéry. Similarly, in his rejection of surrealism, Bonnefoy couches his denial in terms of a repudiation of misplaced and faulty ideals ("le surréalisme, dont l'erreur fut au total de ne pas avoir foi dans les formes simples de la vie.") His criticism is subtle, but unequivocal: surrealism was faulty, "in error," because it was dazzled by the false glory of spreading peacock feathers, when it should have paid more attention to the solid honesty of the stones that mark a

threshold. The didactic element derives, of course, from the intransigence of his position, for if surrealism was wrong, then, clearly, Bonnefoy is showing us that whatever our personal opinions about its esthetic appeal, we must turn away from the underlying intellectual position as one turns away from an outdated scientific theory. In other words, Bonnefoy seems to suggest that a contemporary belief in the fundamental positions of surrealism is akin to continuing to accept the medieval concept of a flat earth. This is not to say that these theories were useless. On the contrary, they each had a function in that they allowed the thinkers of the time to conceptualize the larger issues, that is, considerations on the shape of the earth, or thoughts about the function and capacity of poetry, but, in the final analysis, they were each no more than intellectual markers in the process of thinking.

This very specific recategorization of surrealism is particularly evident in a 1976 interview with John Jackson. There, Bonnefoy praises surrealism for having had the capacity to see things that the past periods of poetry had been blind to: "ces mille choses à la fois furtives et insistantes que la poésie antérieure n'avait pas su interroger, même à l'époque du symbolisme, n'avait pas même entrevues" (*EsP*, 73). His criticism, however, is carried in the idea that even this potential eventually flagged and degenerated. Hence his somewhat curious comment to Jackson that surrealistic writing was "une pratique compensatrice historiquement nécessaire" (*ibid*.). This statement seems to definitively confirm Bonnefoy's rejection of surrealism through the suggestion that the practices it developed, namely, the attention to the processes of the imagination, the desire to read meaning in the juxtaposition of objects present in the world, the transmission from the unconscious to the conscious mind through the techniques of automatic writing, had their place, as they "compensated" for the poverty and blindness of prior poetic investigations. But what seems to me more interesting is the reverse side of his comment: by ostensibly valorizing surrealism as having been "historically necessary," Bonnefoy, in sum,

dismisses it as something that falls into the category of history, and therefore can be discarded as outmoded. This can only be seen in counterdistinction to the *présence* which replaces it in his thought, appearing as essential, ahistorical, a revelation of the true nature of reality.

Given the strength of the theological dimension contained in the word, the notion of revelation is not so far-fetched here, for the significance of adopting a term so clearly derived from liturgical discourse lies, as I suggested above, in furnishing a moral imperative that grounds the totality of Bonnefoy's work, both poetry and prose. This point furnishes, I believe, the grounds for the didactic cast so eminently characteristic of Bonnefoy's essays. More generally, however, the net effect on the reader of the use of such vocabulary is to consolidate his position in a highly serious moral battleground where the stakes are those of thought and soul. This moral dimension is seen particularly clearly in statements such as a description of "l'acte de présence" in the 1959 essay "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie," where Bonnefoy writes:

> S'il est vrai que la question reste entière de savoir ce que serait un salut, si nous avons eu à douter dans la mesure même, presque dans l'instant même où nous avons eu à croire, nous avons reçu malgré tout le bien d'une certitude, nous savons qu'elle est l'origine, au-delà d'une révision des fins humains, qu'il nous restera pour fonder. Désormais nous avons une raison d'être, qui est cet acte soudain. Et un devoir et une morale, au moins *par provision*, qui sera de le retrouver. (*I*, 125, emphasis Bonnefoy)

Here, even beyond the general gist of the passage, and its evocation of salvation and belief, Bonnefoy's use of italics, "*par provision*," echoes Descartes own proposal of a "morale provisoire" by which to govern one's life during the intellectual process of determining the certitude based on the formulation of the *cogito*. Bonnefoy's recourse to the Cartesian phrase in the context of examining *présence* thus has a double thrust: on the one hand, in terms of the "purpose" or "goal," it points to a certain parallelism between the didactic ambition so present in the *Discours de la méthode* and Bonnefoy's own work, and on the other hand, it anchors

Bonnefoy's own thinking within the Cartesian model of a philosophy informed by theological concerns.[70]

This view of a writing presented if not as a form of morality, at least as a guide for moral understanding is vitally important for the interconnection between Bonnefoy's poetry and his essays, and is also highly consonant with comments he has made concerning his own work. It is clear that the moral dimension of poetry is of primordial importance for him. He writes in "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité" that "une intention de salut […] est le seul souci du poème" (*I,* 252), and that the function of the poem is, in conjunction with its objective of salvation, to "permettre de [se] vivre dans la justice" (*ibid.*). What remains intriguing in this position is that although poetry is given as the very form of morality, the intellectual association of poetry and morality itself appears only in the essay.

More globally, Bonnefoy's use of a lexicon so clearly signposted as theological also indicates his own understanding of presence. This suggestion can appear counter-intuitive from the perspective of Bonnefoy's repeated insistence that he is not a believer. Richard Vernier, in his *Yves Bonnefoy ou les Mots comme le Ciel* cites some lines from *Dans le Leurre du Seuil* in order to warn readers of the error of any hasty assimilation of Bonnefoy's position to that of a "chrétien qui s'ignore" (25). He considers Bonnefoy's position to be one of

> Subversion radicale, car il est bien clair que Bonnefoy ne croit pas au Dieu du dogme […] Ainsi écrit-il [...]
> tu peux nommer Dieu ce vase vide,
> Dieu qui n'est pas, mais qui sauve le don
> Dieu sans regard mais dont les mains renouent,
> Dieu nuée, Dieu enfant et à naître encore... (23)

And yet, it is the Christian paradigm that allows us to take a first step in understanding the particularity of Bonnefoy *présence*. A passage from "L'Acte et le lieu…" explains the double

[70] On the point of Bonnefoy's Cartesianism, see Stephen Winspur's "Bonnefoy Cartésien?" which argues that "une seule et même matrice gouverne à la fois une poésie du *corps* chez Bonnefoy et une philosophie de l'*âme* chez Descartes" (244).

poles of his attraction for and rejection of Christianity. "La difficulté de la poésie moderne," he writes, "c'est qu'elle a à se définir, dans un même instant, par le christianisme et contre lui" (*I*, 122). This is because Christianity hinges upon the suffering of a specific individual—Jesus Christ—in a specific time and place, thus giving dignity and worth to the notion of the singularity of each being. And yet, Bonnefoy says, "le christianisme n'affirme qu'un court instant l'existence singulière. Chose créée, il la reconduit à Dieu dans les voies de la Providence et voici *ce qui est* privé une fois encore de sa valeur absolue" (*ibid*., emphasis Bonnefoy). The opposition Bonnefoy discerns between the specificity of the individual and the tendency of larger systems to transform this specificity into abstraction is the first step toward apprehending Bonnefoy's presence.

It is telling that in its earliest incarnation, the web of interlocking ideas and sensations that Bonnefoy now terms *présence* had a different name: *le sensible*, which he abandoned in favor of the term *présence* which is so familiar to readers of his poetry and prose. In a 1972 interview, he explains why he eschewed the term "le sensible":

> c'est un mot [le sensible] que je n'emploie plus, car on pourrait le comprendre comme signifiant «concret», «réservé à la pratique des sens», alors qu'il ne s'agit pas pour moi de la simple apparence, de la texture du monde, mais de ce qui, au contraire, échappe à la perception, quitte à lui conférer en retour son intensité, son sérieux. (*EsP*, 58)

A comparison of the 1959 and the 1980 editions of *L'Improbable* renders this comment even clearer.[71] In the 1980 version of the essay "Paul Valéry," Bonnefoy writes a condemnatory phrase that I cited earlier: "Valéry a méconnu le mystère de la présence" (*I*, 100). In 1959, the sentence read: "Valéry a méconnu le mystère de la *substance*" (*I*, 1959, 137, my emphasis). The substitution of the newer term *présence* points to a dematerialization of the original notion, taking it beyond the passive thingness of matter toward a more dynamic notion of the being contained within it. Further, these comments allow us to glean a notion of what *présence* is *not*, that is, one

[71] If I combine these two printings, it is because at the level of the text, there is essentially no difference between the 1980 and the 1990 editions.

understands that it is not only the natural quality of the world —its "texture"— but rather something which simultaneously lies beyond perception, and acts on this very perception to give it an impact stronger that a mere physical experience of the world.

This brings us back full circle to the psychological impact of the choice of the word *présence*, for Bonnefoy's comment makes clear the fact that for him *présence* partakes of at least an intellectual, but even more so a spiritual and philosophical understanding of the world. The choice of the word which communicates this understanding is thus of significance, especially when compared with other words, such as bread, wine, ivy, stone, fire, etc., that appear regularly in Bonnefoy's constellation of signifying terms. He writes in *Entretiens sur la poésie*:

> Que je dise: *le pain, le vin*, ces deux mots seulement, et l'on aura tout de suite à l'esprit, je pense, un certain type de relations essentielles entre les êtres […], ce sont là des mots pour la communion, des mots qui font souvenir que la langue n'est pas vouée seulement à décrire les apparences, mais à nous tourner vers autrui pour fonder avec lui un lieu et décider de son sens. (*EsP*, 21; emphasis Bonnefoy)

From this, one gathers that Bonnefoy's selection of the word *présence* is guided by moral considerations which, in turn, have the capacity to project a didactic function. For his choice allows him to successfully capitalize on the semantic weight historically carried by the word in order to create—or at least suggest—a sense of communion that is within the grasp of most of his readers. As Jean-Pierre Richard suggests, the word *présence* has the positive function of the "leurre," the snare or trap to which Bonnefoy so frequently refers in his writing (Richard, 229).[72] It is a positively charged space which has the potential to be filled with a meaning that the readers can share with the writer and also use as a means of exchange in their own interaction with the world.

[72] Most notably in the title of Bonnefoy's fourth volume of poetry, *Dans le Leurre du Seuil.*

And yet, Bonnefoy's *présence* has a philosophical specificity which takes it beyond the purely theological definition given to the word. John Naughton compares it with the *punctum*[73] that Roland Barthes evokes in *La Chambre claire* and defines it in the following manner: "In its most general sense, then, 'presence' is precisely what is beyond, or outside of, conceptual categories or a conditioned perception" (18). To most attentive readers of Bonnefoy, this is an accurate definition of *présence*. However, when one begins to examine the definition more objectively, it becomes apparent that it describes *présence* as an indescribable element lying outside the boundaries of the conceptually apprehendable. Naughton himself notes in a later publication this difficulty in pinning down an exact definition of *présence*, pointing out that

> The term 'presence' occurs in a great variety of contexts in Bonnefoy's writings, both in the critical essays and in the poems themselves, and although the term is clearly the cornerstone of his entire poetics, the idea is never defined once and for all, and this is one reason why it has become the object of considerable discussion in analyses of his work. It seems to me, furthermore, that there is a certain evolution and development in Bonnefoy's own understanding and use of the term, and that this in part explains why there should be some confusion and disagreement about its meaning and validity. (43-4)

Certainly, Naughton's point about the evolution of Bonnefoy's position on presence merits careful attention, for, tellingly, the poet has on numerous occasions, attempted to clarify the notion of *présence* by furnishing descriptions. I would argue, however, that it is less the meaning of *présence* that has been subjected to shifts and realignments, but rather a double problem linked first to the complicated relationship between presence and "ce qui est," and the no less important question of whether and how *présence* can find expression in language. We encountered the notion of "ce qui est" in its startling association with "l'improbable" in the first chapter. I suggested there that one way of contrasting Bonnefoy's *présence* with "ce qui est" is to see *présence* as a dynamic gesture that allows the fundamental nature of reality to be revealed. In

[73] Barthes, in *La Chambre claire*, describes the opposition between the *punctum*, something which "pricks" one, and the *studium*, something that is coded and thus is always apprehended through conscious reflection. Bonnefoy himself alludes to Barthes' text in his own text, *Présence & Image*, saying that *La Chambre claire* moves him greatly because he finally sees in this book a movement toward poetry that had not been present in Barthes' prior work.

other words, it is through the action of *présence* that the individual can enter into contact with "ce qui est." Indeed, the two terms interact in a relation that could almost be qualified as symbiotic, in the sense that "ce qui est" cannot be accessed without the effect of presence, while simultaneously, presence can have no significance without the underlying stability of "ce qui est." But at the same time, despite its inherent stability, "ce qui est" cannot be equated with the notion of "concept." Rather, it serves as a copulate to articulate the opposition between presence and concept.

## Polar Opposites: Presence and Concept

Despite Bonnefoy's dismissal of it, "concept" is important, for in the progression of his thought, the idea of *présence* is itself developed and consolidated through one of the most salient characteristics of his work, namely, his antagonism to the notion of the concept, This is most clearly developed in *L'Improbable*. Generally speaking, it is difficult to deny the ubiquitousness of the concept, which has so long formed the cornerstone of Western philosophy that it has become inextricably enmeshed in our understanding of the very functioning of thought. In the earlier chapter outlining the general notion of presence, it was suggested that Bonnefoy spurns the substantive "concept" in order to replace it with the dynamic act of "affirmer." However, the simple replacement of one word by another is far from sufficient to explain the nature of the change that it marks, for it begs the question of why Bonnefoy so vehemently rejects the concept. In point of fact, it would seem that *présence* and "concept," though standing at opposite poles within the arena of his thought, are connected to each other through the even more nebulous notion of "ce qui est." Consequently, since "concept" represents the very antithesis of *présence*, to understand what it represents is, in a sense, to understand what *présence* is not.

There can be little doubt about the fact that in the development of a Bonnefoyian philosophy, the notion of concept, along with the attendant idea of "ce qui est" relies at least in part upon the work of Leo Shestov. Indeed, one of the essays Bonnefoy chose to include in *L'Improbable* is "L'Obstination de Chestov[74]." And, as already indicated, Bonnefoy specifically directed me to Shestov's *Le Pouvoir des clefs* in order to better understand his own position. And yet, though *Potestas clavium* (in the original title) is an important marker in Shestov's thought, his best-known and most emblematic work is *Athens and Jerusalem*, which is widely considered to be the most complete expression of his thought (Martin, 389). Bonnefoy himself describes it as Shestov's "livre le plus hardi, le plus consequent" (*I,* 281), his encomium substantiated by the fact that his essay on Shestov was originally written to be the preface to the de Schloezer translation of *Athens and Jersualem*. In this final text, Shestov describes Western history as a conflict between Reason and Faith, respectively symbolized by the two cities that gave birth to these notions. And although he does not deny the usefulness of reason in addressing a number of practical aspects of human existence, Shestov is bitterly opposed to the fact that Western thought has erected Reason as the supreme–indeed, the only—virtue. His impassioned "revolt against scientism and philosophical rationalism" has, suggests philosopher Bernard Martin, repelled many of Shestov's readers and led to his relative obscurity in modern philosophical circles (387). And yet, Bonnefoy specifically says of Shestov's writing that it "touches" and "impresses" him, evoking profound echoes ("un retentissement profond" [*I,* 284]) in him. Indeed, it is difficult not to see reverberations of Shestov in the statements quoted earlier, wherein Bonnefoy expressed his uneasiness regarding "le parler scientifique" and the disjunction he observes between human beings and modern science.[75]

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[74] This is the French spelling of the philosopher's name.

[75] On this point, see also François Lurçat.

Shestov's position is not easy to grasp. Perhaps the easiest way to broach him is negatively, through his discussion of the necessary laws of nature to which man must submit. He describes this form of necessity in *Athens and Jerusalem*: "L'Ανάγχη[76] est invincible […] et la tâche de la philosophie consiste à enseigner aux hommes à se soumettre joyeusement à la nécessité qui n'entend rien et est indifférente à tout" (45). Shestov cogently constructs this argument only the better to demolish it, for the dark face of such a submission is the loss of that very freedom which should be characteristic of man. The obstinacy to which Bonnefoy refers in the title of his essay derives from Shestov's radical existentialism, his insistence upon the idea that faith alone can provide man with the possibility of breaking free of the iron grip of that of the rationally possible. For if man–and God himself—are subject to the apparently eternal, immutable laws that condition our existence, those physical laws that include, for instance, time, space, or death, then, perforce, it is these laws that dictate the limits of the possible and the impossible, not the will of God.

Against this, Shestov affirms the need for a faith so entire that it rends the veils that we take for self-evident truth. Faith, for him, suggests Martin, is not "a weaker form of knowledge (knowledge, so to speak, 'on credit,' for which proofs, though presently unavailable, are anticipated at some future time), but rather a completely different dimension of thought," for"the substance of this faith, emphatically denied by science and philosophy, is the daring and unsupported but paradoxically true conviction that all things are possible even, for instance, the negation of the laws of identity and temporality that form the bedrock of science and philosophy (393). Martin is at pains to point out that Shestov's dismissal of science is far from being a rabid and unconsidered rejection of scientific knowledge *per se*, pointing to Shestov's explanation, in *In Job's Balances*, that science and truth must not be considered on the same plane: "However

[76] "Necessity"

much we may have attained in science, yet we must remember that science can give us no truth because, by its very nature, it will not and cannot seek for the truth. The truth lies there where science sees the 'nothing,' in that single, uncontrollable, incomprehensible thing which is always at war with explanation, the 'fortuitous'" (Part II, Section 26, "Deus ex machina").

Shestov's embracing of "the 'fortuitous" and his concomitant struggle against the conceptual abstractions that science reifies as self-evident truths are significant markers on Bonnefoy's own path toward *présence*. An echo of them is clearly perceptible in the high value Bonnefoy imparts to the term *improbable.* But because it is the opposition itself that is the focus of his attention rather than the question of unconditional faith, Bonnefoy constructs a more restricted polarity than that of Shestov, limiting it to the opposition between presence and concept. Bonnefoy evokes the reasons for the antagonism between *présence* and concept when he writes in "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité" that "L'idée d'un être […] implique son existence, et cela vainc le concept, qui doit abolir celle-ci pour que ses formules prospèrent" (*I,* 251). It would seem, therefore, that the opposition between concept and *présence* lies in the fact that in order to function meaningfully, the concept needs intellectually to reduce a being into its most generalizable component parts. As a consequence, the concept eschews completely those aspects which are the sources of any being's specific reality.

With this perspective in mind, Bonnefoy makes no bones about the fact that in large part, his own writing is the development of an intellectual rejection of the concept because of the latter's own rejection of reality. His position is most clearly evoked in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne" where he writes, "rien n'est moins réel que le concept" (*I*, 19), and leads us through a litany of real things which can impinge on us, but which cannot be conceptually expressed:

> Je constate au-delà de la pensée cohérente que le moindre concept est l'artisan d'une fuite. [...] Y a-t-il un concept d'un pas venant dans la nuit, d'un cri, de l'éboulement d'une pierre dans les

> broussailles? De l'impression que fait une maison vide? Mais non, rien n'a été gardé du réel que ce qui convient à notre repos. (*I,* 15)

And if "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne" contains the most precise evocation of Bonnefoy's difficulty with the notion of the concept, this is not, I feel, by accident. For this essay, standing in the liminal position of his collected essays, is the initial call to action in which he exposes the broad outlines of his thought. Here he develops for the first time the structure of his rejections and affinities. And as concerns the concept, Bonnefoy evokes here the reasons for his emphatic rejection: its experiential inadequacy, which is itself linked to the concept's own relationship to reality, and more specifically, to the notion of mortality.

Bonnefoy affirms somewhat enigmatically that, "la peur de la mort […] est le secret du concept" (*I*, 28). Essentially, his argument rests on the idea that the concept is a philosophical creation whose function is to attenuate and mask the hard reality of the fact that we, that everything that lives also dies in this world: "Parce qu'on meurt dans ce monde et pour nier le destin l'homme a bâti de concepts cette demeure logique, où les seuls principes qui vaillent sont de permanence et d'identité" (*I*, 14). For it is clear that the concept has no reality of its own outside of the meandering paths of an intellectual apprehension of the world. Its function, at least philosophically, is evident: it allows us to think *in general* and manipulate ideas by abstracting from all things their particularity. Hence, to take a banal example, the existence of the concept allows us to think about tables or trees in general, without the need to refer to specific tables or trees. The concept is thus a powerful tool for abstract thought, but for Bonnefoy, just as for Shestov, it is precisely in this power of abstraction that the problem lies. He writes, still in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne,"

> De quelle chose sensible, d'ailleurs, de quelle pierre qui soit au monde le concept n'est-il détourné? Ce n'est pas seulement de la mort qu'il se sépare, c'est de tout ce qui a visage, de tout ce qui a chair, pulsation, immanence et qui est ainsi, il est vrai, pour sa secrète avarice, le danger le plus insidieux. (*I*, 20)

But what is this insidious danger of which he speaks, and why in fact, would it be a danger? What is the risk involved? I would argue, as Bonnefoy himself will in later essays, that if the reality of things presents a danger to the concept, the real danger is to us, but only indirectly, through language, and this because, in large part, the power that accrues to the concept is derived from its symbiotic relationship with language. For in a sense, there can be no concept without language, and, by the same token, no language without concepts.

It would appear from Bonnefoy's statements that for him, the concept follows the path established by the Platonic Ideal, creating within language a series of ideals which, despite their usefulness in structuring thought, remain unconnected with the reality within which we, as living beings, evolve. This notion emerges clearly in Bonnefoy's prose poem, "Anti-Platon," whose title evokes the poet's position with precision. Published by Maeght in 1962 (in an edition illustrated by Joan Mirò's [77]), it dates actually from 1947 and is one of Bonnefoy's earliest texts. It is an important marker in the development of the notions that subtend what will come to be *présence*. Although it has already been the object of some critical attention due its close connection with Bonnefoy's Surrealist period, to my mind, the text is even more significant because unlike others from the same period, such as, for example, the poem "Coeur-Espace," "Anti-Platon" has been explicitly reinserted into a larger perspective by the poet himself.[78] Indeed, the importance of the poem in the construction of Bonnefoy's ideas seems to be confirmed by the fact that it was reprinted in his 1978 volume of poetry *Poèmes,* along with *Du Mouvement et de L'Immobilité de Douve, Hier Régnant Désert, Pierre Ecrite* and *Dans le Leurre du Seuil*, each of which had previously appeared as individual texts.

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[77] After *Pierre Ecrite*, published with the artwork of Raoul Ubac in 1958, *Anti-Platon* was the second Bonnefoy poetic text to be published accompanied with the work of an artist. Bonnefoy has regularly collaborated with artists to produce texts that engage in a form of dialogue between poetic text and the plastic arts.

[78] See, for instance Arnaud Buchs, *Yves Bonnefoy à l'Horizon du Surréalisme*.

Statements made by Bonnefoy indicate that *Poèmes* is far more than a simple compilation of his extant poetry. Rather, it resembles much more a constructed artefact whose purpose is to define and describe the trajectory of his poetic project. A brief statement found at the end of *Poèmes* shows that Bonnefoy deliberately eschewed including a more recent version of *Hier Régnant Désert,* preferring instead to return to the older version:

> *Hier régnant désert* (1958) avait été assez profondément modifié à l'occasion de sa réédition en 1970 dans la collection Poésie, chez Gallimard. Mais il me semble aujourd'hui que ces pages ne peuvent prendre leur place dans l'ensemble de mes livres de poésie que sous la forme qui a permis en leur temps les développements ultérieurs. Je les préserve donc dans leur structure première, n'y apportant que quelques changements de détail qui clarifient peut-être en des points ce qu'il y avait là de superficiellement obscur ou d'indûment censuré. (*P*, 336)

Bonnefoy's comment indicates beyond any doubt the symbiotic and sequential links between the different collections of poetry: each collection would appear to contain the genesis of the subsequent one. As a corollary, Bonnefoy's desire to provide clarification, seems to reveal a latent anxiety that his readers might not adequately apprehend the development of his thought if they are not provided with the texts arranged in the very form of their development over time. Consequently, if we read the chronological order of the collections as the maturation of a poetic undertaking, "Anti-Platon" clearly has a liminal place in the development of Bonnefoy's ideas, and must thus be read not only poetically, but also in terms of the ideas it seeks to transmit.

This idea of the possible separation between theoretical content and the form that contains it echoes the point evoked in the Introduction concerning the "catégories de pensée" that Bonnefoy identifies as the link between certain of his essays and their "corresponding" collection of poems. There is a similar relationship between "Anti-Platon" and *Poèmes* insofar as in the latter, the text of "Anti-Platon" is dissociated from the Mirò artwork that accompanied the 1962 version,thus highlighting the autonomous significance not only of the poetic content, but also – and perhaps more pointedly—of the theoretical framework within which the poem operates. This theoretical axis is certainly a common reading of the poem of which Daniel Leuwers, for

instance, writes: "c'est l'idéalité conceptuelle qui [y] est fougueusement dénoncée, alors que la réalité empirique est toute valorisée" (12). His exclusively focus on the philosophical content of the text, indicates the ease with which one can attribute a theoretical function to the poem. It seems to me however, that the origin of the tendency to interpret the text theoretically lies less in Leuwers's reading of the poem than in the strategies established by Bonnefoy himself to provide the reader with a highly oriented reading framework.

## An Exercise in Présence: "Anti-Platon"

The first sentence of the poem sets the stage for the particularization which constructs the opposition to the concept and will eventually come to characterize *présence*. "Il s'agit bien de *cet* objet" Bonnefoy writes, not once, but twice in the first paragraph, and his italicizing of the demonstrative "cet" figures the moving finger pointing insistently toward the objects in question, first the head of a horse on which a whole town is encrusted, and then the waxen head of a woman spinning on a phonograph turntable. [79] Leuwers, Jackson, and Vernier, among others, have noted that though these objects are still heavily imprinted with Bonnefoy's then-allegiance to surrealism, he demarcates himself from the surrealist position by explicitly placing these objects in opposition to ideal ones.

The poem as a whole uses the linguistic tool of deixis to take its stand against Plato, Bonnefoy's focus on this deixis is paramount and is intensified first by the fact that the entry to

[79] This is first section of the poem:

I

Il s'agit bien de *cet* objet : tête de cheval plus grande que nature où s'incruste toute une ville, ses rues et ses remparts courant entre les yeux, épousant le méandre et l'allongement du museau. Un homme a su construire de bois et de carton cette ville, et l'éclairer de biais d'une lune vraie, il s'agit bien de *cet* objet : la tête en cire d'une femme tournant sur le plateau d'un phonographe.

Toutes choses d'ici, pays de l'osier, de la robe, de la pierre, c'est-à-dire : pays de l'eau sur les osiers et les pierres, pays des robes tachées. Ce rire couvert de sang, je vous le dis, trafiquants d'éternel, visages symétriques, absence du regard, pèse plus lourd dans la tête de l'homme que les parfaites Idées, qui ne savent que déteindre sur la bouche. (*Poèmes*, 33)

the poem operates through the deictic statement "il s'agit bien de *cet* objet"; second by the italicizing of the deictic "cet," which focuses the reader's attention on the word; and finally by the repetition of the statement. The adverb "bien" consolidates the deixis by reinforcing the phrase through the latent suggestion that it opposes a hypothetical anterior statement that might have made a contrary affirmation such as, "il s'agit d'un autre objet." The ambiguous grammatical construction of the second paragraph lists the objects: "Toutes choses d'ici, pays de l'osier, de la robe, de la pierre […]." But even this enumeration of things is not sufficient, for any one thing can also become a "Thing," a representative of its own most general characteristics. Hence Bonnefoy continues with "c'est-à-dire: pays de l'eau sur les osiers et les pierres, pays des robes tachées," for in the movement of water and the specificity of stains, we perceive the uniqueness of the things the poem gives us to behold. And these things in their uniqueness, says Bonnefoy, weigh more heavily "dans la tête de l'homme que les parfaites Idées, qui ne savent que déteindre sur sa bouche" (*Poèmes*, 33), with the image of "bouche" metonymically connecting these ideas to language.

In opposition to these "perfect Ideas," the leitmotiv of "Anti-Platon" is the idea of movement and change, both of which are associated with the notion of presence, as the last section of the poem tells us: "Sensible seulement à la modulation, au passage, au frémissement de l'équilibre, à la présence affirmée dans son éclatement déjà de toute part" (41). This latter description of movement and change, conjoined with the movement of the water on the stones seen earlier in the poem is contrasted with one of the major problems of the Ideal/concept couplet: its immobility, which Bonnefoy likens to a negative sort of immortality that perilously ignores death. For it is the very nature of the ideal to remain in stasis and to resist evolution, to resist the "modulation" and "passage" explicitly cited in the text. Hence the division that splits the world in which we live and the world of ideals becomes apparent: it is anchored in the simple

fact that the real world is dynamic and the ideal world static. These differences have their own importance: the price of the dynamism that characterizes us and our world lies in the fact that all things move toward their own annihilation. On the other hand, the price of aspiring only to the world of ideals is to live in a dream world, cut off from all real sensation and experience, cut off from what Bonnefoy, following upon the footsteps of Rimbaud, will later call "la vraie vie."

Thus, although the concept serves an undeniable function which Bonnefoy recognizes when he writes, echoing Shestov's ideas, "Il y a une vérité du concept dont je ne prétends pas être le juge" (*I*, 14), it always does so at the peril of cutting us off from the real things and events which impinge on our lives. And when Bonnefoy says that the concept refuses mortality, it is because the fundamental principle of an ideal is to represent only the essence of the thing but in doing so, it necessarily abstracts from that thing the functions proper to its real existence, that is, deterioration and death. In other words, in turning away from the concept, Bonnefoy focuses on the fact that ideal tables do not exist; there exist only real, imperfect tables that slowly make their way through time, become flawed, and are eventually broken and destroyed. Hence Bonnefoy writes of a character in "L'Anti-Platon, " "il cherche la fraîcheur de la mort envahissante, il triomphe aisément d'une éternité sans jeunesse, d'une perfection sans brûlure" (*Poèmes,* 41). The limitations of the concept are thus exposed: its false and inadequate grasp of reality and repudiation of mortality.

This poetic comment can be linked to the prose sentence from *L'Improbable* where Bonnefoy vehemently argues that in spite of the general truths it conveys, "il y a un mensonge du concept *en général*, qui donne à la pensée pour quitter la maison des choses le vaste pouvoir des mots" *(I,* 14 emphasis Bonnefoy*).* The danger lies exactly in that abandonment of "la maison des choses," which is the only tangible and experiential reality we have. And also, parallel to the abandonment of reality, we begin to see in his brief phrase "le vaste pouvoir des mots," the

outlines of the irreducible core of very problem of writing and language. For if words are the ostensible trap, the danger here is moral, since the repudiation of the "maison des choses" leads inexorably, for Bonnefoy, to a loss of communion and community. Daniel Leuwers describes the problem: "Il ne s'agit donc pas de se laisser aller au jeu des signifiants ou à un quelconque bouleversement de la langue, car ce qui demeure essentiel pour Yves Bonnefoy, c'est une vision ontologique de la poésie—et l'affaiblissement de cette vision, voire de cette visée, s'accompagnerait inéluctablement d'un risque de décomposition et de mort pour la société toute entière" (14). Leuwers's point is reiterated by a number of other critics, who thus echo the position that seems so clearly to emanate from Bonnefoy's essays and comments. Still, I feel that the problem is more complex than a series of binary oppositions which would pit poetic language, its anti-conceptuality and its capacity to transmit presence against the inherently conceptual qualities of prose. For even in "Anti-Platon," which would appear to be the quintessence of a poetic space that refuses the concept—and this is perhaps an indication of one of the greatest challenges Bonnefoy faces in his drive to transmit presence—this conceptuality itself re-infiltrates the poem through various paths that can be discerned at several different levels ranging from the purely formal, to structural, to linguistic, and which all combine to define the shape of the poem.

Thus, from a structural point of view the poem is divided into nine sections each of which is given a Roman numeral. The point is minor, but this attention to organization–enhanced perhaps even further by the fact that the numbers are Roman rather than Arabic—orients the poem in the more abstract direction that reinforces the inevitable impression of conceptuality given by the title. More obviously, from a purely formal angle, even before entering the poem, the reader is invited by that very title to consider Bonnefoy's position relative to a clearly defined philosophical stance. The poem is thus structured within a negation, built within the space created

by evacuating the concept of Platonic idealism to replace it with something which, because it is the *mise en relation* of two ideas, necessarily contains a conceptual dimension. Even the highly ostensible use of deixis can also be interpreted as pointing not to an open poetic image that the reader is invited to re-experience, but rather to the closure of the text itself. For as we saw in an earlier chapter, the *written* use of deixis modifies the object of the signifier, doubling it to point not only to an exterior referent, but also the textual object within which it appears. Thus the reiterated "il s'agit bien de *cet* objet" can also refer to the poem itself and remain caught in the web of language.

Conceptuality, "Anti-Platon" seems to show us, is thus inescapable. I would like to suggest again, though, that despite the incontestable importance that Bonnefoy's opposition to the concept has had in constructing his own notion of presence, the challenge actually lies elsewhere. For in spite of the seriousness of threat, finally the danger to us lies not so much in the fact that the concept exists, but rather in Western philosophical history, which has always taught that the world of ideal things denoted by the concept and its material counterpart, language, are, in fact, truth and reality, whereas contingency, because it is inevitably connected with loss and extinction, cannot provide us with stable information about the world. Bonnefoy lucidly analyzes this predilection in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne": "Toujours depuis Parménide, le pensée s'est faite au dépens d'une part de l'être prétendue morte, excès de l'apparence sur l'essence que l'on a nommé le sensible et qui ne serait qu'illusion" (*I,* 23). Along those lines, I would argue that contrary to appearances, fundamentally, the concept does not pose any real problem for Bonnefoy other than the fact–and this is the crucial point—that it is habitually equated with the *true* essence of things. Therein lies the error for Bonnefoy, for as we saw, he equates the reality of things, their true existence, with movement, such as, for example, the moving water over the stones in "Anti-Platon." Paradoxically, however, this movement is itself a form of stability; it is the constant that

he associates with reality, with an authentic interaction with the world. It is perhaps best epitomized by the image of stone which is an important leitmotiv for Bonnefoy, appearing most insistently, for example, in his third volume of poetry, *Pierre écrite*, in which fifteen of the poems are simply entitled "Une Pierre." Linguistically, this image of stone is crystallized in the recurrent expression "ce qui est" which appears, for instance, in virtually all of the essays of the first volume of *L'Improbable*. And though it is clear that the expression is symbiotically connected with *présence*, it is, as I have suggested, by no means identical to the experience of presence.

## "Ce Qui Est" and "La Mauvaise Présence"

The pervasiveness of the expression "ce qui est" is patent in Bonnefoy's writing. In an essay on artist Raoul Ubac, Bonnefoy's use of italics ("Ubac n'a pas consenti à cette autonomie du graphisme. Il n'a pas accepté que la fascination de la forme pure vienne troubler dans son œuvre la méditation plus haute de *ce qui est*" [*I*, 60]) appears to highlight the importance of the phrase, making more comprehensible its frequent reiteration in *L'Improbable*.[80] Like the term *présence,* "ce qui est" clearly serves for Bonnefoy as a form of moral benchmark to evaluate the work of other artists: "Et il y aura chez les plus brillants poètes de notre époque à la fois un pessimisme et un scepticisme et le désir d'une discipline pour se retraire de ce qui est" (*I*, 120). The latent theological dimension of this moral aspect is underscored in another essay where Bonnefoy associates Baudelaire's attachment to "ce qui est" with a form of salvation: "Baudelaire a pressenti au fond même de ce qui est, dans sa mort et parce qu'il meurt, qu'il peut

[80] As we saw with reference to the expression "la théologie négative," Bonnefoy's use of italics can at times function as a discreet form of citation. Thus Daniel Acke quotes an early Bonnefoy essay in which he credits Kierkegaard with the expression "ce qui est." Acke writes: "En 1955 déjà, dans un court essai sur Kierkegaard écrit pour la revue cairote *La Part du Sable*, Bonnefoy saluait le penseur danois comme 'l'inventeur de *ce qui est*" (49, emphasis in original).

être notre salut" (*I,* 118). Clearly, Bonnefoy correlates "ce qui est" with contingency and death, and tellingly, this form of contingency is also associated with place, being, and time–in other words, with all the elements that constitute the object of deixis. Bonnefoy writes of the poems of Gilbert Lély: "L'origine de tous les poèmes de Lély est peut-être dans la perception de ce qui est, dans l'émotion soulevée par le mystère des lieux ou celui des êtres, surtout quand le temps s'est emparé d'eux" (*I,* 88).

As I suggested earlier, I believe the interaction between *présence* and "ce qui est" can be correlated not only to the action of disclosure or unveiling that is so important to the phenomenological apprehension of reality as well as the Buberian form of existential phenomenology. Both of these approaches seem to echo in Bonnefoy's distinction between the two terms, particularly insofar as they give preeminence to the act that conditions the possibility of an authentic encounter. Similarly, Bonnefoy repeatedly states that presence is an act and not the passive reception of an experience: "L'objet sensible est *présence.* Il se distingue du conceptuel avant tout par un acte. C'est la présence" (*I*, 26, emphasis in original). That instance makes clear that authentic presence can only be experienced as an encounter characterized by intention. However–and this is an element that has always remained on the margins of critical analysis of Bonnefoy's presence—if presence is construed by him as an act that occurs in the moment, the object of this revelation–"ce qui est"—is perceived as a far more stable form of reality reachable through the dynamic moment of presence. He writes in "L'Acte et le Lieu" that "dans un moment d'irréalité, de libre décision quant à la chose physique, nous pourrons arracher *ce qui est au sommeil de ses formes stables*, qui est le triomphe du néant" (*I*, 127, my emphasis).

This point is important from several perspectives. Firstly, and in terms of a phenomenological understanding of Bonnefoy's position, I would suggest that the stability of this underlying basis of reality to which presence gives access can be put into parallel with the

independent existence of objects which, as we saw, is an important substructure of Husserlian phenomenology. For Bonnefoy, there can be no doubt that an entire world exists beyond the subject. Access to this world, however, is not something that can complacently be considered as an acquired possession; it is rather something that can only be obtained at the price of the effort made to make oneself available. Bonnefoy's *présence* is the emblem of this effort, and "ce qui est" its object. The second significant point concerning Bonnefoy's "ce qui est" lies in its absolute quality. In a statement quoted earlier in this chapter, Bonnefoy initially praises Christianity for having attributed value to the singular existence of each being, but then brings the burden of criticism to bear on it because Christianity fails to maintain the value of singularity, perverting instead its absolute quality by reintegrating it into the divine ("Chose créée, il reconduit [l'existence singulière] à Dieu dans les voies de la Providence et voici *ce qui est* privé une fois encore de sa valeur absolue" [*I*, 122, emphasis Bonnefoy]).

This absolute quality of "ce qui est" links it to the notion of unity that was so instrumental in Bonnefoy's rejection of surrealism. The identification between unity and "ce qui est" is, however, not specific to Bonnefoy. Blanchot, for instance, makes a very similar analogy between "ce qui est" and a sort of unifying continuity when he writes in *L'Entretien Infini*: "C'est que la réalité même–le fond des choses, le 'ce qui est' dans sa profondeur essentielle—serait absolument continue, postulat aussi ancien que la pensée" (10). Blanchot's comment clearly associates our contemporary idea of unity with more ancient currents of philosophy; in fact, the idea can rather transparently be compared to Plotinus' "One," or even to the Parmenidian "Way of Aletheia" which postulates the true nature of world as one of absolute underlying unity. Both these thinkers have influenced the construction of Bonnefoy's ideas: he indicates explicitly that during the period of time when he was writing *Pierre Ecrite,* "[Parménide] a été effectivement un des points de départ de ma réflexion à l'époque" (*Pau,* 195). Similarly, Bonnefoy's engagement

with Plotinus has been noted by a number of critics, including Daniel Lançon, who develops the idea of a Plotinian basis to Bonnefoy's thought by associating the lines from *Pierre Ecrite* quoted in Chapter One, ("Oui, c'est cela./ Un éblouissement dans les mots anciens […]/ Et tout ce pays que l'Un très proche brûle" [*Poèmes* 221]) with "l'expérience de quelque chose d'encore plus central, de plus profond, de plus vrai, qui serait l'expérience de l'Un, que met en avant constamment Plotin" (*Pau,* 194).

And yet, despite the stability which seems to characterize it, it would be a mistake to equate "ce qui est" with some variant of a conceptual understanding of the world. On the contrary, somewhat later in his writing, Bonnefoy will come to recognize that the problem, especially for the poet, lies not in the existence of the concept itself, but in the problem that language and its relation with the concept poses for true representation. A comment in a letter to critic John Jackson makes clear Bonnefoy's subsequent understanding of the real nature of the conflict. In this letter, he equates his initial structure of thought with the use of an inappropriate terminology, ("des catégories insuffisantes") and writes that "je réduisais alors le péril des mots à celui du concept, et nommais gauchement «objet» ce qu'aujourd'hui je dirais «présence»" (*EsP*, 133). This comment demonstrates clearly that for Bonnefoy, the real impediment to *présence* is what he calls "le péril des mots," and refers specifically to the power of language to give the appearance of pointing to reality even as it lets this same reality escape from the grasp of the speaker. The cataclysmic endpoint of this type of situation is a point that Bonnefoy names *la mauvaise présence*, in opposition to the positive value he attributes to *présence*. The intensity of this negative experience links it to *présence*, but seen from its frightening opposite of meaninglessness; we will return in greater detail to this wholly Bonnefoyian notion later.

Suffice it here to say that Bonnefoy describes it as an "intensité negative" which, he tells us, is "non le dévoilement d'un arrière-fond de l'expérience sensible, aux richesses inaperçues de

la raison ordinaire, mais la *mauvaise présence*, celle par quoi ce qui est s'absente au moment même où il paraît à nos yeux, se clot à notre lecture" (*EsP*, 76). This statement, with the clearly stated opposition between "ce qui est" and "mauvaise présence," crystallizes the triangular relation between *presence*, *la mauvaise presence*, and *ce qui est*. More importantly yet, it is at this juncture that Bonnefoy begins to associate the potential for complete disconnection from "ce qui est" with the use of language. For the idea of something becoming "closed off to our reading" focuses attention on an interaction that appears primarily to take place through language. Indeed, the so-called "salamander episode" (analyzed in Chapter Seven) describes an experience wherein an object becomes so completely consumed by language that the perceiving subject, despite his or her concerted efforts, is frighteningly cast adrift in a world where access to meaning, to the reality of "ce qui est" is no longer possible because language has sealed off this access to unity, leaving only the arbitrary quality of its relation to reality.

## *Présence* and Language

This re-evaluation of language is a significant turning point in Bonnefoy's understanding of presence. In his earlier essays, he demonstrates a profound ambivalence regarding the capacity for language to communicate meaning. In "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie" (1959), for example, Bonnefoy's criticism of Mallarmé concerns the latter's idea that words can contain the very kernel of being. This misguided belief contributed, he feels, to Mallarmé's perception that the language of poetry can be a point of access to an ideal form of Beauty which becomes the objective of poetry. Mallarmé, in the celebrated "Avant Dire" to René Ghil's *Traité du Verbe* (which patently served as a springboard to Bonnefoy's reflection) writes "À quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole

cependant, si ce n'est pour qu'en émane, sans la gêne d'un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure ?" (6). This "notion pure," which is the Mallarmean path to beauty and truth is none other than the concept of the thing. Bonnefoy, rejects the "absente d'aucun bouquet," (*sic*.) because of its abandonment of reality. [81] His criticism is grounded on the idea that "rien n'est requis du réel pour fonder le nouveau pays que l'insoupçonnable forme des choses, celle qui survit à leur mort, l'effacement même du souvenir—la *presque disparition vibratoire* que le mot semble avoir, par chance, pouvoir mystérieux d'inventer" (*I*, 109-10, the emphasis indicating Bonnefoy's conscious quoting). The truth, for him, lies elsewhere, for at this stage in his writing he cannot share the Mallarmean view that words have the potential to contain being. His judgement thus seems irrevocable: "Le langage n'est pas le verbe. Aussi déformée, aussi transformée que puisse être notre syntaxe, elle ne sera jamais qu'une métaphore de la syntaxe impossible, ne signifiant qu'exil" (*I*, 110). True meaning, he suggests at this juncture, cannot be contained in language.

Significantly, however, his position concerning language has changed over time: a sentence from the 1967 essay, "Baudelaire parlant à Mallarmé," sheds some light on the matter:

> Autrefois je croyais que les mots, brûlés par leur emploi conceptuel, ne disaient pas la présence, n'en pouvaient permettre à jamais que la «théologie négative». Maintenant je pressens qu'une archéologie est possible qui dégagerait par fragments les voûtes de notre forme. (*EsP*, 91)

This change is significant and could perhaps be assimilated to a sort of natural evolution over time. I would suggest, however, that it is motivated more by exterior forces and is linked to Bonnefoy's fundamental opposition to twentieth century re-evaluations language. The question of the relationship between language and meaning is, of course, by no means unique to Bonnefoy's thinking; it has, on the contrary, been one of the pivotal issues addressed first by the structuralist, and then by the deconstructionist analyses. Consequently, Bonnefoy's specific

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[81] A fascinating complement to this citation of Mallarmé by Bonnefoy can be found in Gerhard Butters's 1982 article in which he analyzes the reasons for Bonnefoy's misquotation of the original Mallarmean text which reads, of course, "l'absente de tous bouquets."

concern with the interaction between language and *présence* puts him squarely at the center of a set of issues that are particularly germane to contemporary literary questions. And, while it is true that at times he opts for a solution that eliminates the interference of language in favor of a direct, unmediated experience with *présence*, as when he writes: "qu'est-ce après tout, que toute la langue, même bouleversée de mille façons, auprès de la perception que l'on peut avoir, directement, mystérieusement, du remuement du feuillage sur le ciel ou du bruit du fruit qui tombe dans l'herbe?" (*YB*, 163), as a writer, he cannot ignore or avoid the issue of language. And this is especially true because despite the nostalgic sort of sentiment he demonstrates in the above citation regarding a remembered moment of communion his philosophical position is also clearly marked by his strong opposition to those who would see in poetry nothing more than a mere "*effet de présence*" (*NR*, 270) [emphasis Bonnefoy]. Thus his stance is even more strongly conveyed by statements such as the emphatic "Non, l'écriture n'est pas contraire à l'incarnation" (*EsP*, 37), which clearly indicate his conviction that *présence* can appear in language.

But not, it must be said, in *any* language. Indeed, in terms of the essayistic prose, it is important to note that for Bonnefoy though poetry is given as a strong form of moral engagement, the explicit intellectual association of poetry and morality itself appears only in the essay. One explanation for this lies in the familiar idea that poetic language is somehow different from the ordinary "mots de la tribu" that Mallarmé famously invokes in "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe." This idea meshes with the notion of divine oracle evoked in the Introduction, but also can in Bonnefoy's *imaginaire* be associated with the theological paradigm examined earlier with the suggestion that these poetic words which come obscurely from elsewhere, must themselves be interpreted by the poet (*EsP,* 63). Bonnefoy writes: "j'interprète, comme je peux, apprenant de ces images premières les grands symboles qui me feront mieux comprendre les situations où je suis, et dont *maintenant*, je pourrai parler dans le livre. En somme, c'est une langue qui m'est

donnée peu à peu" (*EsP*, 65, emphasis Bonnefoy). It is, I would suggest, precisely because this language is perceived as given from elsewhere that Bonnefoy can repeatedly contend that *présence* does not occur merely symbolically in language but can really inhabit certain words, giving them a shape and substance which contribute to the direct experience and potential transformation, not only of the reader, but of the writer himself: "Les pouvoirs de la langue, c'est qu'elle peut rebâtir une économie de l'être-au-monde, une intelligence de ce qu'il est […] [Il] y a dans ses mots fondamentaux une incitation à se souvenir qu'il peut y avoir de l'être c'est-à-dire du sens, des lieux, de la présence et non de l'absence [...]" (*EsP*, 21).

This position is remarkably consonant with the theological development of the distinction between the *real* and the merely *symbolic* presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, which is striking for its similarity with Bonnefoy's own position regarding the relationship between *présence* and poetic language. It thus appears completely natural that Bonnefoy's position be marked by his adamant opposition to those who would see in poetry nothing more than the mere "*effet de présence*" (*NR*, 270) evoked above. He goes into great detail to specify his position:

> Il y a des critiques pour croire que certain mots ont été places dans le texte pour produire un *effet*, par une sorte de stratégie de l'écriture, cet effet étant ce que l'auteur donnerait à ressentir au lecteur. Mais je crois pour ma part que la poésie commence quand se dissipe le plan de conscience où l'on peut percevoir ou cerner ou vouloir produire des « effets ». Les mots ne sont pas dans le poème pour produire un effet. (351)

This statement makes clear that Bonnefoy rejects the possibility that questions of style might motivate the poetic text. On the contrary, his focus is elsewhere, at a level that I have qualified as moral, and is unquestionably linked with the connection between writing and presence.

And it is precisely the fraught question of whether language can express *présence* that allows us to broach the second part of this analysis. Whereas the first section showed how

Bonnefoy's rejection of the underlying postulates of surrealism allowed him first to sketch out, and thence eventually clearly formulate the notion of *présence*, here we address the logical continuation of his development as a writer and examine the question of how *présence* can be expressed in language. In many ways, Bonnefoy's stance regarding the relationship between *présence* and language only becomes clear when it is compared to the "technical" aspects of the analysis of language proposed by structuralism, and to the limitations suggested by deconstructionist evaluations of language.

As concerns the latter, some critics have noted parallels between Bonnefoy's position and that of Jacques Derrida. Alex Argyros, for example, suggests that for Derrida and Bonnefoy alike, "Presence is the possibility of integrity, of propriety (the proper, property—a "vrai lieu"—etc.) and access which allows for the erection of truth as a normative principle" (247). Bonnefoy himself is clearly aware of the potential for the conflation of his thought with that of the deconstructionists. The Bibliothèque Nationale study, *Yves Bonnefoy*, indicates, concerning the act of writing, that "la parole se laisse enfermer dans la création de mondes-images, systèmes de représentations, de notions, de valeurs, de règles de conduite, qui privent le sujet parlant d'une expérience de la réalité en ce que celle-ci a d'immédiat, d'«indéfait», mais qui le séparent tout aussi bien d'autrui et, en dernière analyse, de soi-même" (155), and adds that "ces considérations peuvent sembler s'apparenter à la pensée déconstructionniste, puisque celle-ci voit également dans le système de signifiés qui constitue un état de langue une représentation irréelle dont l'absolutisation serait idéologie et mensonge" (*ibid*.). Certainly this, along with a number of statements made elsewhere by Bonnefoy, indicates that he is not viscerally opposed to the re-examination of the speaking subject and its expression in writing that certain deconstructionist analyses propose. A sentence drawn from the essay "L'Analogie suprême" indicates his acceptance of some of the principles associated with deconstructionism: "le travail que la

littérature récente a opéré sur la langue, en transgressant l'affirmation abusive, l'autorité usurpée, la naïveté complaisante, en relativisant les unes aux autres les conquêtes hâtives de la chimère […] a fait justice bien opportunément des ambitions de légiférer que suscitaient la croyance à l'inspiration, ou simplement la pensée d'un rapport limpide à soi-même" (*EsP*, 166). Bonnefoy's attitude indicates a level of acceptance that is not unique to him. Indeed, there can be little doubt that even in the face of an eventual refusal, intellectual honesty forces opponents to acknowledge the strength of the positions evoked by deconstructionist thought. George Steiner, whose close attention to the notion of presence and its relation with art and literature echoes some of Bonnefoy's positions, demonstrates a similar respect for the rigor of the deconstructionist position. With a attitude that is very reminiscent of Bonnefoy's, he writes in *Real Presences* that "*On its own terms and planes of argument*, terms by no means trivial if only in respect of their bracing acceptance of ephemerality and self-dissolution, the challenge of deconstruction does seem […] irrefutable" (132, emphasis Steiner).

Still, despite the overt and explicit recognition of some undeniable similarities, it would be a grave error to equate Bonnefoy's position with that of the deconstructionists. Rather, what has interested me particularly is that, as in the case of surrealism, an apparent initial relatedness gives way rapidly to a strongly expressed opposition to, and even condemnation of the deconstructionist position, largely, one understands, because the subject becomes a mere object of language, unable to exercise his or her own will. And on a larger plane, Bonnefoy suggests that the consequences of embracing such a position are potentially catastrophic: "Si la déconstruction de l'antique visée ontologique peut apparaître, à un certain plan, un impératif de la connaissance, voici en tout cas que son affaiblissement dans des situations concrètes s'accompagne d'un risque de décomposition et de mort pour la société toute entière" (*YB*, 161-2). Thus, like the opposition to surrealism, Bonnefoy's opposition to deconstructionism has a

strongly moral axis, which, as it engages not only the individual but all of society, underlines the ethical dimension that subtends Bonnefoy's writing and appears, for instance, in his idea that "Le poésie se préoccupe de la survie du groupe social. Et cela signifie un rassemblement d'éléments épars, un refus de l'ivresse de Dionysios, laquelle collabore de façon trop inquiétante avec les forces qui, par ailleurs, aux niveaux économique, technologique, défont le lieu et le lien social" (*Pau*, 25).

As concerns Bonnefoy's criticism of deconstructionism, the moral axis is further emphasized by his choice of vocabulary in the sense that his rejection turns around the oppositional poles of "espoir" and "désespoir." This is particularly evident when one compares the opening sentence of "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie," cited in the Introduction, ("je voudrais réunir, je voudrais identifier presque la poésie et l'espoir" [*I*, 107]) with this statement drawn from *Entretiens sur la poésie*: "ces écrivains [les déconstrucionnistes] nous disent que communiquer, instaurer un sens, c'est désormais impossible […], or se désister de cette façon sans recommencer le chemin, n'est-ce pas perdre de vu la nature propre de ce qu'on disait impossible? […] Un désespoir qui n'espère pas, si j'ose dire, cela n'est rien qu'une atonie généralisée" (*EsP*, 40). However, this despair and "atonie" to which Bonnefoy refers is only the *hypothetical* endpoint of the deconstructionist position taken to its logical extreme. Clearly, no writer who continues to write can have wholly accepted it, and Bonnefoy, although he has long meditated on the Rimbaldian experience of a complete refusal of writing, uses, in fact, Rimbaud's silence to reinvest poetry with meaning for himself. He comments to Bernard Falciola: "Mais précisément parce que nous comprenons ce que dit Rimbaud [...], faut-il aussi conclure, comme on dirait bien qu'il le fait, que la pratique des mots est condamnée toute entière à n'être que la beauté extérieure, ne faut-il pas plutôt redonner cours à ce beau mot, «poésie» ?" (*EsP*, 32).

And yet, remains the question of how such a project might be accomplished. Bonnefoy's comments about deconstructionists demonstrate his familiarity with contemporary literary problems and their implications on his own work. However, I would argue from a more technical perspective that if what Bonnefoy takes from deconstructionism are important and useful ways to re-evaluate the relationship between writer, writing and meaning, in reality, many of the fundamental building blocks of this re-evaluation of language are the result not so much of deconstructionist investigations into language and meaning as the work of Saussurian structural linguistics. Indeed, based on the way Bonnefoy positions his belief in the potential for language to integrate *présence*, coupled with the terminology he uses, it seems to me impossible to ignore the impact of structuralist analyses of language on his thought. And while it is doubtless true that structuralism has been largely discredited by more contemporary linguistic theories, particularly on the American continent, it remains a vibrant source of mental imagery and reference, particularly in fields such as literary criticism, and this perhaps even more so for a writer of Bonnefoy's generation.[82] What has particularly interested me is that Bonnefoy goes beyond a simple re-inscription of structuralist vocabulary into his own work. Rather, much like the absorption and modification of the term *présence*, his approach toward structuralism seems to involve undertaking a significant recategorization of the Saussurian vocabulary before incorporating this transformed vocabulary into his own work. Thus the following section compares some of the central terms coined by structuralism with Bonnefoy's own use of these same terms in order to see how his perception of language and its potential relationship with

[82] See Jan Koster: "As a result of the Chomskyan revolution, linguistics has gone through a number of conceptual transformations, which have led to all kinds of technical preoccupations that are far beyond linguistic practice of the days of Saussure. For most, it seems, Saussure has rightly sunk into near oblivion" (1, in http://www.let.rug.nl/koster/old%20papers/saussure.pdf).

*présence* is rooted in the structuralist analysis of language and meaning, while providing a distinctly different meaning and interpretation.

## "Comme Sisyphe avec son rocher"

*Il me semble que pour expérimenter l'impossible, il faut recommencer sans fin, comme Sisyphe avec son rocher, ce mouvement d'espérance que je nomme la poésie.*

In a gesture that appears identical to one we saw in the opening sentences of the Introduction, Bonnefoy brandishes in the sentence quoted above the talisman of "espérance" to contrast with what he sees as the potential for "despair and silence" that he sees in deconstructionism. And yet, like the opposition to surrealism, his opposition to these more language-oriented movements is a nuanced one, a compound of acceptance and rejection that is particularly evident in his interaction with structuralism. Hence I'll begin with a question: why associate Bonnefoy's name with "movements" to which he has never claimed active allegiance, as he did, however briefly, to surrealism? Superficially, at least, as concerns structuralism the answer lies in a question of vocabulary. John Sturrock, in his introduction to a collection of essays on structuralism and structuralists, cites Roland Barthes: "It is probably in the serious recourse to the lexicon of signification […] that we must finally see the spoken sign of structuralism" (Sturrock, 5). Sturrock continues: "This may not have the expected form or assurance of a definition, but it may be taken as one. What Barthes is saying is that a true ('serious') structuralist is to be recognized by the use he makes of a number of technical terms, taken over, as it happens, from structural linguistics" (ibid.). These "technical terms" to which Sturrock refers–of which the most recognizable are doubtless the langue, langage, parole triplet—

have become completely generalized, but their use nonetheless indicates a familiarity with the Saussurian framework.

This familiarity appears clearly and frequently in Bonnefoy's essays and theoretical commentary. He states, for instance, that "il faudrait que la fossilisation de langage en langue se désagrège, la relation du sujet à autrui devenant parole, laquelle est plus que la langue" (Pau, 133). And in "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité," he explicitly identifies the contribution of Saussure, writing that "Saussure et ceux qui l'ont suivi ont montré que le signe est déterminé par une structure, ainsi ont-ils ajouté une dimension nouvelle à la signification et, […] à la connaissance des œuvres" (I, 247). And Bonnefoy seems to go even further, for in Entretiens sur la poésie, he seems to espouse the notion that we are more shaped by the structures of our language than masters of our expression. He writes:

> On a compris aujourd'hui, par opposition radicale à la pensée romantique, que le «moi» qui semblait maître de sa parole n'est qu'un effet de la langue, une cristallisation de forces qui dans les mots, par les mots, viennent d'ailleurs que de lui, disent autre chose que nous, se composent tout autrement que nous le pensions ou le voudrions : et c'est là ce que j'ai retrouvé pour ma part […] dans ma pratique propre de l'écriture depuis *Douve*. (*EsP*, 152)

And yet, despite a seeming acceptance of this "crystallization of forces," which gives shape to language and its user, the question of the role of the speaking subject is the axis upon which Bonnefoy's opposition to structuralism (and, *a fortiori,* deconstructionism) turns. This opposition is certainly explicit in his writing, as, for example, when he explains his poetic ambitions to John Jackson:

> Je ne voulais pas signifier mais faire d'un mot en somme quelconque l'agent de la désagrégation de ces systèmes que les signifiants —comme nous disons aujourd'hui— ne cessent de mettre en place. Je voulais lui assurer la capacité d'être cette fois non la notion, la figure, mais au-delà, c'est-à-dire dans l'immédiat, et directement, pleinement, le contact avec l'Un, ce que j'appelle *présence*. (*EsP* 140, emphasis Bonnefoy)

Here, Bonnefoy's conviction that language—any element of language: "un mot en somme quelconque"— can be the focal point of an experience of *présence* is clear, couched as it is in the

notion of the unity ("*l'Un*") that appears in a number of Bonnefoyian contexts. Equally clear is the considered distance he maintains from Saussurian language via his faintly dismissive "comme nous disons aujourd'hui." But at the same time, because this text–along with so many others scattered through his prose—incorporates much of the vocabulary and some of the fundamental precepts of a structuralist view of language, one could argue with Barthes it that must also be considered as a structuralist text.

Clearly, though, the content of the text does not adhere to a structuralist position, thus making Bonnefoy's deliberate use of a structuralist lexicon is intriguing, especially since it is frequently reiterated throughout his writing. In some senses, Bonnefoy's position appears to be located at the cusp of the separation between acceptance and refusal of structuralist critiques but, like his rejection of surrealism, they cannot be rendered by a simple "either-or" paradigm. On the contrary, other comments made by Bonnefoy make even clearer the idea that what he is striving for is a form of synthesis which would incorporate both terms of the contradiction. He writes "puisque dorénavant nous savons comme jamais dans l'histoire ce que sont les fatalités de l'écriture, laquelle n'est d'ailleurs pas l'apanage de l'écrivain mais travaille toutes nos actions, tous nos gestes, eh bien, il va falloir […] assumer *à la fois* ces deux savoirs, ces deux ontologies qui se contredisent" (*EsP*, 63, emphasis Bonnefoy). This last statement brings Bonnefoy into closer resonance with a Derridian vision of writing and writers, but a statement from the Bibliothèque Nationale's study, *Yves Bonnefoy*, shows more clearly the careful distinction Bonnefoy makes between the need for familiarity with post-modern re-examinations of language and a refusal of the visions they propose:

> Mais le refus de cette activité [l'écriture qui ne se veut que le glissement des signifiants dans le devenir du langage] ne signifie pas qu'Yves Bonnefoy voulait se détourner des recherches sémiologiques qui en ont été souvent le lieu d'origine. Au contraire, remarquait-il, la poésie qui dénie l'empire du signe, a tout intérêt à en connaître les lois. (156)

Bonnefoy's reference to the originating point ("le lieu d'origine") is of significance: both his own mental landscape as well as the themes that subtend the deconstructionist model accord a high degree of importance to the notion of origins. And in both cases, a substantive part of this origin lies in its Saussurian roots.

## An Originating Lexicon

Sketchily, we could say that in Saussure's normalization of the discipline of linguistics, it is perhaps his suggestion that language must be studied as a structure whose terms can be understood only by comparison with other terms within the system that has had the greatest impact on the more abstract elements of Bonnefoy's own positions. As Saussure indicates in the *Course in General Linguistics*: "my definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organism or system" (20). The more extended offshoots of this exclusion of all external comparisons point to the notion that no external measure can establish the coherence and "truth" within a given system, since meaning can only be understood as emanating from the relationship between the various terms that compose a structure. Meaning, thus, cannot exist prior to or outside of the connections established between the elements that constitute a system. It is, by definition, relative. Here, we already begin to see the outlines of the divergence that will eventually pit Bonnefoy against the philosophical notions derived from structural linguistics.

For as we saw in the discussion on the implications of the phrase "ce qui est," the notion of the unity that Bonnefoy proposes in his writing is not relative. It is absolute, immutable and completely central in the sense that whether we realize it or not, all meaning and even all sense of self, derives from the existence of an underlying unity which forges us and allows us to fully

exist. He writes, for example, in his letter to John Jackson, "Dans l'expérience de la finitude, et quelles que soient ses tribulations, le sujet humain est au monde, il participe de l'unité de cet Univers qui lui est alors immanent et lui assure d'emblée d'être, [lui assure] sa substance" (*EsP*, 92). This notion of unity, coupled with a focused attention on a certain idea of the sacred, contributed, as we saw earlier, to his disengagement from surrealism. But the co-relationship between a pervasive underlying unity and a sense of the sacred has persisted well beyond the surrealist period. In a spontaneous comment made at least a quarter century later, during the 1981 Colloque de Pau, Bonnefoy stated: "le sacré, c'est le sentiment que ces choses qui nous comblent chacune de par leur nécessité, leur évidence, forment toutes ensemble un ordre qui, par sa cohérence, revient sur chacune d'elles pour leur donner un surcroît de sens, pour y signifier une unité" (*Pau*, 281). This type of comment, linking the notion of unity with an "excess of meaning," makes clear that what Bonnefoy takes from structuralism is equally marked by the stand he takes against it.

But if the philosophical points of Bonnefoy's opposition to structural linguistics begin to be apparent, the matter is quite different as concerns the mechanics of the Saussurian system and the vocabulary that Saussure establishes to qualify and define his concepts: as shown by the Bonnefoy statement on the "signifiant," quoted a few pages ago, his incorporation of a number of Saussure's terms suggests, by his adoption of its lexicon, that he has found the structuralist framework useful enough to seamlessly integrate it into his own discourse. Three of the terms that have become such iconic elements of Saussurian linguistics are of particular interest. The first is the signifier/signified tandem that composes Saussure's conception of the sign. Second is the tension between the triad of terms evoked earlier: "*langue*," "*langage*," and "*parole*." The third is the Saussurian development of the notion of "différence." Bruno Gelas indicates in his "Figures et Fonction de la Voix" that

> Bonnefoy ne désavouerait sans doute pas [le cadre de la réflexion des linguistes] dans la mesure surtout où il se constitue autour du fait que les mots sont ou non le lieu et l'objet d'un échange entre ceux qui parlent. Mais il en déplace les termes: ce qu'il appelle langue/parole n'a pas de véritable rapport avec l'opposition saussurienne 'virtuelle vs. réalisée,' […] (la question demeurant alors de savoir pourquoi il y a malgré tout recours à ce couple conceptuel). (*Pau*, 388)

Gelas' point is well-taken, and his question certainly pertinent. The answer, I would suggest, lies in Bonnefoy's need to rationalize the possibility for *présence* within the poetic text. In point of fact, what has interested me is not only the fact that Bonnefoy uses terms that are such clear codes of a structuralist outlook, but that he integrates them so totally into his own position that he seems to completely forget their "adopted" origin. For example, in his reaction to Marie-France Renard's talk, Bonnefoy says of her analysis that he agrees with her, but "simplement faut-il que je le transcrive *dans mon langage personnel, qui passe par les catégories de 'présence', de 'langage', de 'parole'*" (*Pau*, 132, my emphasis). His absorption is, however, not a mere borrowing but a real transformation insofar as his incorporation of the language of structuralism takes on explicitly theological overtones. Continuing his response to Marie-France Renard, Bonnefoy states: "Cela aussi peut se traduire dans mon langage. La parole n'est qu'un état-limite. Elle a besoin, pour consumer la langue, de la langue même. […] le péché originel est de systématiser les notions, c'est la langue, par opposition à la parole ; et la poésie c'est se délivrer du péché originel" (*Pau*, 134). Needless to say, this association of the notion of "langue" with original sin is completely absent from the original Saussurian model, whose ambition lay rather in the desire to establish a scientific and systematic basis for the study of language and free it from the historical and analogical models prevalent at the time. Bonnefoy's addition of an incontrovertibly theological element seems to point once again toward the seriousness of his purpose and the moral value he derives from the integration of the structuralist vocabulary.

The only way to adequately understand Bonnefoy's incorporation of these more affective modes of thought into a purely scientific model is to examine them in relation to the value

Saussure himself imputed to the terms he established.Regarding the notion of the sign, for example, linguists generally acknowledge Saussure's unique contribution in creating an unambiguous vocabulary to designate its function, proposing to "retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts" (67). This statement makes clear the precision of the vocabulary Saussure developed to address the notions of "concept" and "sound-image" that were prevalent in linguistics at the end of the 19th century. By comparison, a passage drawn from Bonnefoy's "La Présence et l'image," and describing a young reader confronting a great book for the first time, demonstrates what can only be a conscious use of the very same lexicon in its description of the relationship between words (signs), signifiers and the signified:

> Les mots sont bien là pour [le jeune lecteur], il en perçoit les frémissements, qui l'incitent à d'autres mots, dans les labyrinthes du signifiant, mais il sait un signifié parmi eux, dépendant d'aucun et de tous qui est l'intensité comme telle. (*YB*, 163-4)

If it is patent that Bonnefoy explicitly reproduces the Sausurrian vocabulary, he also diverts this very specific terminology from its original function and reappropriates it.[83] This is most evident in Bonnefoy's curious comment about "un signifié […] qui est l'intensité en tant que telle." In his own theoretical position, Saussure is very clear about the fact that the signified has no existence prior to the sign that emerges from its contact with the signifier. His opposition to the existence of some form of nomenclature has been evoked by a number of commentators. In his essay, "Saussurian Anti-Nomenclaturism in Grammatical Analysis: A Comparative Theoretical Perspective," Richard Otheguy restates the fact that "The central holding of Saussure's theoretical position is that there are no ideas to encode independently of language, that

[83] Dominique Combe briefly makes this point in his article on Bonnefoy's poetry and narration (24).

there are no antecedent concepts for language to express, in short *that language is not a nomenclature*" (397, emphasis in original).

And yet, in contradistinction to Saussure's very clear delimitations of the scope of the signified, Bonnefoy pointedly selects one specific signified ("*un* signifié") which emerges from the "labyrinths of the signifier" and is invested with extraordinary impact: "qui est l'intensité comme telle." And unlike the Saussurian signified, which is always completely engaged within the structure that it is a part of (9), the Bonnefoyian signified exists simultaneously inside and outside the structure ("dépendant de tous et d'aucun"). In other words, the horizontal, analogic relationship linking the signifiers in a web of associative connections is, for Bonnefoy, subject to the primacy of a unique signified which, in the very definition of the term "l'intensité," is classified as almost immeasurable.[84] How to construe this? Given Bonnefoy's position in other texts, it would seem reasonable to assume that the only possible interpretation is to understand this "signified which is intensity itself" as another expression for *présence* and its shadowy avatar, "ce qui est." Numerous statements found in Bonnefoy's essays and interviews demonstrate his insistence on the fact that poetic language can literally incarnate *présence*, and that it is this capacity for incarnation that confers its serious, high purpose on poetry. Bonnefoy's dependency on Saussurian linguistics thus lies in the fact that it allows him a rational means of concretely determining—and thus clearly demonstrating—how language has the potential to give access to *présence*. This point is rendered much clearer by an examination of Saussure's description of the structure of language.

[84] See the *Trésor de la Langue Française (TLFi)* definition: "qui se manifeste ou se fait sentir avec une importance particulière, mais non susceptible de mesure directe."

## Langue and Parole

Of Saussure's tripartate structure for language (*langage*, *langue* and *parole*), not all elements have equal importance in Bonnefoy's *imaginaire*. Indeed, Bonnefoy refers infrequently to the first Saussurian term, *langage*, that is, human capacity for speech, but gives great attention to *langue* and *parole,* the two terms derived from *langage.* In the Saussurian model, these latter two terms are symbiotically linked, though conceptualized as an oppositional relation. They are vital to Bonnefoy's thought. *Langue* (language) is an abstraction, a collective notion that is a sort of mental storehouse containing the rules and structures needed to produce communication, but *parole* refers to a concrete activity that is strictly individual. Saussure refers to it as the "execution" of language, writing: "execution is never carried out by the collectivity. Execution is always individual, and the individual is always its master: I shall call the executive side *speaking* [*parole*]" (13).

The importance for Bonnefoy of this third element of the Saussurian triangle cannot be overestimated inasmuch as the term *parole* points to the essential contribution of the individual speaking being which he emphatically claims for us when he comments, for example, to Dominique Coste: "En fait, la parole est plus vaste que la langue, et elle porte ce que la langue ne porte pas, c'est-à-dire l'espérance d'un avenir, le mouvement vers d'autres états de la relation du sujet parlant à lui-même et à autrui" (*Pau*, 402). Even more importantly, Bonnefoy's statement also indicates the capacity of *parole* to break out of the bonds of the linguistic system and provide the theoretical opening of language to *présence* inasmuch as it is always an act determined in a specific *durée* by an individual speaker. Succinctly, thus, one might say that for Bonnefoy, *parole* is the wedge driven into the heart of all linguistic representation, forcing an opening at the place where language tends naturally to seal itself—and us—off from life.

But concretely, how can *parole*, the ordinary utterance of any person, become *présence*? John Naughton sheds some light on the matter when he accurately pinpoints the origin of *présence* as being extra-linguistic. He writes: "it is important to stress […] that when Bonnefoy speaks of presence, he is evoking what first of all occurs outside the world of language. Poetry does not begin as words, it begins as a relation" (47). It is difficult to contradict Naughton's position, since it concurs with much of what Bonnefoy has himself indicated over the course of his writing. And yet, this view of the situation has its own shortcomings, for in a sense it simply begs the issue, since the problem that faces Bonnefoy is not so much acknowledging the inner conviction that "any element of creation, however simple and 'impoverished,' may become a presence, may become the lamp that beckons toward unity," (*ibid*., 46) but rather the very concrete problem of how to convey not only this conviction, but even more importantly, *présence* itself through language.

Bonnefoy's solution to the problem is simultaneously abstract and practical in the sense that he relies on concrete elements derived from linguistics—notably *parole* and deixis—to provide a theoretical perspective that criticizes the deconstructionist rejection of language's capacity to fully express presence. Indeed, in response to the famous Hegelian observation that language can apprehend neither the "here" nor the "now" as objective entities but can only grasp them as movements indicating absence, Bonnefoy acknowledges the impact the Hegelian position had on his thinking: ("ce furent précisément ces pages de la *Phénoménologie de l'Esprit* qui ont été un des ébranlements fondateurs de ma réflexion poétique, ces pages sur l'ici-et-maintenant" [*Pau*, 45]).[85]

[85] Hegel writes in paragraph 97 of the first section of the "Consciousness" chapter: "It is as a universal too that we *utter* what the sensuous [content] is. What we say is: 'This', i.e. the *universal* 'This'; or 'it is' i.e, *Being in general.* Of course, we do not *envisage* the universal This, or Being in general, but we *utter* the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we mean to say. But language, as we see, is the

The response he brings to bear indicates, however, his visceral opposition, as Christian Berg indicates when he argues that in Bonnefoy's position "le dispositif hégélien se trouve renversé, puisque l'expérience du sensible–clef de voûte de l'édifice de Bonnefoy—loin de fixer la conscience dans le savoir, l'expulse hors d'elle-même, la désapproprie, la voue à l'absence, à la mort" (*Pau*, 170). Berg's point is well-taken, for Bonnefoy's opposition to conceptual knowledge is clearly established. More concretely, however, I would argue that Bonnefoy's refusal of the Hegelian model is also materialized in his projection of the capacities of poetry. In response to the well-known association Hegel makes in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* between "now" and "night" ("To the question: 'What is Now?', let us answer, e.g. 'Now is Night'" [60]), Bonnefoy writes in an essay where equates Nerval and Hegel: "Oui, le maintenant est la nuit, nous dit aussi l'auteur d'*Aurélia*, et l'ici est la nuit encore. L'approche de l'unité est barrée de monstres, nos fantasmes" (*VdP*, 63). Bonnefoy suggests that if Hegel's association might have been randomly chosen, the semantic weight of the word "night" translates a certain anguish to which there is a possible response. Thus Bonnefoy continues: "Mais il faut avancer dans cette ténèbre. Et si maintenant c'est la nuit, rien ne dit que demain, et grâce à quelques poèmes, un peu de jour ne paraisse" (*ibid.*), making it clear that this addendum has the function of showing us that the rejection of the Hegelian model is contained in poetry. His project is unquestionably ambitious, but it is precisely, I would suggest, the Saussurian framework that allows him to find a means to oppose the Hegelian limitations on language. For if language itself is the problem for Hegel's approach to expressing the deictic *hic et nunc*, Bonnefoy's reversal of the Hegelian model uses the tools provided by Saussure to suggest a means to resolve the problem of indicating deixis through language.

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more truthful; in it, we ourselves refute what we directly *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, the sensuous being that we *mean*" (Miller translation, 60).

In an opposition that is very reminiscent of the Sartre/Bonnefoy relation we encountered in the Introduction, the perception Saussure and Bonnefoy have of linguistic terms appears as though each of them perceived the same image from an opposite perspective. For if the high value Bonnefoy gives to *parole* does indeed derive from the characteristics that Saussure imputes to it, Bonnefoy's very valorization of the term demonstrates his inversion of the structure and values that Saussure presents. The latter dismisses *parole* as an inadequate object of study. He defines "les manifestations de la parole" as "volontaires, momentanées, variables, contingentes," and concludes that because of these characteristics, "leur étude ne doit en aucun cas se confondre avec celle de la langue qui constitue l'objet unique de la linguistique" (). For Bonnefoy, in contrast, it is the very contingency, variability and momentaneity of *parole* that allows it to faithfully reproduce the nature of reality. He describes the quality of this reality to be eminently anchored in the passage of time, in irreversible choices made, in our necessary reaction to the vicissitudes of the unforeseen:

> [c'est] ce qui détermine […] notre existence effective, dans le vécu : et qui est le temps que nous subissons, les limites, les simultanéités imprévues, le débordement de nos gestes par le hasard, etc., tout ce qu'on peut nommer notre incarnation avec ce que celle-ci demande de décisions rapides, de choix sans retour, d'obstination —et de réflexion aussi, attentive ou compassionnée, sur ces aspects du réel. (62)

All of these undeniable aspects of the reality experienced by individuals in their embodied, "incarnated," selves, are, for Bonnefoy, encapsulated in the use of *parole*. And it is precisely this double capacity of *parole* to be the expression of the individual speaking being, while being the accurate reflection of reality that allows it–potentially—to become a harbor for *présence*. As he writes in "La Traduction de la poésie," "La difficulté de la poésie, c'est que la langue est *système* quand sa parole à elle est *présence*" (*EsP*, 97).

At the same time, however, Bonnefoy is careful not to put too much faith in the capacity of *parole* alone, saying pointedly that although the contingent nature of *parole* gives it the

potential to express *présence*, this capacity does not automatically devolve to all instances of speaking. On the contrary, the relation between *parole* and presence is predicated on three different factors that are intimately connected with elements that appear recurrently in his work. In the first instance, the capacity of parole to become the path to presence is connected with something resembling the intentionality that appears in phenomenological approaches to presence. The specificity of the Bonnefoyian vision lies however in the fact that this intention is closely connected to the language of poetry. Indeed, if Bonnefoy affirms that *présence* is possible in language, he also indicates that the potential for *parole* to express *présence* is directly linked to what he calls "the poetic act" when he comments in "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie," that "ainsi apprendrons-nous que les mots peuvent être avant tout notre *acte*" (*I*, 127, my emphasis). Other comments make clear that *parole* as act attains its highest purpose through poetic language: "quand on veut sauver la parole des empiègements de sa propre langue, c'est le poète en nous qui s'exprime" (*EsP*, 38).

More specifically yet, the poetic act implies a disengaging of the truth of *parole* from the entrapping structures of language through the association Bonnefoy specifically makes between *parole* and a notion of origin:

> Le vrai commencement de la poésie, c'est quand ce n'est plus une langue qui décide de l'écriture, une langue arrêtée, dogmatisée, et qui laisse agir ses structures propres; mais quand s'affirme au travers de celles-ci, relativisées, littéralement démystifiées, une force en nous plus ancienne que toute langue, une force notre origine, que j'aime appeler la parole. (*EsP*, 34)

Needless to say, this wholly Bonnefoyian comment linking language, *parole,* and origin is not neutral. On the contrary, it provides a subtle thrust against the tenets of the deconstructionist position, which Bonnefoy reads as being wholly reductive, inasmuch as it appears to narrowly circumscribe the role of the individual, who becomes no more than the vassal of a language that acts autonomously and can never be inflected by its users. To oppose this, Bonnefoy will use

p*arole* as the weapon of predilection against the reduction of the individual to the level of a mere tool of language. As he comments to Alain Bosquet: "Qu'avons-nous fait depuis le début de l'humanité sinon vouloir être l'origine et non simplement un aspect du sens qu'a commencé le langage […]?" (*EsP*, 62). Thus the self-conscious use of *parole* in the "act of poetry" is the intentional act that has the potential of disengaging it from the system of language.

The idea of disengaging *parole* through act brings us to the second aspect of relation between *parole* and *présence*, which is its capacity to "demystify" ("littéralement démystifiées"), and thus "unhide." This notion finds significant echo in Bonnefoy's interaction with some of the philosophical constructions we saw in the earlier chapter on presence, for the idea of disclosure or unveiling contained in the expression "démystifier" cannot but recall the importance that this notion obtains in the Heideggerian model. For Bonnefoy, as for Heidegger, language provides access to presence. And as critic Jean-Pol Madou suggests, for both writers this access to presence must nowadays be read in parallel with the ideas carried by deconstructionism: "les textes de Bonnefoy comme ceux de Heidegger nous permettent aujourd'hui, par-delà les stratégies de la déconstruction, de reposer la question de la présence dans sa matinale et énigmatique simplicité" (*Pau*, 38).

And yet, Bonnefoy's position is not simply a direct extraction of the Heideggerian vision, for, as we saw earlier, though Heidegger does tend to give primacy to poetic language, he conceives of *all* of language as the foundation allowing human beings to fully enter into the specificity of their humanity. To quote J. Glenn Gray again: "Language is [for Heidegger] the supreme event of human existence because it enables man, in the words of the poet Hölderlin, 'to affirm what he is'" (417). But if both Bonnefoy and Heidegger seek the means to oppose the Hegelian model, as indeed Madou indicates when he writes that "Les œuvres de Bonnefoy et de Heidegger nous invitent à repenser les rapports entre le langage et le réel contre la tradition post-

hégélienne qui fait du mot le meurtre de la chose" (*Pau*, 38), Bonnefoy's insistence on the "poetic act" as the catalyst permitting *parole* to express presence clearly delimits the problem of language and its representation of reality. In point of fact, it is perhaps his narrowed focus on *parole* rather than on the larger structure of language as a whole that potentially allows his position to obtain more legitimacy, enabling him to construct what might appear as a more viable response to the Hegelian rejection of the deictic indicators "here" and "now." And in this trajectory, Bonnefoy clearly finds in the Saussurian structure the means to modulate the Heideggerian position, for as I suggested above, it is through his recuperation of the Saussurian *parole* that Bonnefoy can more "technically" consolidate the potential of language and use this approach to oppose the Hegelian model.

Bonnefoy's "method" functions by integrating deixis into the possibility for language to produce presence. Paradoxically, and in a model that can perhaps be criticized for its circularity, Bonnefoy's use of *parole* itself relies on a form of deixis in order to resolve the problem of the incompatibility Hegel proposes between language and its grasp of the *hic et nunc*. This position is all the more pertinent when we remember Bonnefoy's statement, quoted in Chapter Two, that "la *deixis* est le porche de la création poétique." Indeed, there can be no doubt that at a certain level Bonnefoy accepts the value of the Hegelian mistrust of language. He states that "si j'avais à résumer ce qui me semble la relation qu'on peut vouloir établir, poétiquement, avec ces pages que l'on refuse, je dirais que, oui, c'est vrai, la parole vide l'ici et le maintenant de tout contenu concret, de toute épaisseur d'existence, pour autant qu'elle essaie de les décrire" (*Pau*, 45). And yet, he continues, "Mais il lui reste possible de le *désigner*, cet ici-maintenant, si, précisément, elle rompt avec le dessein de le décrire" (*ibid*, emphasis in original). Bonnefoy's statement encompasses several key points, all of which are connected to "désigner," the word he chooses to bear the standard of his opposition to the Hegelian model.

The importance of the term cannot be gainsaid; Bonnefoy himself points to it by italicizing it. Indeed, in so doing, he materializes the concrete function of the word, which etymologically denotes the notion of marking something with a sign in order to bring it to the attention of others. To designate thus means to point to something, and this is, of course, the very function of deixis, thus bringing us back to the object of the Hegelian obloquy. But in opposition to Hegel, Bonnefoy clearly suggests a rehabilitation of the capacity of language through the double approach contained both in the italicized gesture of pointing and in the semantics of the word "désigner." As suggested above, the argument can appear surprising because of its seeming circularity: the inability of language to indicate the objects of deixis can be undone by deixis itself. However, this position also confirms from a more technical perspective the double function–simultaneously descriptive and indicative—of language that Bonnefoy has repeatedly evoked over the course of his writing. His "désigner" would thus point again toward *parole* as the only agent of language able to undo the system to which it belongs in order to accurately allow for the expression of *présence*. A statement from the essay "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie" tends to confirm this suggestion. There, Bonnefoy writes about *parole* that "Elle opère la transmutation de l'abouti en possible" (*I*, 132), Under the agency of *parole*, thus, "l'abouti"–the finished poem—is undone and transformed back into fresh possibility, clearly reversing the more expected movement that logically transforms a possibility into a finished object.

This vision of *parole* as poetic expression *par excellence*, and the consequent special status of poetic language is of interest to us here, since it reiterates and consolidates a Bonnefoyian hierarchization of expression which we saw earlier and which places prose, and thus essays, at an inferior level with respect to poetry. And indeed, this latter suspicion of a hierarchization is confirmed by an attempt made by Florence Jussy in the Bibliothèque Nationale's catalogue, *Yves Bonnefoy*, to provide a "technical" reason for the primacy of poetry:

> La représentation détruit la présence, mais la poésie est justement ce qui veut briser cette clôture, sous l'effet de laquelle s'efface de la mémoire cette transcendance du monde sur le signe que l'on a nommé le divin. La poésie veut briser cette clôture, et elle le peut, parce que son recours à la part sonore du mot lui vaut de neutraliser dans la phrase, devenue vers, le système de représentations et de notions dont se compose «l'image», le monde-image. Ce qui permet une entrevision, à tout le moins, du monde au-delà des mots : non comme figure, cette fois, mais comme «présence». (155) [86]

Jussy's comment indicates that the very collision between the different material aspects of language confers the possibility of abolishing the mental, and hence conceptual, image created by words. Certainly, the physical characteristics–acoustic and visual—of language, and its latent potential for interaction at a sensory level derive from a network of antecedents which have traditionally provided ways of thinking about verse. For poetry, these material qualities naturally include audible dimension of the poetic text, its alliterations, rhymes, and rhythms; but this material aspect may also include the visual appearance of the poetic text, not only at the level of the word itself, but also, conceivably, in the way the words are physically structured on the page, the most prominent example being, for instance, poetic calligrams. A similar type of structuring process is present in Bonnefoy's work, particularly in the long sequences of ellipses he uses so insistently in *Dans le Leurre du Seuil* to simultaneously segment the poetic verse and suggest a textual absence that necessarily orients the reading of the poem. More commonplace tools used to structure poetic texts, such as the visual division of longer poems into sections marked either by some distinguishing symbol (numeral, asterisk, etc.) or simply by blank spaces are also regularly found in Bonnefoy's work, as indeed we saw in the analysis of "Anti-Platon." Similarly, Jean-Michel Gouvard has noted that in *Hier regnant desert*,"un nombre significatif de poems sont composés de strophes typographiques, c'est-à-dire, de groups de *n* vers démarqués les uns des autres par un blanc" ("Métrique et variations,"2).

And yet, though the close focus on the importance of typography is certainly a common tool for the analysis of poetry, physical composition also has a role in Bonnefoy's essays. Indeed,

[86] This text was written in close collaboration with Yves Bonnefoy.

in a process that might appear counter-intuitive in the study of essayistic prose, I would suggest that the form of poetic structuring described above, namely the division of the text by typographical means, also has import in the analysis of Bonnefoy's essays, and contributes significantly to understanding the latent conflict between fragmentation and unity–and through it, the possibility of presence—that constantly inhabits his work. In point of fact, a number of his essays demonstrate instances where the typographical layout is clearly intended to bear semantic weight, working either to counteract, or, on the contrary, to emphasize the meaning carried in the prose text. This quality is particularly apparent at the level of paragraphs, where Bonnefoy most notoriously sets off single lines of text, converting them *de facto* into isolated paragraphs. Conversely, he also frequently divides essays into sections delimited by the typographical marks evoked above (numbers, asterisks, etc.), while structuring the text so that the meaning contained is carried without a break from one section to the next. This point is important, and will be addressed at greater length in the analysis of a segment of essay devoted to defining the notion of presence. More generally, however, typography indicates the importance Bonnefoy assigns to the material qualities of written language in producing a textual space that is characterized either by its distinction from the surrounding text, or by its rejection of any differentiation.

## Différence, Space, and Parole

The notion of difference and differentiation in language can also be linked to an aspect of structuralism that has not yet been addressed, namely, the well-known term of *différence*. The relationship between this term and Bonnefoy's writing can be said to operate at several distinct levels, of which two are of particular interest. The first addresses the notion of a metaphysical space created within the structure of language, while the second is linked to a specific type of

differentiation within language predicated on imputing positive or negative values to words. Once again, these aspects tend to demonstrate Bonnefoy's construction of his own philosophy of language and meaning, carefully demarcating the limits of his position at the very place where it intersects with that of structuralism. The connecting point is grounded in the well-known formulation of "l'arbitraire du signe." Bonnefoy writes, regarding the materiality of language and its strangely arbitrary nature:

> C'est pourquoi les mots ont offert à l'anxiété poétique aussi bien leur opacité matérielle, ces lettres arbitraires et fascinantes que la clarté du concept. Je dis *une fleur*, et le son du mot, sa figure mystérieuse est le rappel de l'énigme. (*I*, 132)

These double poles, both material and conceptual, that Bonnefoy evokes and links with the realization of the arbitrary qualities of language echo some of the preoccupations of the structuralist paradigm in the sense that Saussure's notion of "difference" comes from his fundamental insight that the intrinsic arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified has as its necessary corollary the idea that the fundamental relationship between signs hinges on that which differentiates them, whether at the level of the signifier, or at the level of the signified.[87] Difference, in fact, is so much the essential requirement of a linguistic system that although it is possible to imagine a crude communications system which divides the world into two categories—food, and non-food, perhaps— and thus uses only two terms—tick, and tock, for example—, a one-term system could establish no meaningful communication. In other words, if everything were called "bleem," then because "bleem" meant everything, it would mean nothing.

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[87] The notion of the "arbitrariness of the sign" is not new, and Saussure does not present it as such. Many thinkers (Plato comes to mind) have been aware that there is no "natural" relationship between an object and the word that language uses to represent it. Even signifiers that appear to be motivated by their signifieds, onomatopoeias like "buzz," or "hum," for example, do not counter the argument. Saussure, in fact, discards the notion that onomatopoeia is proof of the non-arbitrariness of the signifier: "onomatopoeic formations are never organic elements of a linguistic system [and] their number is much smaller than is generally supposed" (69). Benveniste, it is true, does challenge Saussure and propose a "necessary connection" between sign and thing, but Simon Bouquet, among others, suggests that Benveniste bases his arguments on a mistranscription of the original Saussurian course (section 3.3).

To take a concrete example—"chair," for instance—Saussure argues that there is no special "chairness" that characterizes the word in its relationship to the thing it designates. Rather, we derive meaning from the constellations of words which surround it and which assign to it a meaningful space within the linguistic system. Thus at the level of the signifier [*signifiant*], "chair" exists in a differential relationship with all other words which phonetically abut on it: "bear," "stair," "beware," etc. A similar distinction exists at the conceptual level, where the signified [*signifié*] "chair" is surrounded by and differentiated from adjoining notions: "armchair," "sofa," "stool," etc. The net result is that any given term in language derives its meaning only from the "spatial" relation it maintains with the other words which surround it.

Crucially important in the Saussurian framework, the question of this linguistic space which encompasses and determines the semantic content of any given word finds significant resonance in the network of images Bonnefoy uses as the metaphoric building blocks to construct his thinking. Thus, referring to *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*, Alex Argyros writes: "By far the dominant trope in the poem is that of *place*. From 'Théâtre,' to the various 'vrai lieu''s to 'Orangerie,' to 'Chapelle Brancacci,' to 'His [*sic*] Est Locus Patriae,' the poems which comprise *Douve* are repeatedly concerned with the question of a finite location' (253, emphasis in original). Marie-France Renard takes a similar perspective in her article, "Les Structures Spatiales dans *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve*," where she underscores the importance of space for Bonnefoy, writing that "Tant les titres de ses recueils de poèmes […] que les thèmes qui y sont développés […], ou bien encore les images elles-mêmes s'avèrent être pétris d'espace" (121). The same theme is more extensively developed in Patrick Née's very complete analysis of Bonnefoy's relation to place, *Poétique du Lieu dans l'Oeuvre d'Yves Bonnefoy*.

But if the significance of place is incontestably true of Bonnefoy's poetry, it is important to note that place, both as an abstract notion and as a concrete location, has at least an equal importance in Bonnefoy's *essays* as well: the first essay of *L'Improbable* speaks of a specific place, which is also explicitly located in its title, "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne." And the title of the last essay, "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie," transforms the notion of space into an abstraction. The process is very similar in the second collection of essays where the very title and eponymous essay of *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* is clearly evocative of the notion of place, as is "Byzance," the first essay of the collection; the same is also true at a more conceptual level for "Sur la peinture et le lieu," which follows it. The notion of space suggested by the linguistic concept of difference is thus concretely realized in the images Bonnefoy uses to give shape to his thought. But what is the function of the poetic space created by these linguistic maneuvers?

Argyros continues his reflections on *Douve* by arguing that if "the poem is studded with references to things or figures that signify […] and to structures that create space by demarcating it from what it isn't (site, âtre, maison, cathédrale, théâtre, lieu, locus patriae, orangerie, Chapelle Brancacci, etc.)" (255), that is because "both language and architecture function by articulation. It is only by assuming the ontological priority of difference […] that it is possible to even posit the identity of sign or house" (*ibid*.). And as noted earlier, Jean-Pierre Richard suggests that the place Bonnefoy creates in his poetry is a sort of "leurre" within which *présence* might be trapped. He writes that for Bonnefoy "il s'agira […] d'aménager au sein du paysage un creux sensible, d'édifier en somme une sorte de piège naturel où viendrait, littéralement, se prendre l'être" (229).

Richard's comment, though useful in orienting our thought, remains very theoretical. What has interested me is that Bonnefoy actually suggests a means by which the abstract notion of space might be integrated into the very fabric of poetry. In "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie," Bonnefoy specifically links the notion of place with *parole*, and introduces the idea of poetry

entering the space of language through the agency of this *parole*. In a sentence whose importance is made manifest by the fact that it is physically set off from the surrounding the text, effectively becoming a paragraph unto itself, he writes: "La poésie se poursuit dans *l'espace de la parole*, mais chaque pas en est vérifiable dans un monde réaffirmé" (*I*, 132, my emphasis). By conjoining the term "espace" with that of *parole*, the sentence explicitly points to the spatial relationship between poetry and *parole*. More crucially yet, the absence of a clear semantic break between this sentence and the first sentence of the next paragraph, (the previously quoted "Elle [la poésie] opère la transmutation de l'abouti en possible" [*ibid.*]), emphasizes the typographical isolation of the single sentence, thus thematizing the notion of space, with the text using its physical disposition in much the same way as the poetic text might use space with semantic intent. Place, or the notion of an abstract space, is thus a function of *parole*, and Bonnefoy suggests that the very existence of such an opening gives poetry the capacity to invest this metaphysical space with *présence*.

This construction of *parole* as the spatial vector allowing for the interaction between poetry and presence indicates a means to extend the Bonnefoyian distinction between prose and poetry beyond the simple grounding in the "recours à la part sonore du mot" (*YB*,155) that we saw earlier. Indeed, Bonnefoy seems adamantly to distinguish between poetry and prose. Elsewhere in "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie," the very essay where Bonnefoy evokes the relation between "l'espace de la parole" and poetry, he writes: "La parole peut bien, *comme je le fais maintenant* [emphasis mine], célébrer la présence, chanter son acte, nous préparer en esprit à sa rencontre, mais non pas nous permettre de l'accomplir" (*I*, 126).[88] The phrase "comme je le fais maintenant" can be seen as designating the realm of essayistic prose that Bonnefoy is engaged in,

[88] In an interesting detail, the TLFi tells us that "accomplir" historically was a religious term meaning "réaliser, mener à bien (la Promesse, en parlant de Dieu)."

indicating thereby that in the specific context of the essay, *parole* has no capacity to create a linguistic space within which prose could "accomplish" *présence*, for granting it this capacity requires the intervention of the poetic act.

I find this distinction to be problematic. As I have previously indicated, rather than a clear and constant distinction between Bonnefoy's poetry and his essayistic prose, what we see instead is a very permeable and fluctuating boundary between these two forms of writing. The reason for is that poetry and essay are but two facets of the single higher goal of expressing *présence* through language. Indeed, the fact that prose might be *necessary* to express *présence* is confirmed by Bonnefoy's acknowledgement that the capacity of poetry to be open to *présence* can also fail, as Argyros explains when he describes the difference between poetry that has managed to create the open space of a "vrai lieu," and poetry as a text marked by closure: "the difference between a 'vrai lieu' and the poem as text, what Bonnefoy calls a 'poème achevé,' is that while the former is a window to absolute plenitude, the latter does not serve as a sign announcing the extra-linguistic; it simply is" (251). Argyros then cites Bonnefoy to support this statement: "le poème achevé ne parle pas, il *est*…" (*NR*, 271). However, this notion of poem as closure can, I would suggest, be read as another manifestation of the opposition between "abouti" and "possible" that we saw earlier, and indicates that it is not necessarily *poetry itself* that has the capacity to encompass presence, but suggests on the contrary that the capacity of *parole* to gesture toward *présence* must be considered within the larger spectrum of the whole of language. Therefore if we return to the idea that the mission of poetry is to transform "l'abouti" into possibility, then it would seem that "le possible" must be linked to Bonnefoy's strong and recurrent insistence on the poetic place of the "vrai lieu." Clearly, this distinction between poetry as *place* and poetry as *thing* is crucial, for Bonnefoy's use of the word "est" to denote a negative context comes as a surprise to readers who recall the importance for him of the phrase "ce qui est." In a sense,

however, the positive or negative value of words—the "est" taken as the quintessence of opening onto reality, and "est" as the static opposite of the dynamism of *parole*—points also to a wholly Bonnefoyian use of the notion of difference that I briefly touched upon earlier when I evoked the notion of value in language.

Saussure argues that the differential relationship between words is essentially a negative one, in the sense that a word is meaningful more because of what it is *not* than because of any positive characteristics inherent to it. He writes: "everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more importantly: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (120, emphasis Saussure). This last point merits our attention, because it marks a crucial aspect of Bonnefoy's withdrawal from the fundamental principles of structuralism in the sense that where Saussure perceives the differential relationship of all words in a voluntarily neutral fashion, for Bonnefoy, words are not inert agents of meaning, but are rather invested with a moral imperative derived, inevitably, from his need to show *présence* through language. Thus when he writes in "La Poésie française et le Principe d'Identité," "je dirai que ce que la conscience poétique a espéré dans les mots—au moins dans quelques mots—c'est que de l'unité, du divin y brille, c'est une présence réelle" (*I*, 255), the important statement buried in the sentence is the almost casual "au moins dans quelques mots," which points to a wholly Bonnefoyian differentiation that appears at the semantic level of language. This notion becomes clearer when one reads his comment to Bernard Falciola:

> L'important avec ces mots, le pain, le vin, ce n'est donc pas seulement qu'ils signifient *autre chose* que farine ou verre ou bouteille, disons, mais qu'ils signifient *autrement*. Et les prononcer, les employer sous ce signe, c'est donc faire apparaître au sein de la langue une liaison structurelle, qui n'est pas pour autant simple différenciation de signifiants, mais création d'être. (*EsP*, 21, emphasis Bonnefoy)

This statement is perhaps not so surprising, since we saw earlier that "bread" and "wine," symbols of the sacrament, of communion, are motivated words for Bonnefoy. But what is perhaps more unusual is that we find Bonnefoy arguing in an extensively developed analysis which has been widely commented on, that "tous les mots d'une langue ne se prêtent pas au même degré à l'intention poétique" (*I*, 255). On the contrary, some words are more naturally poetic, that is, more invested with a poetic dimension than others, "ainsi *brique*, déjà, parle à l'esprit de poésie de façon moins évidente que *pierre*, parce que le rappel du procédé de fabrication l'emporte, dans la donnée de ce mot—et d'autant plus qu'il s'oppose à *pierre* dans la structure verbale" (*ibid*.). The reason for this, Bonnefoy contends, is that some words encompass entire categories of human activities, while others are more superficial in that they refer to what he considers to be merely a single aspect of an activity. "To drink," therefore, points toward an essential act, while "to sip," indicates merely an aspect, a fact which appears problematic for Bonnefoy in the sense that "ces mots prennent trop clairement par le dehors l'acte humain, ne font que le décrire, n'ont pour signifié qu'un *aspect*, difficilement perpétuable dans l'intériorisation que la poésie se donne pour tâche d'effectuer" (*ibid*., the word "aspect" is italicized in the original text, indicating thus Bonnefoy's focus on this particular quality that certain words contain). And while these latter words have their place in poetry, their use renders the poet's task of obtaining presence through language more difficult. He writes in a sentence evoked in an earlier chapter: "si je veux sauver le mot *siroter*, par exemple, j'aurai à peiner longtemps sous le vent de l'extériorité: tandis que *boire*, qui exprime un acte essentiel, ne pourra que garder, au plus désabusé d'une vie, sa capacité d'absolu" (*I*, 256).

The highly specific vision of language that emerges in these comments provides yet another level of meaning to the notion of difference, one that is wholly particular to Bonnefoy and integrates a number of elements we have already seen over the course of the previous

chapters. Indeed, the difficulty Bonnefoy has with so-called "aspectual" words clearly lies in a triumvirate of negative associations he provides: description ("ne font que décrire"); exteriorization ("prennent par le dehors"); and fragmentation ("n'ont pour signifié qu'un aspect"). These three elements must be understood as grounding elements, both of Bonnefoy's *imaginaire*, and of his intellectual position, for we have encountered them in other forms: the divergence between words as descriptors and words that function deictically seen in Bonnefoy's opposition to Hegel; the image of the "vent de l'extériorité" both in Bonnefoy's poetry and in the "Dédicace;" the tension between fragmentation and unity in a number of writing strategies he uses. All three combine to consolidate the specificity of Bonnefoy's interpretation of *différence* as radically different from the one given by Saussure.

That said, it is interesting to note that in spite of the seemingly intransigent quality of the distinction he draws, he also argues that "de nombreux mots qui semblent dire l'aspect pourront être repris, rachetés par le souci poétique" (*I*, 256). This latter statement is capital, for if its general meaning is straightforward, the constructions Bonnefoy uses reiterate the specificity of his vision of language and its connection to the philosophical and theological currents examined in earlier sections and chapters. For instance, his almost casual qualification "semblent dire" reiterates the idea that, for him, words inherently have an absolute value, inasmuch as some of them only "seem" to refer to limited aspects of acts. The logical corollary to his "sembler" indicates that these words must, in reality, possess the qualities associated with the more authentic "totalizing" words that can truly contain presence—e.g. "boire" *et al*. His use of "semblent dire" thus points again to a definition of poetry as an act whose function it is to reveal that which is hidden, thus harkening back to the notion of "unhiding" we saw in the Heideggian description of language.

At the same time, these Bonnefoyian statements provide indicators that are rather subtle, requiring some foreknowledge in order to be clearly perceptible. For a reader broaching Bonnefoy's writing for the first time, what is perhaps most immediately striking in the wording of these sentences is the theological tenor of the words used to describe how language can become a poetic act productive of presence. Both 'redeem' ("rachetés par le souci poétique") and 'save' ("si je veux sauver") are heavily connoted words, as is, to a lesser degree, 'absolute' ("sa capacité d'absolu"). Thus, the omnipresent connection between Bonnefoy's lexical choices and the historical trajectory of *présence* bring us back to considerations not only on the inflections Bonnefoy makes on larger notions of presence, but also these larger considerations themselves.

Indeed, bearing the literary, philosophical, and theological elements of presence in mind, the next step is to see how this idea of presence finds concrete realization in Bonnefoy's writing. Poetry, as we have seen him arguing in multiple instances, is perhaps the *only* form of writing that can provide some language-based form of access to presence. The extension of his argument to its limits suggests that poetry can *be* a form of presence. And yet, simply "being" does not necessarily convey meaning and understanding. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that only in Bonnefoy's essays does one find explicit descriptions and definitions of presence. And what is notable in these definitions of *présence* is, precisely, the manner in which it is described. Hence the next chapter uses a very specific instance–namely the first definition of presence given by Bonnefoy (in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne")— to address the question of the various strategies and forms he adopts in order to render his explicit description of presence accessible to the reader.

# CHAPTER SIX –
# Image and Word: The Hospitable Essay

As the previous chapter showed, Bonnefoy's realignment of the notion of *parole* along his own theoretical perspective served to provide a "technical" means for *présence* to inhabit poetry. But the question of *parole* has broader implications, for the Bonnefoyian gesture of locating "*la veritable parole*" within values inherently contained in certain words ("boire" rather than "siroter," and so on) suggests that the promise of *présence* can be located in language itself. Nonetheless, Bonnefoy recognizes that even that linguistic tool cannot provide a complete panacea to the difficulty of binding poetry to *présence*, for we also saw that the poetic act can itself fail to provide this access and instead of being a window to *présence*, the poem can simply *be* and thus become an inert agent instead of being an transforming act. This point provides an indication of the function of the essay in Bonnefoy's work along two vectors: first, the latent realization of the potential failure of poetic *parole* to provide access to presence, and second, the double nature—both experiential and conceptual—of presence. It is the combination of these factors that leads Bonnefoy to seek other means to show presence, most notably through images.

Much critical literature already exists on the question of Bonnefoy's highly ambivalent relation to images.[89] Certainly, Bonnefoy's poetry demonstrates at times a detachment from and even mistrust of images, as when he writes in *Douve*, "La mer intérieure éclairée d'aigles tournants,/Ceci est une image/Je te détiens froide à une profondeur où les images ne prennent plus" (*P*, 57). By revealing the mechanism of its own function, his poetic discourse here hints,

[89] See Patrick Née's *Yves Bonnefoy, Penseur de l'Image*, or Murielle Gagnebin's *Yves Bonnefoy, Lumière et Nuit des Images,* Pierre Dubrunquez's "La Fonction Ontologique de l'Image chez Yves Bonnefoy," Richard Stamelman's work, or even Dimitrios Kargiotis's article on representation in *Douve*.

much like the double "clarté" of the "Dédicace," at a solution that would be extra-poetic, suggesting thereby the potential inadequacy even of *parole* to adequately describe *présence*. And in point of fact, the poetic difficulty of this description is shown by the fact that the four volumes of poetry collected in *Poèmes* contain only one instance —in *Douve*— which tries to say what presence is: "La plus pure présence est un sang répandu" (*P*, 74). In every other instance, presence is either the subject or the object of a verbal structure, as, for instance, "Présence ressaisie […] je te découvre" (*P*, 53) and thus is not described. As it happens, of the volumes that comprise *Poèmes*, *Douve* is the one that contains the greatest number of references to presence.[90] In some senses, this is not so surprising, for it is Bonnefoy's first volume of poetry, and can therefore be put into parallel with what he calls "its own" essay, the contemporaneous "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne," (both were published in 1953), whose objective clearly is the description and definition of *présence*.

Globally, thus, the reader is faced with the following paradigm: a poetics of presence that combines poetry that is virtually devoid of descriptions of presence with a series of "subaltern" essayistic texts that do try to define and give image to what this presence might be. There is, of course, a certain logic to the situation: poetic presence, Bonnefoy seems to suggest, cannot be shown as an image. Because it is an act it must, through the "technical" agency of *parole*, be directly experienced to have an impact of immediacy on the reader. In parallel, he has often evoked the peril of the image, a danger which lies in its capacity to seduce us and make us desire things which are, *in fine*, no more than mirages and thus turn us away from the reality of our world.

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[90] *Douve* contains seven direct references to *présence*; *Dans le Leurre du Seuil,* five, *Hier Régnant Désert,* three, while *Pierre Ecrite* and « Anti-Platon » each contain only one.

But this position itself masks or deliberately ignores the *whole* reality of presence and what Arnaud Buchs describes as its double nature, both visceral experience and abstract idea (12). And although Bonnefoy insists on the primacy of poetic *parole* and on its capacity to give an experience of *présence* without the agency of images, the parallel existence of essays suggests that they might, in fact, be responding to the potential limitations of poetic *parole*: perhaps we simply cannot experience poetic presence if we do not beforehand know what it is. And in order to know it, and thus *feel* it in a poetic text, it must first be shown to us, described by means of images. This strategy is not the province of Bonnefoy alone: as I have suggested elsewhere, his descriptions of presence resonate particularly powerfully with the idea of presence proposed by Martin Buber's descriptions of the relation between I and Thou. For both thinkers, the solution to the notoriously difficult task of describing intangible relations clearly lies in providing images to counter the abstraction.

What has particularly interested me in comparing the two writers is the substantive parallels in their attempts to provide concrete images describing coming into contact with presence. Buber most famously uses a lengthy (well over a page) and highly poeticized image of a tree to describe the multiple possibilities inherent in the struggle away from an *I-It* relationship and in the direction of the desired *I-Thou* relation. The poetic quality of Buber's language has been noted by a number of commentators.[91] In the *I and Thou* text, it appears both at the level of language and in the physical disposition of the sentences, a number of which are offset to the margin, thereby creating individual units within the text as a whole, much as lines of verse might do. Such a disposition cannot but bring to mind Bonnefoy's frequent use in his essays of similar

[91] Ronald Gregor Smith, whose 1937 translation of Buber I used, clearly indicates as much: "To the reader who finds the meaning obscure at a first reading, we may only say that *I and Thou* is indeed a poem" (xii).

writing strategies, which also involve setting off single sentences from the rest of the text, with the clear intent of making them carry a greater semantic burden.

## Act, Art, and Fragment: Manifestations of Presence

As I indicated above, descriptions of presence appear only in Bonnefoy's prose texts, and this appears quite natural, given the less analytical qualities normally associated with poetry, and given also that presence is said to be a relation rather than an object. A specific instance of Bonnefoy's own highly imaged definition of *presence* helps to show how his essayistic prose interacts with the poetry that is said to be the "true" place of *présence* and thence see how his use of rhetorical tools combines with the essay's generic capacities to convey his vision. The segment—taken from "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne," the first essay of *L'Improbable*—was chosen because the terms used to evoke *présence* (act, allegory, artistic representation, etc.) are also germane to broader questions concerning Bonnefoy's work. At the same time, however, the passage is both rhetorically and stylistically very representative of Bonnefoy's essayistic work, allowing us to see some of his predominant themes and techniques, and through them see how the quest for *présence* conditions his prose. Concerning the place of the "Tombeaux" text, it is important to recall that Bonnefoy's essays were all written individually for different publications, and were later collected by him into the various volumes of *L'Improbable*. I suggested in an earlier chapter that this reordering of extant pieces is highly significant to the overall project that Bonnefoy's essays represent; indeed, this idea of a specifically determined structure represents one of the central axes of the following chapter.

The "Tombeaux de Ravenne" essay first appeared in the review *Lettres Nouvelles* in 1953 before being collected in *L'Improbable* in 1959. Clearly, its liminal position in the latter is of

significance, for it is this essay that provides the initial call to action and establishes the groundwork of Bonnefoy's theoretical and philosophical position. And, as we saw earlier, it is also there that he develops his critical distance from established philosophy, with his rejection of the Platonic ideal and commensurate rejection of the idea that the concept itself forms the cornerstone for all human thought. To replace it, he establishes here his own philosophical position, introducing the notion of *présence* to conjure against the concept. These ideas, central to the development of both Bonnefoy's essayistic prose and his attempt to come to terms with the conditions allowing for *présence*, are all present in the passage, as are the rhetorical devices he has developed to help him convey his philosophical position through the imperfect medium of language:

> L'acte de la présence est en chaque instant la tragédie du monde et son dénouement. C'est la voix apaisée de Phèdre du dernier acte, quand elle enseigne et se rompt.
> Je dirai par allégorie : c'est le fragment de l'arbre sombre, cette feuille cassée du lierre. La feuille entière, bâtissant son essence immuable de toutes ses nervures, serait déjà le concept. Mais cette feuille brisée, verte et noire, salie, cette feuille qui montre dans sa blessure toute la profondeur de ce qui est, cette feuille infinie est présence pure, et par conséquent mon salut. (*I*, 26)

This passage is particularly valuable because it condenses so many of the themes that recapitulate Bonnefoy's struggle to transform *présence* into a textual experience: first through the notion of presence as act; then through the images used to bring presence into the text; and finally through the patent tension between fragmentation and unity that is shown in the disjunction between the semantic contents of the passage and its rhetorical structuring.

As we saw in the chapters on the essay, the question of fragment inevitably gives rise to the latent question of structure. And in point of fact, Bonnefoy's essays demonstrate a high degree of structuring, thus suggesting the control he exercises over his writing. Hence, though "Tombeaux" is a part of *L'Improbable*, which is itself part of a larger collection of essays, the single essay is itself divided into a number of sections, each indicated by a Roman numeral. Significantly, each section is also subdivided into units that are visibly demarcated by blank

textual spaces setting them off from the surrounding text. The physical disposition and internal subdivision Bonnefoy imposes on his texts points both to the notion of fragmentation evoked above, and addresses the semantic value of the blank spaces.

Arnaud Buchs, writing about a very early edition of *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve*, (May 1950; three years before the definitive version) indicates that this early version contained only 19 poems that would become "Théâtre," the first section of the final text. He adds: "Signalons par exemple la numérotation des poèmes suggérant une sérialisation de l'écriture (procédé récurrent depuis "la Nouvelle Objectivité"), à laquelle fait d'ailleurs écho la fragmentation corporelle de Douve" (329). Buchs convincingly links the divisions imposed on the collection of poems, via numbering, to the increasing dislocation of the body of Douve, arguing that structuring thus echoes the meaning borne by the text. The process, I would argue, is identical in Bonnefoy's essays as well and even more clearly evidenced by the blank spaces that organize the text within each of the numbered sections. These blank spaces that configure the text are not trivial: Richard Stamelman, in his "Syntax of the Ephemeral" has pointed out that Bonnefoy's poetic work uses the syntactic interaction between words and white space to semantic intent. Stamelman writes that "syntax and the *mise-en-page* constitute a new kind of writing […] Syntax connects and disconnects; it both establishes and undermines relations between signs" (103). Its ultimate function, he suggests is to provide "a mimesis of contradiction and of *rupture*" to show syntax as "an instrument of dialectical contradiction: orderly arrangements of words following rules of syntactical combination are contested by passages where traditional grammatical and syntactical operations have been suspended" (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

The syntactic disposition of the two paragraphs of the *Improbable* text demonstrates the prose transposition of the process used in poetry. Indisputably, for the reader the importance of the contents of the passage is substantively reinforced by the visual impact of its isolation from

the preceding text by the same type of blank space to which Naughton refers. Still, because the passage thus delimited is not a single block but contains several distinct paragraphs, we can note that the description of *présence* is not monolithic but multiple. Stamelman's interpretation provides an interesting analytic tool, showing how Bonnefoy physically arranges the text to rhetorically link its two segments and simultaneously produce textual connection and disconnection: on the one hand, just as for the "Dédicace," a linear, connected reading of the text provides the most fruitful means of entering and analysing the passage as a whole; on the other hand, the interaction between the two paragraphs precludes a linear reading.

## Présence as Rhetorical Act

The first sentence of the passage completely integrates the connection between *présence* and act by presenting the equivalence as a given, as an axiom that can be used to lead to other connections.

> L'acte de la présence est en chaque instant la tragédie du monde et son dénouement. C'est la voix apaisée de Phèdre du dernier acte, quand elle enseigne et se rompt.[92]

Here, eschewing the rhetorical devices of comparison (i.e. "comme," "semble," "ressemble à," etc.), this first sentence begins with a strong assertion about the act of presence, which is itself directly identified with the other elements contained in the sentence: presence *is* an act, and it *is* "la tragédie du monde," as well as "la voix de Phèdre." And yet, in spite of these substantive analogies, the passage continues, as though even those analogies were somehow not enough to truly transmit the nature of *présence* and needed a more direct example of this act, namely, the striking image of the broken leaf. This image, presented as it is through the prism of

[92] The exact physical disposition of *L'Improbable* is reproduced for easier recall.

allegory, is so unusual that it very naturally compels the reader's attention, to a higher degree even than the reference to Phèdre.

> Je dirai par allégorie : c'est le fragment de l'arbre sombre, cette feuille cassée du lierre. La feuille entière, bâtissant son essence immuable de toutes ses nervures, serait déjà le concept. Mais cette feuille brisée, verte et noire, salie, cette feuille qui montre dans sa blessure toute la profondeur de ce qui est, cette feuille infinie est présence pure, et par conséquent mon salut. [*I*, 26]

Just as interesting as the double definition of presence, however, is the connection between the two sections of the passage. For when one begins to analyze the first sentence of the second paragraph: "Je dirai par allégorie: c'est le fragment de l'arbre, cette feuille de lierre cassée," one becomes immediately aware that the subject of the entire sentence is "missing," only to have been replaced by the deictic demonstrative "ce." Where to look for an antecedent to this ambiguous "ce"? And why, indeed, should it be missing? The answer lies in the immediately preceding paragraph, where a rapid re-reading shows that it is the utterance "L'acte de la présence est..." that allows us to assign a grammatical subject to the "c'est" of the second paragraph. It follows, therefore, that the second paragraph cannot be properly understood without returning to the preceding paragraph.

Two points are noteworthy in terms of their larger applications to Bonnefoy's essayistic practice. The first is that he semantically undercuts the rhetorical separation into distinct paragraphs; and second, that it is precisely at this juncture in the "Tombeaux" passage that the speaking "I" appears. One interpretation of Bonnefoy's subversion of the normative use of paragraphs as logical separations that work as structuring devices derives from his ambivalent position toward systems. As the general gist of the "Tombeaux" essay shows, systems are equated with concepts; they provide a means by which we can turn away from the reality of existence into the false safety of an artificial construction replicating not the world as it is but an idealized notion of immortal, timeless world. Yet at the same time, Bonnefoy is forced to

recognize that systems have an undeniable functional value: they provide a means by which expression –or even an idea such as *presence*— can be transmitted, and understood. It is, I believe, precisely this hesitation between an intellectual rejection of systematic thought and the practical and necessary utilization of the self-same system which creates the central tension between the two paragraphs of the passage from "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne." For while the "leaf" paragraph can only be understood within the greater context of the two paragraphs taken together, thus impelling what is, in sum, a poetic, non-linear reading, there are clear differences between the two: the second paragraph, though rhetorically tied to the first is not necessarily the logical continuation of its antecedent. Rather the relationship is much more complex, for it functions—much like the "Dédicace"—as a replication of the methods and objectives informing much of Bonnefoy's essayistic work.

Indeed, the two paragraphs are thematically very different, the first one dealing with a clearly identified element of artistic production, while the second addresses what might be appropriately termed the "natural," or "real" dimension of presence as depicted in the description of an emblematic dying leaf. Clearly, Bonnefoy's emphasis is on the leaf of the second paragraph. Not only does he devote a significant portion of the passage to it but, more tellingly yet, within these sentences, the word "feuille" (most often "cette feuille") appears no less than five times. But while this reiteration of the "natural" central element is significant, it is equally imperative to note that although Bonnefoy argues for the primacy of the natural world in his writing, this same primacy is frequently undermined through the rhetorical structure of his text. This statement is borne out in the strange ambivalence shown in the fact that the thematic predominance of the leaf paragraph is countered by its grammatical subordination to the paragraph that speaks of Phèdre. For if, as the text suggests, the wholly natural leaf and its slow destruction at the hands of time are the true indicators of *présence*, it is quite legitimate to wonder

why Bonnefoy has given rhetorical precedence to the artifice of a constructed work of art such as Phèdre. Further, if it is true, as Bonnefoy so forcefully says, that the leaf's ability to incarnate *présence* derives in large part from its visible deterioration—its very "physicality"—why does connecting the physical aspect of the leaf to the act of presence require the reader to navigate backwards and forwards through the text in order to reconstruct what is revealed to be essentially an intellectual and rhetorical paradigm?

## Artifice to Art: Artistic Representation as a Point of Entry

In a way, the seemingly arbitrary division between the paragraphs is "artificial," in the primary sense of the term, that is, something of conscious human construction. This suggestion is reinforced by a point that is particularly pertinent to the essayistic matrix of Bonnefoy's prose, namely the fact that the transition between the two paragraphs is anchored around the pivot of the speaking "I." Indeed, it is precisely through the physical disposition of the text and its particular division that Bonnefoy highlights the role of this "je" and its function as a copulate between what appears to be the two radically different domains—natural and artistic. For it is only after the image of Phèdre is established that the "I" appears in the statement "je dirai," suggesting potentially that only the speaking subject and its capacity for a particular type of discourse allows the integration of the natural world into the artifice of the text. Arguably also, it is the very manner in which this "je" speaks—allegorically[93]—that allows for the transition between the self and the natural world, allowing this latter entry into the text via the image of the leaf.

This sequence of events is by no means unique to this passage, for the "Tombeaux" text provides a microcosm of the process leading to the description of Bonnefoy's *présence*. Indeed,

[93] Serge Canadas, in a more global context, notes that "il y a chez Bonnefoy […] une *allégoricien*. Mode de construction d'un monde, l'allégorie en est aussi le déchiffrement" (1057).

I would argue that the position of art preceding nature and the self is completely consonant with much of Bonnefoy's essayistic writing: it would seem that in order to arrive at a discussion of the true presence invested in the natural world, he must first pass through the intermediary of art, such as the paintings, for example, of Poussin or Michelangelo, the poetry of Baudelaire or Valéry. Hence, his own essays reproduce the manner in which the genre itself tends to be subordinated to a larger cultural sphere: although their underlying subject is almost invariably that of indicating potential access to *présence*, the ostensible subject is also consistently rooted in the world of art and representation.

Bonnefoy's tendency to assign great value to art when his true and stated interest seems to lie in the realm of the natural world has been widely noted. In the first volume of *Entretiens sur la poésie*, John Jackson asks for clarification on that very point: "votre oeuvre se donne — explicitement— pour une quête de la présence du sensible. Et pourtant, cette quête, vous la menez très souvent par le relais d'autres œuvres. N'y a-t-il pas là une manière de contradiction?" (*EsP*, 57). Jackson's question points toward one of the most problematic aspects of Bonnefoy's work: the apparent disjunction between a philosophical position and the practice demonstrated in his writing. In essence, Jackson identifies the problem as lying in the mediated nature of a work of art. Because *présence*, as Bonnefoy defines it, confers immediacy to the relationship between subject and world, it would seem that the use of other works as a point of departure for his own work would transform and perhaps even adulterate the nature of the quest. But Bonnefoy's response expands the quest for *présence* beyond his own work and indicates that this striving toward presence is vitally important and universal, concerning everyone to some degree. The artists who interest him are those he feels to be engaged in his own struggle with finitude and indifference, with what he calls "la mauvaise présence." Hence he remarks to Jackson: "L'art n'est pas à mes yeux la succession, ou si l'on veut l'enchevêtrement, de formes

autonomes dont la critique aurait à tirer sans fin des significations toujours muettes, indifférentes: mais la co-présence d'êtres d'autant plus avertis de leur finitude qu'ils ont tenté […] de la vaincre" (*EsP*, 58).

Comments of this nature seem to indicate that far from detracting from the real purpose at hand, art also provides a means to arrive at *présence*. But at the same time, Bonnefoy says, we cannot invest too much of our hope in art, for reality has a value that art can never hope to surpass: "on n'a pas besoin de l'histoire de la peinture pour être en présence de l'oiseau qui bouge dans l'arbre" (*EsP*, 58). The point is forceful, and yet even this straightforward statement reveals an ambivalent substratum in Bonnefoy's surprising rhetorical choices: although one cannot doubt his integrity in upholding the primacy of the natural, non-mediated event, his use of the expression "histoire de la peinture," rather than simply "art," or "painting," seems to inordinately expand the parameters of the statement. Certainly, the distance between the history of painting and the "bird which moves in the boughs," is great enough to give anyone pause.

It is perhaps this great gap between the abstract and the concrete that the essay can most effectively palliate, for the very same esthetic and philosophical concerns emerge in the "Tombeaux" passage, which replicates in its structure the tension between the need for art and its necessary subjugation to more important matters. The grammatical dependency of the second paragraph implies, as we saw, a certain circularity in the reading, as the reader must navigate back and forth through the two sections of the text to obtain the full meaning of the whole. But in terms of the argumentative construction borne by the essay, we can also discern a more distinctly linear relationship very similar to the one we saw linking the different paragraphs of the "Dédicace." Examined from the standpoint of their sequential relation, the rhetorical and grammatical structure of the two paragraphs follows a very specific development, showing first

artistic representation, then the interposition of the self, and the resulting integration of the natural world through the action of the "je."

## Fragment against Concept: the Image of Phèdre

Bonnefoy begins the "Tombeaux" passage with the impersonal invocation of what he terms "l'acte de la présence." This "act" is explicitly associated with art through the expression "la tragédie du monde et son dénouement," which points explicitly to theatre. Then, linked to the notion of tragedy, follows the explicit evocation of a specific artistic representation: Phèdre is not simply a name, nor even an abstract literary figure.[94] She is very specifically "Phèdre au dernier acte." And if the leaf in the second paragraph is clearly and explicitly fragmentary: "c'est le fragment de l'arbre" this same condition of fragmentation applies also to Phèdre, for not only is her entire character reduced to the fragment which is her voice, but this voice is in turn explicitly reduced to the calm voice of the last act of the play. This point is important because as a dramatic work, Phèdre operates simultaneously in two different environments: on the one hand, *Phèdre* is a more or less immutable text, a codex established according to the rules of editing and publishing; but on the other hand, this same text serves as a basis for a physical production which, of necessity, is a changing representation of the ideas evoked in the pages of the text. Bonnefoy plays on this ambiguity precisely because the hesitation between the two possibilities is central to the way he comes to terms with the interconnection between language, concept, and reality.

As we saw earlier, the "Tombeaux" essay provides Bonnefoy's clearest repudiation of the concept because of the latter's own rejection of reality: "Je constate au-delà de la pensée

[94] And as we shall see in a subsequent segment of this chapter, this specific character, and through her, a certain form of poetry and thought are an avowed source of fascination for Bonnefoy.

cohérente que le moindre concept est l'artisan d'une fuite. [...] Y a-t-il un concept d'un pas venant dans la nuit, d'un cri, de l'éboulement d'une pierre dans les broussailles? De l'impression que fait une maison vide? Mais non, rien n'a été gardé du réel que ce qui convient à notre repos" (*I*, 15). In a sense, a parallel can be drawn between the unchanging codex of *Phèdre* and the very notion of concept that Bonnefoy so emphatically rejects; like the written text of the play, the concept is an abstraction that exists out of time in what Bonnefoy terms a "provisoire immortalité, mais suffisante" (*I*, 14). But this immortality is precisely that which gives the concept its dangerous, and ultimately destructive attraction. For Bonnefoy equates the provisional immortality of the concept with a flight from reality in the sense that the concept is a lie we tell ourselves to hide our ephemeral condition in the world: "Parce qu'on meurt dans ce monde et pour nier le destin l'homme a bâti de concepts cette demeure logique, où les seuls principes qui vaillent sont de permanence et d'identité" (*I*, 14). Hence only those things which are not conceptualized, which are not frozen in a timeless idea of themselves, are able to give us anything of the real world in which we live and die.

And yet, a return to the text from the "Tombeaux" essay shows this smooth perspective linking *présence* with movement and lack of closure to be riddled with uncertainty. Indeed, Bonnefoy's use of the character of Phèdre—and particularly the connections he establishes between her image and the passage as a whole—can also be seen to reveal an inherent ambiguity in his interaction with the idea of presence. Arnaud Buchs, it will be remembered, located the nature of this ambiguity in the double nature of presence itself: "le concept doit être dépassé pour aboutir à ce que Bonnefoy appelle la présence—aussi écrite Présence et le problème affleure ici plus nettement—voulue comme la saisie de l'objet tel qu'il est hors langage" (12). This opposition between Presence and presence, between concept and experience, is materialized not only in the individual segments of the passage from "Les Tombeaux," but also in the interaction

between its different parts. And this indeed is functionally possible because of the essay's double capacity for immediate and symbolic action. For paradoxically, despite Bonnefoy's emphatic insistence on the value of the ephemeral and the unique as the true indicators of reality and his insistence on the tone of Phèdre's voice as bearer of this uniqueness, it is also clear that she functions as a symbol for him. Her introduction into the text allows him to touch upon a number of concerns that are, *in fine*, more philosophical than esthetic, in the sense that he is clearly concerned not so much with the artistic value of the play but rather with something resembling rather an intellectual construction borne through his association of "la tragédie du monde," "son dénouement," and "la voix apaisée de Phédre."

The symbolic quality that Phèdre holds, both here and more generally in Bonnefoy's *imaginaire*, is reinforced by the fact that she appears on a number of other occasions in his work, and is associated with an obsessive form of behavior and moral anguish linked with writing and poetry, as this sentence from *Récits en Rêve* indicates: "Des heures durant, que dis-je, des nuits et des nuits, pendant que j'écrivais, que je barrais des mots et en formais d'autres, j'assistai ainsi dans l'angoisse à la représentation de Phèdre" (47). Indeed, the potency of the image is attested by the fact that Bonnefoy himself qualifies his interest in the character of Phèdre and other Greek tragic heroines as a form of fascination: "Comment oublier, en effet, la fascination qu'exerce sur [la poésie] le sang, la mort, Clorinde blessée, Eurydice ou Phèdre expirantes" (*I*, 112). In this particular instance the fascination is connected with images of death, inasmuch as death is unquestionably associated with what one could define as the grounding reality of existence. On a larger scale, however, Gérard Gasarian has noted parallels between Bonnefoy's images, and the fascination Blanchot describes in *L'Espace Littéraire*: "comme la 'fascination' pour Blanchot, le phénomène décrit par Bonnefoy consiste lui aussi, par bien des aspects à 'vivre l'événement en image'" (32).

This coupling of the perception of fascination with the experience of images reinforces the idea that in Bonnefoy's work, Phèdre operates on a highly symbolic level. In the second *Improbable* essay*,* for instance, her character figures a foreclosed period of time: "Il y a des moments où la poésie veut une action courageuse. C'était le cas dans ce désert de 1840, quand, depuis Port-Royal fermé, depuis Phèdre expirée, rien n'était plus que mensonge" (34). This point is made clearer by his affirmation in a much later text entitled "Quelques Livres qui ont Compté," that *Phèdre* was "decisive" for him (*EsP*, 340). Decisive, she may be, but it is noteworthy that he evaluates the attraction he felt for the play through terms equated with metaphor and symbol. Once again, he describes his obsession with the first four lines of the play as a form of fascination, but attributes here that fascination to the fact that the content of the text (the inexplicable fatigue of Phèdre, her inability to go further) reveals the exhaustion of classical poetry itself.[95] He writes: "Qui ne peut aller 'plus avant' […] sinon le vers alexandrin lui-même, enfermé qu'il est dans l'intemporel de ses deux hémistiches, bâtis symétriquement?" (*ibid.*). This perspective helps us understand the significance of Phèdre in the "Tombeaux" passage: not only does she provide the rhetorical bridge which ties the two paragraphs together, but *as a symbol* she is set in theoretical opposition to the allegorical discourse which follows. This point has larger implications for reading Bonnefoy's essays inasmuch as the theoretical opposition between allegory and symbol parallels many of the concerns specific to the essay.

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[95] "N'allons pas plus avant, demeurons chère Oenone,
Je ne me soutiens plus, mes forces m'abandonnent,
Mes yeux sont éblouis du jour que je revois
Et mes genoux tremblants se dérobent sous moi…"

## Allegory, Symbol, and Representation

When Bonnefoy finally approaches the discussion of *présence* in the natural context of the leaf, he continues to express a certain ambivalence about the best way to access it, continuing, in fact, to rely on artistic production to demonstrate his position. Thus, despite his clear concern with expressing the authentic nature of presence in the world, he is driven to describe it from the vantage point of a mediating construction that can scarcely help being artistic, given its literary origins. Hence the first thought of the second paragraph—"je dirai par allégorie"—immediately and effectively removes the leaf from the sphere of a real encounter with a natural object. The leaf is not "itself" in any sense of the word; rather it is a figure, an allegorical representation of something else, just as its blackened, dying skeleton is a figure for another sort of passing. And this necessarily has an impact on the nature of the presence being described, as Gasarian points out: "Si le discours entier procède ainsi d'une figure, la présence dont il y est question apparaît elle-même comme une *représentation* : 'acte' allégorique dont la feuille est la *figurante*" (20, emphasis in original). Like Phèdre, thus, this leaf, "brisée, verte et noire, salie," is a "figurante," a character in an artistic production, in this case, the production of an allegorical creation that Bonnefoy is explicitly engaged in at the moment of the enunciation ("je dirai").

### Rhythm and Artistic Construction

The question of an artistic dimension plays out on a number of levels, for, unconsciously perhaps, Bonnefoy has graced the first sentence of the second paragraph ("Je dirai par allégorie : c'est ce fragment de l'arbre sombre, cette feuille cassée du lierre.") with a manifestly poetic rhythm. The syntax of this sentence is grammatically structured into three separate parts, each delimited by an obvious grammatical marker–a colon in one case, and a comma in the other—and

each of these sections scans into an octo-syllabic rhythm, thus inevitably reinforcing the artistic aspect of Bonnefoy's opening reference to allegory. Indeed, the regularity of the "meter" in this first line, implying, as it does, a poetic dimension, is congruent with thematic, allegorical intent of the sentence.

This point is also important from considerations of the theory of allegory in the sense that rhythm, or even more strikingly, rhyme can become the structuring element in an allegorical text, as critic Joel Fineman suggests:

> if allegorical themes are in a sense emptied of their content by the structure that governs them, if the particular signifiers of allegory become vehicles of a larger structural story they carry but in which they play no part, they are at the same time ostentatiously foregrounded by the very structurality that becomes immanent in them. There is no clearer example of this than that of rhyme |…] and the resulting literary effect is exactly that we hear the sound of the sound rather than the meaning of the meaning. The same holds for the other metrical and intonational means of marking poetic periods as isochronic, all of which render "the time" of the speech flow experienced. (51-52)

His point is valuable, for in the "Tombeaux" text, it is indeed the interaction between the very explicit "allegorization" of the leaf and the syntax of the passage that impels a particular reading of the text. And Fineman's hypothesis is borne out there because the leaf, clearly, is part of "a larger structural story" in its role as a figure for *présence*. And if the leaf can be identified as Fineman's "particular signifier of allegory," it is equally true that the allegorical weight of the image is constructed in great measure by the "obvious foregrounding" given by the multiple repetition of "cette feuille" and, to a lesser extent, a certain poetic rhythm.

This poetic pattern observed in the "Tombeaux" echoes the rhythmic regularity that characterized some of the more thematically "poetic" segments of the "Dédicace." Doubtless, however, Bonnefoy's integration of instants of "metrical regularity" into his prose is not meant to obey the theoretical preconditions he may more consciously enunciate. On the contrary, his recourse to rhythm and a certain form of meter within prose can probably be imputed to the very

natural tendency of poetic formulations to spill over into other arenas of writing, as Wordsworth observed:

> I here use the word "Poetry" (though against my own judgment) as opposed to the word Prose, and synonymous with metrical composition. But much confusion has been introduced into criticism by this contradistinction of Poetry and Prose, instead of the more philosophical one of Poetry and Matter of Fact, or Science. The only strict antithesis to Prose is Metre; nor is this, in truth, a strict antithesis; because lines and passages of metre so naturally occur in writing prose, that it would be scarcely possible to avoid them, even were it desirable. (note, p. xxiv)

Indeed, the question of meter in Bonnefoy's work has ambiguous undercurrents. On the one hand, Canadas suggests that Bonnefoy's poetic work is a paean to "le mot rythmique," adding that "on est toujours, avec le poème de Bonnefoy, en situation de rythme: la part physique, respiratoire, est essentielle, et comme la condition même d'un regard" (in Ravaud, 34). But, at the same time, as John Naughton so patiently and carefully points out, rhythm is of significance because of its general absence in Bonnefoy's poetic work (6). Naughton discusses Bonnefoy's philosophical affinity for "imperfect" structures in poetry: for irregular rhythms that follow the trace of conventional rhythms before breaking off on their own, for the "e muet" that the poet perceives as "cette faille entre les concepts, cette intuition de la substance, cette chance extraordinaire du français" (*I*, 105), for uneven numbers, both of lines and of poems. In his analysis, Naughton avers that Bonnefoy's "concern for numerical detail is related to a general philosophical conviction. Bonnefoy is seeking to reconcile the ideal of formal perfection with the reality of movement and becoming. Static 'perfection' is a threat to 'being' in Bonnefoy's view" (6).

One must, naturally, exercise some prudence in attempting to mesh Naughton's analysis of poetic meter with Bonnefoy's prose, for prose is, of course, not generally concerned with the dynamics of scansion and meter. Naughton clearly shows however that Bonnefoy conceptualizes rhythm and meter as a philosophical problem and gives them far larger scope than a mere "technical" concern of poetry by explicitly associating the use of poetic rhythm with a quest for

access to *présence* through language. The analogy he makes between rhythm and presence is grounded on the disjunction he sees between word as sign and word as "parole originaire." And yet, for a poet who is determined to make the shape of his poetic production conform to his philosophical vision of the world, it is interesting that some aspects of his essayistic prose appear so poetic. In this blurring of genres, it is noteworthy that if Bonnefoy's first collections of poetry ( *Anti-Platon*, *Coeur-Espace*, etc.) are comprised almost exclusively of prose poems, later collections, beginning with *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve* forsake this form for a more "traditional" free verse. The timing of *Douve* seems to mesh rather precisely with the production of the first essays, suggesting that there might be a possible displacement of poetic prose into the essay. Certainly the "Tombeaux" passage demonstrates a clear "poeticization" of the essayistic text, which evolves from the relatively neutral Phèdre section to the more distinctly poetic "leaf" section of the passage

## The Opening into Allegory

Despite the undoubted importance of Phèdre, it is indisputably the "allegorical" image of the leaf that is by far the more notable element. And yet, the approaches taken in the two paragaphs are significantly different. Indeed, in direct contrast to the incisive assertion about the act of presence in the first paragraph, we are struck in the second by what appears to be the hesitant tone of the passage, its refusal to categorically state that which is nonetheless perceived as a sort of absolute truth about the relationship between *présence* and reality. The voice of Bonnefoy is doubly distanced by the opening words, "je dirai par allégorie," where the speaking "I" appears in a liminal position and duplicates itself by speaking about its future self, which in turn, is further removed by the insertion of allegory. The verb "dirai" projects the current

statement into the future, infusing it with an element of uncertainty. But in so doing, it operates a peculiar temporal split, for now there is one "I" who will speak in the future, and one which is now speaking about the future "I," creating a structure which might be paraphrased as follows "je dis maintenant que je dirai alors." But at the same time, the use of the future, rather than the more common and expected conditional tense ("je *dirais* que") is itself an affirmation.[96] Yes, Bonnefoy seems to say, none of this currently exists, but the possibility for it is absolute, not subject to the wavering possibilities of the conditional.

This strategy recalls vividly the valorization of the term "improbable" we saw in the "Dédicace." There, as here, paradox and uncertainty are redeemed by capacities that are shown to be inherent to language, in the first case, by the positive semantic value of the word "improbable," and in this case, by the opposition between the future and the conditional tenses. Here, the use of the future tense also has another function, which is the creation of an image through language. Indeed, it is particularly striking that Bonnefoy also uses this rather marked use of the future tense during another key moment of description of *présence*: the "salamander" episode of "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie." There, as Gasarian points out, Bonnefoy's use of the future tense acts not only to destabilize the reading, but also has the crucial function of undermining the "reality" of the event by revealing it to be an image: "on s'aperçoit que l'épisode de la salamander est un événement 'vécu' en image et non en réalité" because Bonnefoy uses the future tense to shift the event into "l'imaginaire du present" thereby underscoring the "la duplicité des images" (36). In the "Tombeaux" passage, the future tense clearly has a similar function of transforming the leaf into the object of imagination, but this transformation itself also acts to materialize the act of writing that is taking place within the text. Indeed, it is because the

[96] Indeed, this use is so surprising that at first I checked all three versions of the *Improbable* text to make sure that this was, in truth, the spelling intended.

future tense renders the leaf imaginary in the present, that its image can provide the possibility of a literary creation which is then actualized by the introduction of the notion of allegory that dominates the passage.

Given Bonnefoy's insistence on the value of that which is particular and ephemeral, his use of the term "allegory" in this extended definition of *présence* can appear as nothing short of astounding. Our astonishment is fed, of course, by the popular preconception that equates allegory and abstraction. C. S. Lewis, for instance, in his analysis of medieval allegory, follows a well-beaten path when he defines allegory as a universal principle of the mind, saying that "it belongs not to medieval man, but to man, or even to mind, in general. It is the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms" (44). And yet, as Lewis himself recognizes, allegory is more than just an image; it is an image that has at its origin an idea or a concept. In allegory, he writes, "you can start with an immaterial fact, such as the passions which you actually experience, and can then invent *visibilia* to express them" (45). Lewis' point was to rehabilitate a genre that had, since Coleridge, Goethe, and the Romantic period, become highly criticized, if not unconditionally despised because of the stereotyped nature of those *visibilia*. But what particularly interests me is that it is almost a general trope to evoke two oppositions: the first between allegory and symbol; and the second between allegory and allegoresis. As it happens, these oppositions are precisely the ones governing Bonnefoy's "Tombeaux" passage on *présence*, particularly with respect to how the image of the leaf connects with the image of Phèdre.

As we saw, the words "par allégorie" shift the mood of the assertion away from the certitude associated with the image of Phèdre, and focus instead on the ambiguity and apparent tenuousness of the speaker's position, for what is an allegory but a scrim placed between the true subject and the reader, a series of symbolic representations whose decoding will permit the

emergence of a "real" subject hidden within the words? In theoretical texts on allegory, much is frequently made of the origin of the word, which, though derived from the verb *allegorein*, to speak figuratively, has its more ancient roots in the combination of *allos*, 'other', and *agorein*, 'to speak publicly or openly.' Now although "speaking openly in a hidden manner" can undoubtedly make literal sense within a political or social context, it nevertheless suggests a form of paradox that Bonnefoy appears to literalize in his own text through the direct thrust of the statement "je dirai," mitigated by the more ambiguous "par allégorie." Taken as whole, the utterance "je dirai par allégorie" thus inscribes the dual meaning integral to the notion of allegory, for it can be read along two different paraphrasings: "voici comment je définirais l'allégorie," or "j'utiliserai l'allégorie pour dire…" This duality governs the difference between allegory and allegoresis and plays a crucial role in interpreting Bonnefoy's choice to use the term "allegory" in his extended descriptions of presence, both here, and in "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie."

## Allegory and Allegoresis

Peter Berek has pointed out that a number of critics, most notably Northrup Frye, have extended the concept of allegory to suggest that *all* forms of critical interpretation are allegorical in nature, in the sense that all textual interpretation assumes a certain level of disjunction between the finished text and its intended meaning that critical interpretation proposes to resolve (117). [97] Berek, however, is careful to make a distinction between author and reader, saying that "though its practitioners make interpretive statements which at first sound much like those made by interpreters of allegorical works, [allegoresis] ultimately makes claims to validity that have nothing to do with authorial intention, but rather with a truth the allegorizing reader knows which

[97] Frye, does, of course, point out that "Genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation" (54), but Berek's point is that the critical work required to interpret it is identical to the process of allegorizing.

may well have been beyond the awareness, whether conscious or not, of the work's author" (118). Hence, to take an example from Bonnefoy's work we could, as critic Matthieu Dubois has suggested, provide multiple interpretations of the "character" of Douve: "de nombreux commentateurs l'interprètent-t-ils chacun de manière différente, y voyant soit une figure allégorique, soit un principe de connaissance, ou encore un horizon poétique qui détermine son esthétique" (11). The variability of these definitions, conjoined with Bonnefoy's own attempts to give an idea of the genesis of "Douve," suggests that none of them is intrinsically false. Given, however, the distinction between allegory and allegoresis, and the attending difficulty of assigning authorial intent, Bonnefoy's "Tombeaux" text appears to be doing something quite different.

Indeed, perhaps the most striking characteristic of Bonnefoy's text is that it uses both allegory and allegoresis while providing a serious disjunction between both functions. We saw above that the "speaking openly in a hidden manner" of "je dirai par allégorie" could be interpreted either as definition (the leaf is a definition of allegory), or as manner (the use of allegory to assign meaning to the leaf). Though the latter of the two interpretations is more in keeping with the task Bonnefoy assigns himself, the idea of definition also has some importance, for by comparison with a normative interpretation Bonnefoy is redefining the notion of allegory to fit into his own project. Certainly the act of directly saying that one is speaking allegorically removes from it the idea of an oblique and hidden expression which the reader or hearer must decode by means of a given system of equivalences. In some sense, it is Bonnefoy's choice of image—a leaf—that renders this necessary. Precisely because he is not engaging in some variant of personification allegory, which might be more easily visible through a "character" such as Douve, there is no transparent allegorical gesture mapping one system of codes onto another set of referents. Thus, unlike the medieval and post-medieval allegorical texts that were so reviled by

Romantic criticism, and in which the codes are patent and onomastically given by the names of the characters—Christian, Patience, The Giant Despair, and so on— the leaf has no immediately apparent codified meaning, forcing Bonnefoy to make the method of reading apparent.

And indeed, a more contemporary definition of allegory suggests that "in allegory the objective referent evoked is without value until it is translated into the fixed meaning that it has in its own particular structure of ideas" (Holman and Harmon, 498). This being the case, it is reasonable to assume that some indication *must* be given of the allegorical nature of the leaf; if no mention were made, the reader might not fully grasp its allegorical import. But on the other hand—and this is really the central issue here—Bonnefoy, by inscribing the means of reading into his text changes the emphasis of the reading, forcing the reader to look beyond the words on the page to an underlying meaning which is given as the *raison d'être* for the writing. The corollary implication is that in this type of writing, to wit, prose, the words are not to be taken for themselves, as artefacts with substance and resonance as they might be in poetry; here, they are merely a means of communication, the "tools" of the Sartrian conception of prose evoked earlier, which point not to themselves, but elsewhere.

This question of guiding the manner in which the reader may read the text is vital to the allegorical gesture, and is particularly interesting for me because it replicates a number of the strategies connected to the generic functions of the essay. In order, however, to grasp this point more clearly, we need first to understand in what way Bonnefoy's text is allegorical. In other words, is it allegorical just because he tells us it is so, or are there some truly allegorical elements embedded in it? The short answer is probably that it is truly allegorical, for the allegorical dimension can operate at the level of the word itself and the way in which it structures the syntax of the sentence. In Bonnefoy's text, the physical position of the word "allégorie" itself figures the allegorical operation, standing between the utterance "je dirai" and the real subject which follows

after the colon. It literalizes the notion of allegory, for it literally sets itself as an intermediary between the speaker and the enunciation of subject. To see this more clearly, one has only to imagine the sentence without the transforming "par allégorie." The result is a statement of future intent "je dirai que c'est le fragment de l'arbre…" which has a much different tone and meaning than the "allegorical" utterance.

Following this cautious "allegorical" introduction, the process begins to reverse itself immediately thereafter through the repeated deixis. The ambiguous "c'est" returns the reader to the previous paragraph and reveals its grammatical equivalency with "L'acte de la présence est." Further, the colon which follows the opening words itself has a clear deictic function. Not only does it serve to visually set the first four words off, but it also directs the reader's attention to the matter at hand, that is, to the ensuing words that contain the gist of the message. Perhaps more crucially yet, the colon prepares the way for and heightens the impact of the marked deixis, "cette feuille," which appears immediately afterward and is so insistently reiterated. That repetition echoes, of course, the "il s'agit bien de *cet* objet" of "Anti-Platon," where Bonnefoy exposed the thrust of his project not only by italicizing the critical word, but by repeating the self-same phrase twice, thereby showing "*cet* objet" as being, as unconditionally *existing*. Similarly, the rhetorical structure of the passage from the "Tombeaux" essay points to the fundamental object of Bonnefoy's engagement: an understanding of the reality of the human experience through the interaction with the things extant in this world. Here, this understanding is developed in the emblematic image of a broken leaf doubly embedded within the two deictic utterances that precede it: "*c'est* le fragment de l'arbre sombre, *cette* feuille cassée du lierre (my emphasis)." And over the course of the single paragraph, in a form of litany that cannot but have a strong impact on the reader, the deictic expression "cette feuille" is repeated no less than four times.

Putting this extensive use of deixis into parallel with the idea of allegory that opened the paragraph, I would suggest that the reader is faced with a manner of contradiction. Indeed, if we return to Lewis' definition of allegory as concept dressed in *visibilia*, Bonnefoy's emphasis on "cette feuille" seems to fly in complete opposition to any conceptual perception of the leaf, pointing insistently instead at what would be given as an identifiable element of concrete reality. It is difficult not to see the multiple reiterations of the deictic in such a short textual passage as having an effect similar to, for instance, the use of any of the metalingual codes that might spontaneously be used to capture an interlocutor's attention: gesture, voice modulation, perhaps even physical contact. The net effect, of course, is to highlight the reality of the object being observed and anchor it in the text, rendering it, in Bonnefoy's own language, "sensible," that is, accessible to the senses ("L'objet sensible est présence" [*I*, 26]). This production of "here-ness" is particularly patent by comparison with a similar evocation in "Le Temps et L'Intemporel dans la Peinture du Quattrocento:"

> Ce qui distingue telle personne, disons Socrate, de l'idée de l'être humain comme telle, c'est l'acte imprévisible, non nécessaire, c'est la réalité de ce temps existentiel dans lequel elle semble n'être que jetée que pour mieux décevoir et déchirer toute notion fixe, ou *a priori* de son essence. Une feuille d'arbre, par contre, plongée dans le temps naturel, est davantage une image double, à la fois générale et particulière, elle est plus près de l'Idée. (*I*, 84)

If it is clear in this passage that Bonnefoy presents the leaf in counterpoint with a human being to show it as being closer to the concept, by contrast the "Tombeaux" passage overtly "anthropomorphizes" the leaf. Along those lines, Gasarian has pointed out that the leaf "speaks," to which he imputes the idea that it is an allegory of the poetic voice (xxx). And indeed, though the leaf does speak, doing so almost continuously ("inlassablement"), it also goes further yet along the path of anthropomorphism by constructing ("bâtissant"), showing ("montre"), and being wounded ("blessure"). The net effect is to create a "character" to undercut the abstraction that is the "true" meaning of the leaf, working thus in the opposite direction of the increasing

abstraction of the Phèdre of the first paragraph. And yet its very "leafness" stands in opposition to its anthropomorphization, which brings the question of whether it truly has the allegorical function Bonnefoy so adamantly imputes to it or whether it might not be more aptly described by other rhetorical figures.

## Allegory or Symbol?

It is, paradoxically enough, useful to consider rhetorical elements with antonymic properties. Here, Coleridge's oft-quoted distinction between allegory and symbol provides a possible substitution for Bonnefoy's choice of the word "allegory":

> Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a symbol (*ὁ ἐστιν ἀεί ταυτηγόρικου*) is characterized by a translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative. (33)

This well-known passage describes *symbol*, not allegory, through a series of terms that appear to be infinitely more suited to Bonnefoy's leaf. For instance, Bonnefoy's insistent focus on rendering the leaf textually, almost *materially*, present through deixis seems indeed to oppose Coleridge's idea of the insubstantiality of allegory and function in a far more symbolic mode. The leaf appears, like the Coleridgian symbol, expressly to "partake of the reality which it renders intelligible," for it is the non-idealized reality of "cette feuille brisée, verte et noire, salie" that provides "intelligibility," precisely through the understanding of *présence* it furnishes: "cette feuille infinie est présence pure." In addition, Coleridge's distinction between the whole and the part, with the symbol acting as *living part*, seems highly congruent with Bonnefoy's explicit description of the leaf as a fragment torn from the tree. Similarly the Coleridgian "it enunciates the whole," can fruitfully be conjoined with Bonnefoy's "dans sa blessure la profondeur de *tout*

ce qui est." (my emphasis). Finally, Coleridge's "translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal" is exactly the object of the leaf in the Bonnefoyian passage. It is *because* the leaf is damaged and dying that it can provide salvation, for its very destruction renders it inviolable: "Qui pourrait m'arracher en effet que [cette feuille] a été mienne, et dans un contact au-delà des destins et des sites, dans l'absolu? Qui pourrait aussi bien détruite, la détruire?" (*I*, 27). These parallels suggest that "symbol" and not "allegory" is the most appropriate term for Bonnefoy's description of the leaf.[98]

And yet, Bonnefoy's clear choice, reiterated and confirmed through the multiple editions of *L'Improbable*, is to use "allegory." This choice, moreover, cannot be imputed to lack of knowledge. As Patrick Née has pointed out, Bonnefoy is completely familiar with the Romantic theory of symbol, having written in the 1950s "un article fondamental sur la conception du signe (réfléchie, entre autres, à partir de Coleridge et donc de la théorie romantique du symbole), d'abord publié en anglais dans la revue *Encounter*, puis dans *Preuves*" (13). Bonnefoy's choice must thus be assumed to be deliberate and motivated. Certainly the question of a conscious decision plays into selecting allegory as a rhetorical strategy, as indeed Coleridge himself points out: "Of utmost importance to our present subject is this point, that the latter (the allegory) cannot be other than spoken consciously; whereas in the former (the symbol) it is very possible that the general truth represented may be working unconsciously in the writer's mind during the construction of the symbol" (99). The fact that Bonnefoy's choice is a conscious one is confirmed by a comment made just a few pages before the leaf passage. Discussing his attraction for the tombs of Ravenna, he writes "Qu'on ne s'étonne pas de la part que je fais aux monuments d'une

[98] It must be noted, however, that Paul Smith, in his "The Will of Allegory in Postmodernism," suggests that the commonly-held opposition between allegory and symbol is overstated, since "both eventually exhibit a similar nostalgia for a plenitude and security of reference, for 'truth' as a stay against the individual's alienation from himself and from the world," (108), and this certainly plays into Bonnefoy's overall project.

ville. Ce n'est point par souci d'allégorie, ni simplement par le gout, d'ailleurs mystérieux, de la méditation des ruines" (*I*, 21). These tombs, he suggests, cannot be read as allegories of anything else, because their very ipseity renders them incompatible with conceptual thought : "si la pensée conceptuelle s'est détournée du tombeau, tenons au moins pour acquis que ce n'est pas à cause de son savoir de la mort" (*I*, 20).[99] Bonnefoy's rejection of the association between tombs and allegory thus reinforces the idea that his identification of the leaf with allegory is a deliberate choice, that allegory really is the scrim through which he intends to consider the leaf.

## Theoretical Perspectives on Allegory

Despite its relative unpopularity, a number of critical studies attempt to retrieve allegory from the abysses into which it was cast in the preceding centuries.[100] Walter Benjamin's *Origine du Drame Baroque Allemand* is perhaps the first text to spring to mind, with the caveat that it explicitly links the allegorical impulse with a specific period and genre. The breadth of Benjamin's approach, though, clearly makes it possible to link his vision of allegory to larger patterns of thought. Indeed, to return momentarily to the opposition between allegory and symbol, Benjamin indicates that "Pour contrebalancer la plongée dans les abîmes de la méditation, l'allégorie doit sans cesse renouveler ses développements, sans cesse surprendre. Le symbole, au contraire, reste obstinément identique à lui-même […]. Les allégories vieillissent, parce que leur caractère choquant fait partie de leur essence" (197). Certainly, this comment seems to mesh well with the sense of surprise the reader experiences at the association Bonnefoy makes between the leaf and allegory. From a more contemporary theoretical perspective, Craig

[99] And yet, as Michèle Monte argues convincingly, in Bonnefoy's poetry it is often the bald ipseity of the thing described that impels an allegorical reading (238 *et passim*).

[100] See for instance this statement by Craig Owens: "allegory has been condemned for nearly two centuries as aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art. In *Aesthetic* Croce refers to it as 'science, or art aping science' Borges once called it an 'aesthetic error'" (67).

Owens indicates that at least as concerns the visual arts, allegory may be an exceedingly useful way of understanding the motivations driving certain works and suggests that "postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse, and […] criticism will remain incapable of accounting for that impulse as long as it continues to think of allegory as aesthetic error" (75). That these theoretical considerations could have some impact on Bonnefoy's use of the word seems indisputable, and his use of allegory is particularly important in the perspective of studying his use of the essay.

Indeed, in examining the critical domain surrounding the term allegory, what is striking is the manner in which many of the theoretical discussions on allegory tend to use terminology and assign motivations that are, in many cases, highly congruent with those associated with the essay. Thus, one of the first parallels between allegory and essay comes from the same Craig Owens cited above, who writes that "the allegorical work is synthetic; it crosses aesthetic boundaries." (75) The essay, as we saw, is also frequently praised or taxed for these very qualities. And along similar lines, but in what is perhaps an even more prominent coincidence of descriptive adjectives, the opening words of Angus Fletcher's often-cited *Allegory, The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*,indicates that "Allegory is a protean device, omnipresent in Western literature from the earliest times to the modern era" (1). The essay, it will be remembered, is also identified with that rather unusual term, "protean," thus suggesting the variability associated with both genres and also, more broadly, with Bonnefoy's attraction for polysemous terms.

Like his pointed choice of the essay as a mode of expression, Bonnefoy's choice of allegory is motivated by its inherent rhetorical qualities and focuses both on the themes that give it form and on its capacity to transmit a particular position. For him, perhaps the most useful characteristics of allegory are connected to the question of textual resonance foregrounding its desire to redeem and revitalize the past; its fascination with fragmentation; its relationship to

symbol, metaphor, and metonymy; and finally, its more psychological aspects, shown in the constraints it imposes and its didactic potential. Together, these elements point to a highly motivated use of allegory that functions as one of the structuring modes for Bonnefoy's work.

## Fragmentation, Ruins, and Textual Pasts

One aspect of allegory that is very convincingly addressed by Walter Benjamin in the "Ruine" and "Morcellement Allégorique" sections of his *Origine du Drame Baroque Allemand*, is the kinship between allegory and fragmentation. "Ces ruines qui jonchent le sol, le fragment hautement significatif, les décombres : voilà la matière la plus noble de la création baroque" (191). Owens points out that Benjamin's connecting of allegory, fragment and ruin also works on larger scales: "Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete—an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence" (70). These terms, "fragmentation," "imperfection," "incompleteness," have considerable resonance in Bonnefoy's work, particularly when one remembers his "goût, d'ailleurs mystérieux, de la meditation des ruines" (*I*, 21) and associates it with "L'imperfection est la cime," which is both a title and a line from a poem in *Hier Régnant Désert* (*Poèmes*, 139). Indeed, it is telling that critic Jean-Pol Madou uses exactly the same extract to suggest that for Bonnefoy, "tout ce qui évoque la perfection doit […] être nié, oublié, détruit" (*Pau*, 33).[101]

It is perhaps not surprising then to note that the leaf passage is drawn from an essay on tombs, which though not themselves ruins, are nonetheless metonymically related to the idea of ruin. More specifically yet, the leaf in the "Tombeaux" passage is explicitly set under the sign of

[101] On this subject, see also Richard Vernier's chapter, "Une Poétique de l'Imperfection," in *Yves Bonnefoy ou les Mots Comme le Ciel.*

fragmentation, and this, as Madou points out, is an inherent component of Bonnefoy's thought, and is characterized by "la prédilection du poète pour tout ce qui est fragmentaire, donc *infini* au sens d'inachevé" *(ibid,* emphasis in original)[102]. Indeed, after establishing the deictic utterance as the operating mode governing the leaf passage, Bonnefoy's first step is to identify the leaf within the structure of a larger whole from which it derives: "Je dirai par allégorie : c'est le fragment de l'arbre sombre, cette feuille cassée du lierre." Before even being itself, thus, the leaf is first described as a fragment, a piece of the tree whence it sprung. This notion is further developed in the final segment of the sentence, where the fragmentation is specified, indeed, almost over-determined by the fact that the leaf is shown as broken off, "cassée du lierre." The conjunction between the notion of fragmentation so patently inscribed in the text and Bonnefoy's emphatic association of the leaf with allegory underscores the correlation between his text and theories of allegory, connecting through this to the essay's predilection for fragmentation and Bonnefoy's essayistic project as a whole. The foregrounding of fragmentation in this passage provides a direct form of connection between allegory and the essay, for it demonstrates the constant tension between an underlying unity which can only be guessed at, but which subtly and continuously weaves together the very real and explicit fragmentation of the work.

The notion of fragmentation carries over into another connection between allegory and essay for both types of texts refer–frequently explicitly—to other texts and sources, and these frequently oblique roots often appear in fragmentary form in both allegory and essay. Just as Bonnefoy's choice of the word *présence* sketches out a continuum, anchoring his present choice to a series of historical moments that are both theological and philosophical, so is the word

[102] Much theoretical debate exists on the nature of the fragment, and if one vision is Madou's sense of "unfinished," it is equally legitimate to consider it as an "éclat," "débris," thus a part of a larger whole. On this aspect, it is interesting to consider Michael Brophy's comments on Bonnefoy's fragmentary text, *L'Ordalie*: "ce qui l'intéresse, c'est de toute evidence la trame rompu du récit, sa trame privée d'un début, sa totalité intentionnelle devenue fragment accidentelle" (695).

allegory frequently theorized as looking back toward a textual origin. As Owens writes, "In allegorical structure, then, one text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest" (69, emphasis in original). More globally, Bloomfield enlarges the scope of the backward glance of allegory by stating that "one of the basic functions of allegory is to make literary documents relevant" (301). That said, Bloomfield himself recognizes that although it is largely determined by them, allegory is perhaps not limited solely to textual origins but includes the past in general: "the allegorical or historical interpretative mind is continually telling us that the past is relevant and the quotations of the past apply today" (302). This idea of giving renewed value to the past finds substantive echo in Bonnefoy's work: it is certainly worth noting that one of Bonnefoy's most academic productions is the editing of a two-volume *Dictionnaire des Mythologies*. And from the recuperative perspective of allegory, it is striking that the stated objective of this work is to give renewed meaning and accessibility to a number of traditional narratives that were originally oral. The adamantly thematic orientation of the work–as opposed, for instance, to the alphabetical organization normally associated with dictionaries—has an explicit purpose, that of vesting the past with revived meaning while connecting it to present concerns, which hints at the potentially moral function of allegory.

Indeed, a number of critics suggest that one of the capital functions of allegory is to retrieve, almost to salvage the past, particularly inasmuch as it is in constant danger of disappearing, or of losing its pertinence (Owen, 68, Quilligan, 64). Naturally, for the reader of Bonnefoy, it is difficult to avoid connecting these ideas with the frequent references to the idea of salvation or redemption that constellate his work. The ready transposition of these particular terms suggests that it is possible—as Benjamin suggests, and Owens reiterates—to see allegory

not as a rhetorical flourish but more properly as a state of mind that pertains to a particular perception of the world. Owens writes:

> Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (*allos* = other + *agoreuei* = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance. (69)

The notion of (re)appropriating extant pieces, as well as that of supplement, are both vital to our reading of Bonnefoy's allegorical passage, bringing us directly back to the specificities of Bonnefoy's choice: why, indeed, a leaf? Why not a bird, a fence, or a stone? If it is true, as Owens suggests, that the allegorist does not invent images, are there identifiable sources for the image of the leaf? Can Bonnefoy's choice be seen as motivated, and if so, how is this motivation linked to the terms evoked by Owens?

## Ivy, Allegory, and Concept: Three Sources for the Leaf

For if the leaf image is striking, there are also a number of questions the "Je dirai par allégorie" sentence immediately provokes. Why, for instance, does Bonnefoy use the definite article "le" ("c'est *le* fragment de l'arbre sombre," my emphasis) when referring to an unknown tree which is only later identified as "lierre"? And in point of fact, why specifically "ivy"; is there an allegorical connotation that might validate such a choice? This last question provides the simplest entry point, for ivy, like many plants, has symbolic import: since pagan times, its physical qualities–evergreen and clinging—has caused it to be associated both with eternity and attachment. Two texts, a very early uncollected essay and a poem from *Douve* indicate Bonnefoy's awareness of this symbolic value. His choice of ivy in an essay whose main point is to disassociate the ideas of eternity and immortality from that of the concept is thus far from

trivial. Indeed, the fact that the ivy leaf of the "Tombeaux" text should bear the burden of showing immediacy becomes completely congruent with the larger project carried by the essay, for Bonnefoy subverts the timelessness associated with ivy to show the very opposite: the passage of time and through it, mortality. Similarly, the notion of attachment symbolically carried by ivy is undone in the text by the explicit description of the leaf as being broken off from the larger whole.

The anti-conceptuality the ivy leaf assumes in the "Tombeaux" essay, along with its explicit allegorization, and the undoing of the notion of attachment all allow us to connect Bonnefoy's leaf image with the more global characteristics of allegory suggested by Owens *et al*. For the over-determination of certain points contained in the Bonnefoyian text suggests that his choice is predicated, whether consciously or not, on principles that are, *in fine*, linked not only to the theoretical notions that subtend allegory—particularly as these latter encompass the notion of making the past relevant—but also, and more pertinently, to the ferocious opposition *présence* brings to bear on concept. Indeed, I would argue that the deictic over-determination of the leaf points to idea that for Bonnefoy, it must be associated with a previously identified object. This, in turn, allows us to seek the links between Bonnefoy's image and references it makes to an identifiable textual past, and subsequently turn to the question of what Owens' "supplemental meaning" might actually be in the Bonnefoyian text.

Two connections deriving from Bonnefoy's own work appear particularly compelling. The first one, uses the very early essay, "Sur le concept de Lierre" (1951), and the second is contained in a poem from *Douve*. These two very different texts, combined with the leaf passage from *L'Improbable* allow us to address the crucial question of how the notion of *présence* serves as a multi-level link between poetry, prose, and essay. As we saw earlier, the "Tombeaux" essay provides an explicit and even violent rejection of the concept. Twice, Bonnefoy repeats the

virtually identical question: "De quelle chose sensible le concept n'est-il détourné?" (*I*, 20). The answer comes near the end of the essay: it has turned away from the real things of the world because "Le concept est une illusion. C'est lui ce premier voile des vieilles métaphysiques. Il s'agit d'être en regard de lui l'incroyant et l'athée. Car il est faible comme un dieu. Et qu'on ne dise point qu'en son absence, et dans ce débris de lierre que j'ai tenu, dans le passage et l'écume, toute vérité devient impossible" (I, 29).[103] But between the questions and the answer the paradigmatic leaf passage has occurred. More importantly, it has set a leaf–*this particular leaf*—to be the very antithesis of concept and has confirmed the idea that the absence of concept cannot be equated with the absence of truth, allowing Bonnefoy to affirm more generally that contrary to the principles held by traditional philosophical thought, the concept does not intrinsically harbor truth, and that it is precisely because the leaf can be seen as the opposite of the concept that it can become a mooring for truth.

## "Sur le Concept de Lierre"

The brief, though dense and rather abstruse essay published by Bonnefoy in the short-lived review, *Troisième Convoi,*[104] provides some elements of response to the question of why, grammatically, the anti-conceptual leaf in the "Tombeaux" essay is so highly determined. The older essay appears to be the starting point of a much larger project that was never developed: it is subtitled "Prolégomènes," and this subtitle itself bears the number "1," thus suggesting the intention of future sections that never materialized. The essay makes overt reference to the philosophical opposition between Hegel and Kierkegaard but develops it no farther than to

[103] Implicit in this statement is the Bonnefoyian ambivalence, which recognizes Nietzsche's "Gott ist tot" through the use of the anti-Pascalian terms "incroyant," and "athée," but seems, *in fine*, to opt for Pascal's "deus absconditus" through the choice of the word "absence."

[104] Reprinted in Jacques Ravaud, *Yves Bonnefoy*; page numbers refer to this edition.

suggest that the opposition fails because both lines of thought remain mired in the concept. The *Troisième Convoi* essay is unusual, not only because of the highly theoretical nature of the argument, but also because of its very particular style, located somewhere between poetic discourse and argument.[105] In his *Yves Bonnefoy, à L'Horizon du Surréalisme*, Arnaud Buchs provides an excellent analysis of the essay, identifying it as the theoretical framework buttressing Bonnefoy's rejection of Surrealism. Buchs remarks judiciously that because of the nature of Bonnefoy's argument, the "concept de Lierre" evoked in the title finds its logical conclusion in silence (341). Indeed, in the essay, we clearly see that Bonnefoy addresses the problem of language and suggests that undoing the concept requires either the absence of language, or, *in fine*, silence: "Car en dépit de la clairvoyance de Rimbaud, des intuitions de Plotin : le concept a racheté tout ce qui n'est pas silence" (Ravaud, 24, Buchs, 340). And even this cannot provide a durable solution because of the tenacious interconnection between language and concept "car la pensée de la ruine ne se laisse entrevoir qu'à l'état naissant. Elle aime le renoncement et rejoint vite le silence" (*ibid.*). Here, by "ruin," Bonnefoy specifically means the destruction of the concept, but he argues that it cannot be undone: we cannot abstract ourselves from its infinite loop because the intellectual techniques to oppose it, namely questioning or defining, are themselves the techniques of the concept (24, 27).[106]

Several points stand out in the analysis of how the allegorical quality attributed to the leaf in the "Tombeaux" passage relies on the "Lierre" essay as a source,. The first is that in contrast with the fierce opposition between leaf and concept of the "Tombeaux" essay, the very title "Sur le Concept de Lierre" seems to associate the two. The second point concerns the grammar of the

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105 Discussion on the style of this essay is more fully developed in the following chapter on the specificities of the Bonnefoyian essay.

106 From the perspective of the allegorical impulsion that this early essay will provide, the thematization of the notion of "ruin" is itself striking.

title, where the absence of article combined with the capitalization of the word suggests that "lierre" is treated as a proper name. Does this equate "lierre" with the genus, making of it the generic representative of an entire category? Or does it rather suggest some obscure onomastic properties attributable to the word, similar to those we saw Bonnefoy using in his proto-novel, *Agent Secret*, wherein the protagonists bore names such as Douve, Plaque, and Ruine?

The question remains unanswerable because the last and most fascinating point is that despite the title, at no point in the text is there any mention of "lierre" as a concrete object. Indeed, as indicated above, the entire text discusses the abstract notion of the concept. Therefore the only reference to the real object hovers in a strange no-man's land between hyper-determination, if we interpret "Lierre" as a proper name, or complete genericity, if we take it as the undefined representative of a kind. Naturally, the complete absence of "lierre" in the body of the text raises the question of why it should be missing. Did Bonnefoy intend, in a never-written section of the same essay, to introduce and clarify the relationship between "lierre" and "concept"? The point is moot, for as he allowed the essay to be reprinted in a much later collection of texts, he must feel that it can stand alone. For our purposes, this essay demonstrates rather clearly that in Bonnefoy's *imaginaire*, the ivy occurring in the subsequent texts must be seen as mentally associated with concept seen in this earlier text.

## Le Lierre: "Présence sans Issue"

A few lines from the second poem in *Douve* allow us further insight into how anterior textual sources provide the allegorical substratum of the leaf in the "Tombeaux" essay. In that poem, the speaker, responding to the "imperfect drunkenness of living" describes a highly metaphysical scene and then reports the reactive speech of the second person "tu":

L'été vieillissant te gerçait d'un plaisir monotone,
nous méprisions l'ivresse imparfaite de vivre
«Plutôt le lierre, disais-tu, l'attachement du lierre aux pierres de sa nuit : présence sans issue, visage sans racine»
«Dernière vitre heureuse que l'ongle solaire déchire, plutôt dans la montagne ce village où mourir.»
«Plutôt ce vent… » (*P*, 46)

These poetic statements are striking from a number of perspectives, not the least of which is that they connect several distinct essays through the mechanism of poetry and the notion of *présence*. The truly crucial point is that the poetic strategy of incorporating direct speech into the text demonstrates the vital link that the notion of *présence* provides between poetry and essay in Bonnefoy's work. The whole of *Douve* contains only a few instances of direct speech.[107] The first ones occur in the above poem, and the subsequent ones are found in the salamander poem cycle near the end of the volume. It is highly significant that each of these poetic episodes has its memorable essayistic counterpart, and that they are both instances of reflection on the notion of *présence* through the use of image: in the "Tombeaux" text, through the image of the leaf, and in "L'Acte et le Lieu," through that of the salamander. Not only does the direct speech thus provide an immediate link between the leaf passage in this chapter and the salamander episode discussed in the following chapter, but it also offers a "material" connection between the first and last essays contained in the first volume of *L'Improbable*. This connection, naturally, plays a significant role in analyzing how Bonnefoy's essays are structured by the notion of *présence*.

In the above *Douve* poem, the images "spoken" are linked to *présence* through images that also appear in Bonnefoy's essays. The effect of the direct speech in the poem is no doubt enhanced by the fact that there are three distinct statements, each enclosed within its own set of quotation marks, and each clearly governed by the repeated "plutôt." And though each of the statements expresses a desire that can be connected to *présence*, the semantics of the word

[107] Indeed, until *Dans le Leurre du Seuil* (1975), the incidence of direct speech in Bonnefoy's poetry is exceedingly rare: there are none in *Hier Régnant Désert*, and only one instance in *Pierre Ecrite*.

"plutôt" demonstrates a far more tentative quality, linked to the fact that this desire is presented as something that the speaker would *rather* have. Considering Bonnefoy's strong position on *présence*, this doubtfulness might appear surprising. A return to prior textual sources demonstrates, however, an increasing decisiveness. Indeed, a facsimile of the first manuscript copy of the poem shows that the early version contains only one set of quotation marks enclosing all the lines of direct speech (*YB*, xx). The semantic effect of this typographical choice recalls Fineman's analysis of how rhythm structures allegory, for the three sets of quotation marks used in the later versions of the poem visually draw attention to language. The rhythm given by the triple repetition of "plutôt" creates a mood that appears more confrontational and simultaneously underscores the opposition created between the descriptive first section of the poem and the subsequent direct speech that enumerates ivy, sunlit window, and wind as the markers of *présence*.

Though the image of the wind is, as the analysis of the "Dédicace" showed, somewhat ambivalent, the images of a window reflecting the sun and, of course, that of the ivy, participate more clearly in the enunciation of *présence* because both of these poetic images are explicitly linked to presence in Bonnefoy's prose. Indeed, "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie," contains an identical sunlit window image, one that I evoked in Chapter One: "Mais la chance de la poésie à venir […] est qu'elle est au point de connaître, dans son durable exil, ce que peut ouvrir la *présence*. Etait-ce donc si difficile ? Ne suffisait-il pas d'apercevoir, au flanc de quelque montagne, une vitre au soleil du soir ? " (*I*, 133, emphasis in original). Tellingly, the essay's image appears in a question that is directly addressed to the reader and explicitly linked to *présence*, thus creating an obvious parallel between the prose question and the direct speech of the poem.

Overall, however, the strongest image is that of the ivy, which is very conspicuously foregrounded in the poem. Clearly, the ivy is taken there to be in opposition to a facile and hence unsatisfactory form of living ("plaisir monotone"). And yet, the image of the ivy remains subordinated to metaphor in the sense that the qualities that contribute to making the ivy a desirable alternative to "imperfection" of the "aging summer" lie in its physical characteristics and the allegorical analogies derived from them. In other words, it is clear in the poem that it is not the ivy *per se*—even though it is associated with the notion of *présence*—that is the sole object of attention. It is rather–and almost to an equal degree—its *characteristics*, found in the subsequent statement, "l'attachement du lierre aux pierres de sa nuit" that bear the equal rhetorical weight in the line. And though the notion of attachment is a clear echo to its allegorical qualities, the metaphor "pierres de sa nuit," also associates the image of the ivy with something that appears as fundamentally metaphorical, thus connecting it more closely to its identification with allegory in the "Tombeaux" essay. Finally, the quality poetically ascribed to ivy, namely its "attachment to stones," points to the living entity as a generic whole which is metaphorically seen through its signal characteristic of clinging to all surfaces, even the most inhospitable.

In the "Tombeaux" passage, by contrast, the holistic idea of ivy is subordinated to the image of the leaf: though it is explicitly described as an ivy leaf, its most important qualities lie in its fragmentation and in the reality of its existence. The adjective "cassée," though describing the relationship of the part to the whole, of the leaf to the ivy, prefigures the existential condition of the leaf, revealed several lines further to be broken, "brisée, verte et noire, salie." Thus the plight of the leaf hinges on this double damage done to it: not only has it been rent from the tree, but it has subsequently been torn and broken, mortally wounded. And therein, precisely, lies its interest for Bonnefoy. For, as he explicitly says, the whole, undamaged leaf would be concept: "La feuille

entière, bâtissant son essence immuable de toutes ses nervures, serait déjà le concept." His insistent use of deixis through the multiple repetition of the expression "cette feuille" serves as a supplementary counterweight to the potential for conceptualization, by rhetorically making real the concrete presence of the leaf.

In sum, thus, we can observe a progression of the image of "lierre" through the three texts: first, in the *Convoi* essay, the capitalized word "Lierre" is linked in an indecipherable manner– positive? negative?—to the idea of concept. Then, in the *Douve* poem, the "lierre" undergoes a form of de-conceptualization by its direct conjunction with the characteristics of living ivy (its "attachement," etc.), which are then associated with the notion of *présence*. Finally, in the "Tombeaux" text, the generic notion of ivy is entirely subsumed in the physical presence of a fragment of ivy. The ivy leaf, in all its ephemerality, becomes the most important element of the drive to describe *présence* and this, in turn, is associated with the complete rejection of the very notion of concept.

## The Allegorical Supplement and the Nietzschean Concept

The surprising connection between "leaf" and "concept" is, however, not unique to Bonnefoy. It bears the latent echo of another textual connection contained in the Nietzschean text briefly examined in Chapter Three. As it happens, Nietszche uses there the same image of a leaf to theorize the conceptualization of reality, writing: "Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal. No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept 'leaf' is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through forgetting the distinctions" (46). Bonnefoy evokes a very similar idea in the *Convoi* essay, writing that: "La vérité conceptuelle n'est qu'un état de fait" (Ravaud, 29). And though the devaluation of the

truth-value of the concept is already present there, it is only in the later "Tombeaux" essay that the particularization of the ivy leaf through fragmentation and deixis becomes the response allowing for the rejection of the concept.

But Nietzsche, as we saw, goes beyond negating the possibility of the concept to represent reality. Ultimately, he seeks to argue that language itself cannot contain truth because our every interaction with the real world comes through sensory images that are unrecognized metaphors, and hence that every use of language equates "lying" according to convention (50). The only possibility for reinvesting language with truth entails consciously creating new metaphors (*ibid.*). It is on this point that Bonnefoy is most critical of Nietzsche, for, as he argues, the attachment to metaphor, that is, to the signifier alone, provokes isolation of the individual, and through it, the negation of community: "la danse de qui, à la suite de Nietzsche, se donne au signifiant dans sa virtualité, est un acte de solitude, dans lequel le rapport à autrui ne peut plus s'établir" (*Pau*, 25). And given the importance for Bonnefoy of the creation of an authentic relation through language, his position must, *in fine*, be hostile to the conclusions Nietzsche reaches.

Allegory, through the notion of "supplement" that it introduces, provides Bonnefoy a means to counter the Nietzchean idea that language is untruthful. For if some lapidary form of the Nietzschean leaf does indeed hide behind Bonnefoy's own leaf, using allegory allows him to retrieve the image itself while adding another layer of meaning to it. This meaning, I would argue, is the very notion of truth that Nietzsche banishes from the so-called metaphors of ordinary language. Hence, allegorizing the leaf would allow Bonnefoy to reintroduce the possibility that language can encompass truth, and this truth can be none other than *présence*, which, as he so emphatically asserts, can *truly* inhabit certain words. This can help to explain why Bonnefoy rejects metaphor in favor of allegory: he attributes to the latter a more communal value linked to the fact that unlike the self-absorption of the metaphor, allegory transcends its

form to point elsewhere. This, of course, brings us to ask why Bonnefoy would feel allegory to be more truthful than the simple image of the leaf, which, given plainly for itself, might seem to be more authentically connected to the truth. The answer lies in the complex relation allegory maintains not just with metaphor, but with metonymy as well.

## Metaphor, Metonymy: Allegory as Bridge Between Them

The traditional definition of allegory describes it as an extended metaphor. Joel Fineman, countering Roman Jakobson's *Fundamentals of Language*, suggests however that this association is too simplistic, and that allegory must be treated as a particular case. Jakobson, it will be remembered, associates metaphor with Romanticism, Symbolism, and poetry, while he puts Realism and prose into parallel with metonymy: "The principle of symmetry underlies poetry […] Prose, on the contrary, is forwarded essentially by contiguity. Thus for poetry metaphor, and for prose metonymy is the line of least resistance" (81-82). Allegory, however, suggests Fineman, differs from these trenchant distinctions, as it can "cut across and subtend all such stylistic categorizations, being equally possible in either verse or prose, and quite capable of transforming the most objective naturalism into the most subjective expressionism, or the most determined realism into the most surrealistically ornamental baroque" (50). Craig Owens is even more direct, saying that allegory, "with blatant disregard for aesthetic categories" "implicates *both* metaphor and metonymy" (74, emphasis in original). These critics thus imply that there is something specific about allegory, allowing it a span of freedom that other rhetorical figures can acquire only with great difficulty. Their claim puts allegory once again into close relation with the essay, whose sense of freedom is also widely asserted.

As the previous section showed, Bonnefoy evinces a highly negative reaction to Nietzsche's reification of metaphor-creation because its individualism and potential solipsism appears to disregard the values of the community and a shared access to some form of communion. For instance, Bonnefoy describes metaphor as a "construction fermée qui n'est que la décision d'hier, en somme, la compréhension toujours trop hâtive qui risque de rester du passé et me garder séparé du monde" (*EsP*, 51). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the manner in which Bonnefoy constructs his opposition depends heavily on the proto-Saussurian codes that he uses to describe those functions of language which remain really central in his struggle to transmit *présence*. Thus if metaphor, in the Saussurian lexicon tends to discount the "signified" to focus on the "signifier" alone, Bonnefoy's rejection of it lies in this mono-focal reductionism: from the perspective of his imperative to transmit *présence*, metaphor is inadequate to truly transmit its holistic nature, which is carried in *both* the signifier and signified. And yet, linguistically speaking, there is perhaps some form of contradiction in Bonnefoy's refusal of the reductionism that characterizes metaphor-creation, and the high value he places on the individual production of "parole." The answer to this conundrum lies once again in his very personal interpretation of the Saussurian system. As the preceding chapter showed, Bonnefoy makes a clear distinction between words that are "naturally poetic," and other words that are inherently less so: "ainsi *brique*, déjà, parle à l'esprit de poésie de façon moins évidente que *pierre*, parce que le rappel du procédé de fabrication l'emporte, dans la donnée de ce mot " (*I*, 255). Further, he cites the example of words that can be "redeemed" by the poetic gesture, allowing them to express *présence*: "de nombreux mots qui semblent dire l'aspect pourront être repris, rachetés par le souci poétique" (*I*, 256). This redemption of the words is made possible, as we saw, by Bonnefoy's re-evaluation of the Saussurian arbitrariness of language, redefining it to include a positive form of

differentiation between certain words. Allegory, as it happens, can be seen to similarly transform the arbitrary quality of language.

Indeed, Fineman, following Benveniste, argues that contrary to the completely arbitrary coupling of "signifier" and "signified" postulated by Saussure, the very passage of language through history transforms the relations between these two parts of the sign.[108] He writes: "Once the signifier's relation to the signified, i.e. the sign as a whole, is understood […] to be relatively motivated, rather than utterly arbitrary as in Saussure, it is possible to make the sign itself into an index pointing to the structure it embodies and supports" (53). In substance, Fineman argues that the synchronic structure of language necessarily also has always been subjugated to a diachronic existence and this, perforce, has contributed to shaping it. Thus words (signs) have naturally acquired a non-arbitrary value within a particular system of linguistic representation—poetry, for example—and indicate this value by their very presence in the structure. Fineman adds–speaking specifically of rhyme, but his analysis is clearly true in a broader sense—that words can function as a form of deictic indicating the various properties of the texts within which they occur. Bonnefoy's careful distinction between "pierre" and "brique" can be read in similar fashion. Much though he would have us read "pierre" as a sign pointing to the extra-linguistic, because "pierre" can be a sign pointing to poetry, whereas "brique" cannot, within a system which differentiates between "poetic" and "non-poetic" words it is word "pierre" itself that can act as a proto-diectic pointing to structure, to the "poeticity" of the text. Objectively, "pierre" has obtained this capacity through the historical evolution of language and the codes the speaking community has come to accept as "naturally" devolving to it. Indeed, this code is so well-

[108] Benveniste's refutation, in "La Nature du Signe,"of Saussure's "arbitraire du signe" however, concerns more particularly the relation between the sign as whole and the real object it represents: "Ce n'est pas entre le signifiant et le signifié que la relation en même temps se modifie et reste immuable, c'est entre le signe et l'objet ; c'est, en d'autres termes, la *motivation objective* de la désignation, soumise, comme telle, à l'action de divers facteurs historiques. "

integrated into Bonnefoy's work that it is perfectly reproduced by the critical community, which tends to confirm the *gravitas* and importance of Bonnefoy's work by pointing to his compelling tendency to limit his vocabulary to "les mots essentiels" that are bearers of a universal message.

Allegory, Fineman argues, has a similar indexical function: "all the levels of allegory, up through and including the thematic […] display themselves and each other with resoundingly poetic and emphatically structural effect" (53). In large part, his unambiguous parallel between allegory and the motivated nature of the linguistic sign derives from allegory's particular position at the intersection of metaphor and metonymy. What allegory can do, perhaps better than other rhetorical tropes, is project the Jakobsonian metaphoric axis onto the metonymic axis. And if it is true, as Fineman, Owens *et al.* argue, that allegory is misrepresented when it is equated with metaphor alone, then a singular matter of concern for us is the way in which allegory combines metaphor and metonymy to produce something that Bonnefoy finds essential to communicate his philosophy of *présence*.

Perhaps the most important aspect of metaphor is, as Daniel Chandler suggests, the apparent un-relatedness that habitually characterizes its two parts: "the linking of a particular tenor and vehicle is normally unfamiliar: we must make an imaginative leap to recognize the resemblance to which a fresh metaphor alludes" (127). In order for metaphor to "work" properly, thus, the necessary distance between the two terms must be decoded by the observer, and this deciphering relies on the suppressed image connecting them. Apollinaire's "Bergère ô tour Eiffel le troupeau des ponts bêle ce matin," for instance, requires the latent image of Paris. As a result, the content of the metaphor is subordinated to an image that creates a connection by analogy: A *seems* like B through image C.

Metonymy is substantively different in that it operates by contiguity and thus presupposes a perceptible connection between the elements put into relation. Todorov indicates that

metonymy uses "un mot pour désigner un objet ou une propriété qui se trouve dans un rapport existentiel avec la référence habituelle de ce même mot" (354). This "rapport existentielle" strikes at the heart of Bonnefoy's preoccupations, and its relation to *presence* is suggested even more explicitly in Jakobson's reading of Saussure: "[metonymy] 'is *in presentia*: it is based on two or several terms jointly present in an actual series,' whereas [metaphor] 'connects terms *in absentia* as members of a virtual mnemonic series'" (61, emphasis in original). This crucial point concerning metonymy and *présence* through its more immediate connection between language and object is substantiated by Patrick Née's suggestion that Bonnefoy's predilection for metonymy stems from the fact that it is perhaps the only rhetorical tool allowing him to effectively integrate *présence* into language[109]:

> Si donc il y a chance que de la "présence" se fasse jour au sein des mots du langage […] c'est à la condition que ces mots en poésie soient comme des noms propres, voire des *prénoms* : lesquels font coïncider les trois pôles au sein du signe (signifiant/signifié *et* référent extralinguistique), et mieux encore, les mettent en situation de discours, où ils font comme répondre à un appel, à moins qu'ils ne le lancent. Or ces passeurs de poésie dans le langage *noms ou prénoms de l'être* (qu'antérieurement le poète désignait comme « *grands signifiants »),* tiennent en fait leurs pouvoirs de la structuration la plus profonde du poétique, pour Yves Bonnefoy, et dont la notion fait chez lui l'objet d'une extension proprement révolutionnaire (autant qu'inaperçue par la critique) : à savoir la *métonymie*. Non pas figure parmi les autres, mais ce qui donne *figuration* à la « présence », et d'abord par la contiguïté (sur le plan d'une ontologie de la « parole ») qu'elle instaure entre ce qui, en deçà et au-delà, échappe au langage lui-même. De sorte que ce n'est pas—n'en déplaise à la définition jakobsonienne de la « poéticité » --la *métaphore* qui fait ici pierre de touche : laquelle risque toujours, pour Yves Bonnefoy, de n'instaurer qu'un faux transport *esthétique* entre les seuls mots de la langue, et de ne constituer qu'une sorte d'image se reflétant à son miroir." (*Yves Bonnefoy*, 49-50; emphasis in original)

Née's position proves useful in understanding how the leaf occurrences of the *Convoi* essay, the *Douve* poem, and the "Tombeaux" passage might provide an access to *présence*. His suggestion is that the use of proper names allows Bonnefoy to create a relation of contiguity between language and reality by connecting an object directly to what purports to be an "référent extralinguistique" that really exists outside of language. Née doubtless has in mind the

[109] On the importance of metonymy see also James McAllister, "Metonymy and Metaphor in Yves Bonnefoy's Poetry."

ambiguous figure of "Douve," but an analogous function governs the proper name "Lierre" in the *Convoi* essay. And though the lowercase "lierre" of the *Douve* poem and the "Tombeaux" text has a strong metaphorical dimension–"leaf equals *présence* via the idea of death"—it cannot, for Née, be given this value *alone*. He argues instead that Bonnefoy resists attaching the value of metaphor to the relation between leaf and *présence* because doing so would create nothing more than a connection of analogy between the signifying surfaces of the two terms, and such a connection, because it deliberately ignores deeper existential connections carried by their metonymic interaction, is by its very nature false: the leaf, Bonnefoy would have it, is not *like* presence, it *is* presence.

*In fine*, then, the answer to: "why allegory?" resides in two characteristics that may have influenced Bonnefoy. First, allegory's tendency to recuperate and revalorize the past speaks, perhaps subliminally, to his re-use of the "lierre" image from older texts within his owncorpus. Secondly, because of allegory's blurring of the metaphoric and metonymic paradigm, Bonnefoy's overt and explicit insistence on it might stem from his perception of it as the quintessential trope allowing him to transform what is initially a metaphorical relation into one that becomes predominantly metonymic and thus more theoretically apt to transmit his philosophical position., From this perspective, allegory can be seen not as a rhetorical flourish but rather as something essential to Bonnefoy's purpose.

## Compulsion, Control, Redemption: the Multiple Faces of Allegory

The idea of *necessity* points to other characteristics of allegory that play into Bonnefoy's compulsion to convey the idea, and even the fact of *présence*, through writing. Indeed, beyond the trope of fragmentation, allegory also suggests a number of characteristics linking it with the

preoccupations governing the essay. Some of these considerations connect the technical, linguistic principles defining allegory to implications that are rather more psychological in nature. The Jakosbsonian reading of allegory shows this perhaps most clearly. As Fineman very cogently points out, the interplay between allegory, metaphor and metonymy necessarily has an impact both on writer and reader, and this tends to legitimate the notion of the allegorical structure itself, thus engendering specific behavior patterns associated both with writing and reading allegory. Fineman writes:

> […] it is always the structure of metaphor that is projected onto the sequence of metonymy, not the other way around, which is why allegory is always a hierarchizing mode, indicative of timeless order, however subversively intended its contents might be. This is why allegory is […] an inherently political and therefore religious trope, not because it flatters tactfully, but because in deferring to structure it insinuates the power of structure. (51)

The idea of implicating allegory in systems of power and hierarchy may come as a surprise after seeing the importance of "allos agorein" and of fragmentation, both of which seem to suggest a certain reluctance to overtly impose categorical affirmations. However, this aspect is important, for it points to the latent ambivalence that Bonnefoy's work projects regarding systems and their potential undoing. It is surely not by chance that this selfsame ambivalence is identified by Angus Fletcher as one of the key psychological characteristics of allegory: "allegory always demonstrates a degree of inner conflict, which we call 'ambivalence'" (301). Indeed, when placed in parallel with Fineman's comment on the hierarchical nature of allegory, the thematic insistence on fragmentation that is so patently present not only in Bonnefoy's leaf, but also in the way Phèdre's voice is described, shows that allegory provides the same double polarity we saw occurring in the essay. Both forms thus demonstrate a constant tension between elements that play into the notion of systems and those that seek to break out of that very system.

Further, allegory can potentially accommodate highly divergent motivations (from purely narrative all the way to clearly didactic) *because* of its inherent capacity to reiterate the value of

structures. This, it seems to me, suggests a parallel between Bonnefoy's use both of allegory and of the essay. Indeed, the net effect given by Fineman's decrypting of the hierarchical substratum of allegory goes beyond structure to reveal a psychological dimension that, at least in part, provides a justification for Bonnefoy's need to use allegory. This point is important because it allows us to read Bonnefoyian allegory as a form of writing that not only can more easily accommodate his imperative to transmit *présence*, but can simultaneously be seen as an expression of a latent anxiety concerning the transmission of his message. As it happens, Fletcher has suggested rather convincingly that from a psychological, and even Freudian perspective, "the proper analogue to allegory is the compulsive syndrome" because as far as explicitly allegorical texts are concerned, "fear of not reaching [the] goal is" for the allegorical character "even greater than fear of the particular terrors along the way" (287). Fletcher is, of course, referring to true allegorical figures, whose function it is to behave as characters in a fiction, and he is careful to point out that the compulsive pattern refers to the behaviour of the characters and the unfolding of the narration, and can by no means be construed as a comment on the author. However, it must be said that as his chapter on "Psychological Analogues" progresses, the line between allegorical figure, author, and even reader seems to become increasingly blurred, this conflation providing useful elements to understand the undercurrents initiating the allegorical mode in Bonnefoy's work.

Clearly, the idea of some form of compulsion requiring the use of allegory harmonizes well with the drive to express *présence* that comes across so clearly in his writing. There is an overwhelming sense of urgency that marks statements such as his, "Il faut que la ruine ne s'installe pas sur les sociétés de la présence et du sacré, il faut en perpétuer la mémoire, il faut les faire revivre" (*Pau* 132). In the wake of that urgency, it can be argued that the compulsive fear of not reaching the goal of transmitting *présence* dovetails seamlessly with some of the more

controlling modes also attributed to allegory. For if the sense of compulsion originates in the writer, allegory also provides the rhetorical means to try to ensure that the message effectively reaches its target. Indeed, as Fletcher himself points out, "the step from the compulsive to the compulsory is but short, and […] allegorical works present an aesthetic surface which implies an authoritative, thematic, 'correct' reading, and which attempts to eliminate other possible readings; they deliberately restrict the freedom of the reader" (305). Fletcher's point is particularly apt for the leaf passage in the "Tombeaux" essay, for the allegorizing mode is so obviously foregrounded there by the explicit and seemingly gratuitous allusion to allegory that any other reading modes are made impossible, especially those such as symbol or metaphor that might rather naturally be evoked by the description of the leaf. This being the case, the question then becomes one of determining how the idea of compulsion and control that appears to be so apposite to the allegorical construction of the "Tombeaux" passage functions with respect to the objective of transmitting *présence*, especially inasmuch as there appears to be a certain contradiction in the fact that Bonnefoy's own descriptions of *présence* identify it with an experience that can only occur spontaneously and thus, *a fortiori*, never be imposed or forced.

The answer to that problem is linked, I would suggest, to yet another facet that puts allegory and the essay into close parallel with each other: their potential didacticism. In the most ordinary sense, the moralizing dimension of allegory is well-known. It has repeatedly been demonstrated that allegory is intended to teach readers something about some other element that is, in reality, located deeper within it, or, more frequently, elsewhere: the tribulations of Christian and his cohort of helpers and hinderers in *A Pilgrim's Progress* are meant to show readers that salvation lies within their grasp also. In that particular example, the allegorical dimension of the text is so obviously put to the fore that it is virtually impossible to read it in any other manner. Hardly any freedom if left for the reader to remain, for instance, simply at the narrative surface of

the text, and it is precisely this intent to control that constitutes the basis for much of the disfavour with which allegory is frequently met.

However, in counterdistinction to this rather negative perception of the didacticism of allegory, which is, in truth, a powerful *lieu commun* of critical theory, there is another aspect that Quilligan most judiciously points out in *The Language of Allegory*. Her analysis allows us to combine Bonnefoy's profound attentiveness to the function of language with his use of allegory in a way that meshes more closely with the concern he so frequently expresses for finding a writerly place of exchange. Inverting the "normal" didacticism that denotes a point external to the allegory and frequently implies, whether overtly or at a more subliminal level, the "moral improvement" of the reader, Quilligan writes instead that "the final focus of any allegory is its reader and […] the real "action" of any allegory is the reader's learning to read the text properly" (24). And though her use of the adjective "properly" clearly reiterates a latent form of moral value, the idea that allegory can teach us not only to be better readers, but also allow us to enter more fully into the thought of the writer is an important one. This vision is, I would argue, far more in keeping with any latent objectives Bonnefoy might have in so pointedly using allegory as the focal point of the leaf passage. Indeed, Quilligan's argument reinvests the didactic tendency of allegory with a positive value that links it quite coherently with Bonnefoy's central preoccupations:

> After reading an allegory, however, we only realize what kind of readers we are, and what kindwe must become in order to interpret our significance in the cosmos. Other genres appeal to readers as human beings; allegory appeals to readers as readers of a system of signs, but this may be only to say that allegory appeals to readers in terms of their most distinguishing human characteristic, as readers of, and therefore as creatures finally shaped by, their language. (24)

To extend the argument, we might say that learning how to read can serve as a precondition to learning how to be. And it is precisely this reading of allegory that provides the *raison d'être* for Bonnefoy's essays. Perhaps *présence* is possible neither in the poetic text, nor in

the essays, but through the model provided by allegory and expanded into essay, it can be suggested that his essays have the function of teaching us how to read, and through that reading, allow us to recognize the *présence* that might occur in real life experiences.

And yet, this is not to say that everything is open in Bonnefoy's writing, and that all solutions are possible. For it cannot be denied that allegory intrinsically contains a value judgement that Fletcher underscores when he writes: "Frequently didactic in aim, allegories raise the question of value *directly* by asserting certain propositions as good and others as bad" (306, emphasis in original). Indeed, in the leaf passage, there is absolutely no ambiguity about which propositions are given positive value: the assertion that "cette feuille est présence pure et par conséquent mon salut" clearly indicates a moral stance that is reinforced by the highly positive status of the word "salut." Bonnefoy's repeated use of an overtly theological vocabulary provides a highly significant connection with some of the more "religious" themes that subtend allegory. Indeed, it is perhaps impossible to adequately evaluate the didacticism that allegory projects if one does not also consider the notion of the sacred and of redemption associated with it. From this perspective, a clear parallel emerges between these manifestly theological considerations and much of Bonnefoy's discourse on the value of poetic language.

Quilligan very interestingly suggests that the horizontal rather than vertical reading that allegory imposes leads to the textual development of a sense of the sacred (28). She does not expand on this idea, but this feeling is doubtless linked to the non-substitutability of the terms used, in the sense that when words cannot be replaced by synonyms, they acquire an absolute quality that parallels the manner in which theological systems work. A Bonnefoyian example shows how her assessment works and intersects particularly aptly with the vocabulary he uses. If we take, for instance, the word *présence*, not only is it very difficult to interchange it with a syonymn having a similar or identical meaning, but because of the diachronic determination of

"presence," a text built around it would naturally tend to demonstrate a reticulation of words that are metonymically linked to the original term. This is precisely what seems to happen in Bonnefoy's work, where the general use of a theological vocabulary is rendered *necessary* by the initial choice, resulting in the frequent use of terms such as "salut," "sacré," "racheter," "communion," "sacrifice," etc.

And it is this vocabulary or, rather, the more profound moral significance that it bears that finally suggests an explanation for the usefulness of the didactic potential of allegory. Why does Bonnefoy need the didacticism? Probably not because of its intrinsic appeal, but rather because of what he perceives as the vital importance of *présence*, and the absolute necessity of conveying this importance. There is, in point of fact, a clear sense of anxiety and distress reflected in his writing concerning the historical loss of the power of language–and poetic language in particular—to link human beings to each other. He writes in "L'Analogie Suprême": "Après tant de siècles où l'expression poétique a été la voix principale de la conscience publique […] voici en effet que la civilisation a changé, […] voici que le besoin de totalité cohérente et de plénitude a été sacrifié, dans la nuit de plus en plus dense de la pensée conceptuelle, au développement des sciences et des technologies de plus en plus autonomes" (*EsP*, 171). It is this strong sense of reticence regarding the contemporary "scientific" world that finally shows allegory's importance in providing a means to limit the disintegration of models of signification and restore past meaning. Owens indicates that allegory is, *par excellence*, a mode of redemption because it has the

> capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear. Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present—these are its two most fundamental impulses. (68)

The importance of this scrutiny of the past, which then serves as a springboard to the present, cannot be overstated, for it provides another decisive parallel with the essay, which also frequently looks backward to an already-existing cultural element to find the material for its own existence. Bonnefoy's need for the essay clearly comes through in the sheer number he has written. And yet, in terms of his own rhetoric, allegory can obtain a privileged position because of its greater capacity to re-evaluate the capacities of language through its particular location at the intersection of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of expression. And, in point of fact, it is its double capacity of aiming for a sense of redemption while problematizing the interaction between language and reality that doubtless grounds Bonnefoy's interest for it. Thus, Owens's more general perspective on allegory and redemption meshes seamlessly with the language-oriented analysis that Quilligan gives of the redemptive nature of allegory:

> Perhaps language cannot redeem language, so that poetry cannot redeem society; fiction may only entertain. But all allegorists do aim at redemption, and because they must work with language, they ultimately turn to the paradox at the heart of their own assumptions about words and take the final focus of their narratives as not merely the social function of language, but in particular, the slippery tensions between literalness and metaphor. They scrutinize language's own problematic polysemy. (64)

This polysemy described by Quilligan is, as we have seen, one of the governing leitmotivs of Bonnefoy's work. It occurs not only in the very constitution of allegory and essay, but also echoes the thematic construction of the earlier collections of poetry. In *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve*, for instance, the polysemy of the name of the central character combines with the multiple ways in which she/it is shown over the course of the poems: landscape, woman, cadaver, etc. Similarly, *Pierre Ecrite* contains a plethora of different poems whose single name, "Une Pierre," suggests the plurality of descriptions and definitions a single word can contain. The net effect of such a strategy replicates for the reader the larger framework of fragmentation and unity that is created in Bonnefoy's work by his acknowledgment of the polysemy of the world and our ineluctably fragmented perception of it, combined with the parallel desire to reveal the

unified and unifying structure that subtends it. It is this fragmentation and ephemerality that provides one of the most striking connections with the theorization of allegory. And if this tension is seen at all levels of Bonnefoy's work, it emerges particularly clearly in his own definitions of *présence*.

## Bonnefoy's *Présence*: A Return to the "Tombeaux" text

Allegory, suggests Owens, tends to arrest the narrative in its place (72). From a Jakobsonian perspective, this occurs because the reader must interrupt the narrative flow in order to examine the metaphoric implications of the images presented. What is interesting is that Owens' suggestion of the allegorical function is actually materialized in Bonnefoy's description of *présence*. It is, in essence, exactly what occurs in the passage from the "Tombeaux de Ravenne," where the text gives the impression of coming to a standstill in order to delineate a *présence* that is successively described from three different angles. Indeed, if the evocation of the "act of presence" portrayed through the voice of Phèdre is expanded in the allegory of the leaf, the definition of *présence* does not stop at the allegorical infrastructure. Just as in the "Dédicace," where the text extends beyond the "poetry" of the middle section, here, the description of *présence* continues beyond the rhetorical and poetic construction of allegory, intimating that such a construction is a mandatory precondition to the representation of *présence* because such an evanescent notion cannot adequately be described in ordinary language, but that the "true" description can only come after this preparing of the reader.

Benjamin's suggestion that allegory is *necessary* proves useful here because he shows it as providing "la synthèse qui […] résulte du conflit entre l'intention théologique et l'intention

artistique dans le sens d'une *treuga dei*[110] plutôt que d'un traité de paix entre des positions adverses" (190). Allegory thus reconciles the theo-philosophical axis of *présence* with its artistic dimension in a momentary "truce," which is itself an act. Indeed, the allegory we find in the second paragraph is not simply an allegorical description, but can also be read as an act, a true performative in the Austinian sense. Like the "je dédie" of the "Dédicace" the allegory is actually performed in the opening sentence, where saying "je dirai par allégorie" creates an allegorical reading which would not otherwise exist. *In fine*, it is the performance of this act that engenders the textual creation of the allegory and produces a highly poeticized text that will eventually lead, at the very end of the "Tombeaux" passage, to that "true" description of *présence*, which reads as follows:

> Qu'est-ce que la présence? Cela séduit comme une œuvre d'art, cela est brut comme le vent ou la terre. Cela est noir comme l'abîme et pourtant cela rassure. Cela semble un fragment d'espace parmi d'autres, mais cela nous appelle et nous contient. Et c'est un instant qui va mille fois se perdre, mais il a la gloire d'un dieu. Cela ressemble à la mort…
> Est-ce la mort? D'un mot qui devrait jeter ses feux sur la pensée obscure, mot cependant rendu méprisable et vain : c'est l'immortalité. (*I*, 27)

These final paragraphs get us a little closer to what Bonnefoy means by his idea of *présence*. They clearly mesh with other seminal Bonnefoyian texts: the "Dédicace," of course, but also the poem "Dévotion." Here again, we see the incantatory repetition of a key word or grammatical structure: in the "Dédicace," as in "Dévotion," it is the preposition "à"; in the leaf paragraph, the expression "cette feuille"; here it is the demonstrative "cela." Here also, Bonnefoy calls upon deixis to structure the text, and uses the physical disposition of the writing semantically, separating the statement "cela ressemble à la mort…" from the question that immediately follows it, "Est-ce la mort?" Finally, the juxtaposition of art and nature, seen here in the apposition of "une œuvre d'art" and "le vent ou la terre," finds its echo not only in the "Dédicace's" similar apposition of "une poésie désirée" and "de pluies de vent et de terre," but

[110] "Truce of God," a religiously determined period of cessation of hostilities.

also in the parallel between Phèdre and leaf that begins the passage. These stylistic elements are important because they so frequently occur in conjunction with *présence*, indicating thus the relationship between the notions Bonnefoy is trying to convey and their capacity to translate into language and writing.

What is immediately striking in the passage is that for all the grace and poetry of the definition Bonnefoy gives, the fundamental meaning of *présence* remains obscure. Indeed, much like the "improbable" of the "Dédicace," this passage deliberately thematizes paradox, for if the gist is clear, the primary impression one receives is the contradictory nature of Bonnefoy's *présence*. From the passage one can deduce that it is an object of artistic production, "une oeuvre d'art," but also an element of the natural world, "brute comme le vent ou la terre"; it exists in a *durée* and yet is simultaneously a-temporal; it is fragmentary but capable of totalization; finally, it is both death and immortality. In point of fact, Bonnefoy's deliberate use of paradox is the key to understanding the culmination of the whole passage. For if the notion of paradox appears clearly in the appositions of such antonymic elements as art and nature, time and timelessness, etc. it is completely integrated, both thematically and grammatically, into the complicated final sentences:

> […] Cela ressemble à la mort…
> Est-ce la mort? D'un mot qui devrait jeter ses feux sur la pensée obscure, mot cependant rendu méprisable et vain : c'est l'immortalité. (*I*, 27)

The cusp of the paradox comes with the last response to the original question "Qu'est-ce que la présence?" "Cela ressemble à la mort…," Bonnefoy answers, the ellipsis at the end suggesting the possibility of multiple other descriptions. This materially visible ellipsis, however, prefigures the more important grammatical ones that condition the reading of the final paragraph. Once again, Bonnefoy's purposeful use of the rhetorical tools specific to written texts, namely, the visual separation of logically connected segments, has the net effect of making the last

sentences carry the focal weight of the passage, since they are set apart in an separate paragraph, thus mobilizing the reader's attention not only on the triangular relation between *présence*, death, and immortality, but also giving visual primacy to the last word, "l'immortalité."

Though the section as a whole gives a good demonstration of the destabilizing density and even obliqueness of Bonnefoy's prose, it is really his use of syntax, particularly of syntactic suppression, that produces the sense of paradox rather remarkably conveyed by the passage: in order to understand the second sentence, "D'un mot qui...,", the reader must reinsert the elided words "c'est la mort," to obtain: "c'est la mort d'un mot qui devrait…" Similarly, acquiring an understanding of the last fragment "c'est l'immortalité" is extremely challenging. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the sentence, "D'un mot qui devrait jeter…," does not immediately strike the reader as lacking an introduction because it begins as a perfectly logical, albeit poetic construction. It continues, however, with an apposition, "mot cependant rendu méprisable…" rather than the expected subject and verb, thus greatly complicating the reader's task, since the sentence diverges radically from the expected grammatical direction. Solving the problem requires the reader to fill the ellipsis and reintroduce something on the order of: "ce mot, c'est l'immortalité." And in a final perturbing element, though the colon creates a logical connection between "mot" and "immortalité," this link is substantively undercut by Bonnefoy's reintroduction of the demonstrative "c'est," whose echo of an answer to the initial question blurs the different parts of the text.

The elision, combined with the construction of the sentence, thus generates the strong sense of ambiguity that permeates the text, for they complicate the syntax to such a point that a hasty reading might mistakenly amalgamate the initial question "qu'est-ce que la présence" with what appears to be the answer at the end, "c'est l'immortalité." In reality, of course, the answer is exactly the opposite of what might be gathered from the text, even by a relatively attentive

reader: *présence*, Bonnefoy is telling us, is the death of immortality. The question, of course, is: why does he allow such a high level of ambiguity on a matter that is obviously of capital importance for him?

A return to allegory provides some elements of a solution. In the Bonnefoyian text, it is precisely *because* the leaf has been ravaged that it is no longer within reach of destruction: "qui pourrait aussi bien détruite, la détruire?" (*I*, 27). In other words, the destruction has provided a paradoxical form of immortality, but this immortality is accessible only through the agency of the "je," whose sensate awareness of the leaf ("*je la tiens* dans ma main […], *j'entends* son inlassable voix" confers the power of salvation it obtains: "cette feuille est présence pure, et par conséquent mon salut" (*ibid.*). At the very heart of it, thus, *présence* nurtures a form of paradox that vacillates between ephemerality and immortality, and this is exactly what Benjamin attributes to allegory when he writes that "la conscience du caractère éphémère des choses et le souci de les rendre éternelles, pour les sauver, est l'un des motifs les plus forts de l'allégorie" (241). It is striking that all the elements Benjamin describes are perfectly enacted in Bonnefoy's leaf passage where, in addition to the notion of immortality, his consciousness of the ephemerality of the leaf is consciously highlighted, as is his explicit reference to salvation. The problem, for Bonnefoy, is compounded by the act of writing for, given his overwhelming preoccupation with language, he cannot be unaware of the fact that the textual existence of the leaf imparts a form of immortality to it. This would be true even for a single text, but in the case of *L'Improbable*, its multiple printings over the past fifty years reinforce the idea of a form of textual immortality that parallels the immortality which is so obviously highlighted at the end of the "Tombeaux" passage, confirming Benjamin's suggestion that textual immortality can, *in fine*, be seen as the raison d'être of allegory.

From many perspectives, thus, allegory provides Bonnefoy with a number of powerful tools that allow him to present and reinforce the ideas that he so obviously feels the moral obligation to transmit. And yet, allegory is by no means the perfect solution for Bonnefoy's imperative to convey his message. Allegory's capacity for didacticism and control is also risky, potentially leading to a rejection of the message by the reader. These tensions between the capacities and limitations of allegory explain perhaps why Bonnefoy, while tempted at times by its generic potential, as, for instance, in his "récits," which frequently seem like allegorical narratives, seems to opt decisively for the essay, which finally provides a more flexible mode of expression allowing him to reach a greater range of objectives than those furnished by allegory. Owens reiterates a statement by Benjamin when he indicates that it is "the common practice of allegory to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal" (72). This perhaps is, finally, the reason for Bonnefoy's adhesion to the essay, for the imperatives of his commitment to *présence* suggest that he does, in point of fact have a goal. Allegory, suggests Fineman, "is directed to critical and polemical ends," (49), which is certainly also the case of the essay, but "the motive for allegory emerges out of recuperative originology" (*ibid*). And here, perhaps, is the key difference, for if Bonnefoy is interested in origins, his final focus is more pragmatic, and oriented toward providing a means to find an access to *présence*. And if that is indeed his true focus, I would suggest that allegory, essay, and even poetry can be seen simply as the tools Bonnefoy uses to obtain that goal, and the essay, finally, may simply be the more efficient tool.

# CHAPTER SEVEN – ITINERARY, METHOD, MAP: THE "VRAI LIEU" OF BONNEFOY'S ESSAYS

## The Anxiety of Transmission

Jorge Luis Borges famously commented that he felt good readers to be "des oiseaux rares, encore plus ténébreux et singuliers que des bons auteurs[111]" (167). Borges' almost facetious little quip serves as a useful guide, for it is my contention in this chapter that one of the significant *raisons d'être* for Bonnefoy's essays is providing a means for his readers to become better readers. Better readers, but of what? The question is quite legitimate, since Bonnefoy invariably positions himself primarily as a poet, and in his role of "poète de la présence," he strongly argues that the specificity of poetic language can provide the true access to *présence* precluded from other forms of writing.

Bonnefoy's tenacious faith in the capacities of poetic language notwithstanding, much of the impetus driving the writing and structuring of his essays resides in a need to provide a more manageable and perhaps more stable access to the notion of *présence*. The object, thus, of this final chapter is to examine the generic status of the essay in order to see how Bonnefoy's essays can be integrated into his more general *telos* of conveying *présence*. I have repeatedly asserted that although the critical tendency is to see them as adjuncts to the more central poetic expression, the role of the essays is in reality far more pivotal, particularly within the broader context of the place of literature and the situation of poetry in contemporary society. And if there

[111] As cited by Nicole Deschamps in "Borges et l'Oiseau Rare," *Études françaises*, vol. 8, n° 2, 1972, pp. 167-175.

can be no doubt that the crucial idea of presence guides Bonnefoy's *poetry*, this idea can be seen to obtain an equal, if not greater influence over the subject matter, the characteristics, and the organization of his essays. In point of fact, their cardinal role is best understood through the trope of an itinerary that Bonnefoy is engaged in. Whether consciously or not, this itinerary relies upon the characteristics inherent in the genre, and combines rhetorical techniques with structural methods to provide readers with what, *in fine*, could be seen as a usable map allowing them to become better readers. Indeed, I would even go so far as to say that if Bonnefoy's subterranean objective is to guide us toward becoming better readers, then it is perhaps *only* through the essays that we can do so.

A fundamental question concerning Bonnefoy's essays is naturally the question of their role, particularly with respect to the high valorization of poetry which is by no means specific to Bonnefoy. Rather, as Benoît Denis argues in his study of "la littérature engagée," the idea of producing writing deliberately focused on the political and existential condition of society instead of form is one of the central themes of 20th century literature (19). Poetry, within this understanding, appears to be antithetical to that ambition. Indeed, we remember Adorno making a very similar point when he wrote about the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz[112]. Denis writes:

> [L]es contradictions de l'engagement–qui, soit dit en passant, sont en symétrie exactement inverse à celles qui caractérisent la conception moderne de la littérature—convergent toutes vers un point aveugle de la pratique littéraire qui se nomme poésie. De tous les genres littéraires, la poésie est celui que la modernité a symboliquement le plus valorisé, parce qu'en lui se donnaient à voir le plus pleinement les principes qui fondaient l'appréhension moderne de la littérature : le poème est un objet autonome et clos, à lui-même son propre principe et sa propre fin ; en lui le langage se retourne sur lui-même et se prend pour objet, ne disant rient d'autre que cette démarche autoréflexive. Forme intransitive par excellence, la poésie résiste de tout son « être » à l'engagement. (71)

[112] Bonnefoy cites this very comment in the essay "Poésie et Vérité": "Ainsi Adorno s'est-il demandé, vous le savez: la poésie est-elle encore possible après Auschwitz?" (*EsP*, 273).

Denis's analysis of the closure and intransitivity of poetry certainly seems an accurate depiction of the vision of poetry inherited from the Romantics, and is precisely the one that Bonnefoy himself seems to reiterate when he says that "Je sais par expérience dûment et bien des fois vérifiée, que le poème achevé—j'insiste sur ce mot—a le caractère d'une forme, qui a son autonomie, et non seulement par rapport à beaucoup d'intentions qu'elle méconnaît chez les autres hommes, mais même par rapport à moi, qui ai décidé de chacun des mots" (*NR,* 270). The troubling question that follows upon the heels of Bonnefoy's analysis is whether contemporary thinking imputes the same level of value to the generic status of poetry. Might it not rather be that closure and intransitivity, instead of being intellectual values that link poetry with philosophy and a higher, more truthful form of expression—precisely the point Heidegger seems so frequently to be making—are losing, or have lost their power to point to that truth? From the point of view of the writing subject, *i.e*., the poet himself, that is certainly what Bonnefoy seems to express with some disquiet when he says that "Aujourd'hui, en effet, la poésie est problématique par nature. Celui qui parle n'a plus l'impression que ce qu'il va donner à lire sera l'expression transparente de ce qu'il est" (*Pau*, 5).

Needless to say, this type of statement speaks also to a quiescent but multi-faceted form of anxiety that I have touched upon in earlier chapters. This anxiety, which remains latent in much of Bonnefoy's work, emerging only in occasional remarks, can be analyzed along several main trajectories, all of which seem clearly to play into the interaction one observes between his poetry and his essays. As we remember, Bonnefoy himself symbiotically connects the two, giving, indeed, precise indications linking each volume of poetry with its "own" essay and suggesting that the essays are the "material use" of the thinking process engendered in the poetry, "un emploi des catégories de pensée qui s'étaient dégagées de l'écriture des poémes" (*YB*, 166). In some larger sense, the concerns emerging from Bonnefoy's decision to parallel his poetic

production with essays encompass not only the problem of writing *per se*, but also larger social concerns relating to the role of literature and writing in society.

A first level of concern addresses the reader's capacity to recognize and embrace the true experience of *présence*: if Bonnefoy's firm commitment to the notion allows him to posit the capacity of poetic language to convey it, far less certain is the idea that readers not conditioned to recognize it will adequately perceive *présence* in a text. In some senses, then, the reader must be taught to "see" it; perhaps the essay is the most efficient means of doing so. A second, even more pragmatic consideration that parallels this potential "training" of the reader is the inescapable fact that we live in a society wth diminishing numbers of readers of poetry. The consequence of this seemingly ineluctable given is that poetry alone may not touch significant numbers of readers, and may thus not allow enough readers to come into contact with the notion of *présence*. The purpose of Bonnefoy's essays is thus potentially two-fold, first, at a lesser level, they inform readers of the larger capacity of language contained in poetry, and secondly, they prime the readers and encourage them to turn to poetry in order to seek what Bonnefoy calls the "salvation" that can there be found.

Finally, an equally important latent anxiety is that poetry might not provide sufficient access to "presence." This concern, as we have seen, is one that is certainly not limited to Bonnefoy, but constitutes one of the leitmotivs of contemporary thought. Stephen Winspur, in "The Poetic Significance of the Thing-in-Itself," reports Roland Barthes' assessment of modern poetry as an "objective poetry," concerned with recapturing an "infrasignification, a presemiological state of language" and trying to reach "a sort of transcendent quality of things" (Barthes, *Mythologies,* as quoted in Winspur, 41). Given the desire to attain a "presemiological" object located beyond language, Winspur asks the very valid question, "how does the poem's linguistic structure create the appearance of being its exact opposite—an ideal, or Kantian, object

uncontaminated by language?" (42). In other words, how can a poem, which perforce must deal with language, erase that same language to reveal the referent of the word, that is, the thing itself?

Winspur, using the following quote from *Douve*: "Présence exacte qu'aucune flamme désormais ne saurait restreindre; convoyeuse du froid secret; vivante de ce sang qui renaît et s'accroît où se déchire le poème" (*Poèmes* 62), shows that Bonnefoy's poetry uses a specific form of indirection as well as the image of "tearing" language to reveal presence.This analysis can be applied to Bonnefoy's essays, for there is an identical use of language there also. Certainly, the image of tearing recalls the Dédicace, where an image of veils of light is torn in order to reveal a greater light still. More striking yet is the fact that Bonnefoy uses exactly the same combination of images, tearing and light, to speak of his essays when he recounts an anecdote explaining why the publication of *L'Arrière-Pays* was delayed:

> J'avais écrit un tout petit livre, plutôt alors un essai, et j'allais l'envoyer à l'éditeur, je lui annonçai même qu'il allait le recevoir avant peu de jours, il ne me restait qu'à le dactylographier. Et je m'assis devant la machine, mais un mot me déplut à la seconde phrase, je le changeai. Hélas, toute la troisième était du coup à refaire; et de proche en proche, et si large bientôt que beaucoup du premier texte se dissipa, zigzagua *l'éclair d'une déchirure*, au sein de quoi j'aperçus les linéaments de l'écriture nouvelle non conceptuelle cette fois. (*NR*, 274, my emphasis)

Winspur's larger point is the notion of indirection, which he sees in the fact that Bonnefoy is writing "not poems that show us things but rather poems *about* utopian poems that would ideally reveal things" (44). The means, for him, of getting past language would be to use language itself and make it indicate the *place* of authentic access. Two aspects of Winspur's approach are significant to Bonnefoy's essays. The first is contained in this idea of indirection, that is, of an ostensible subject that masks the "real" subject, which is one of the substantive theoretical constructs of the essay that Lukàcs, for instance, points out when he says that the essayist is "always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone that implies that he is only discussing pictures and books" (9). And second, Winspur's comment about "utopian" poems plays perfectly into the trope of "place" ("vrai lieu") that is such an omnipresent aspect of

Bonnefoy's writing. And although Bonnefoy is aware of, and engages seriously with the limitations of language to adequately account for the real lived experience of human beings, it is at least in part through this notion of place that he comes firmly down in a strongly voiced opposition to the deconstructionist suggestion that language can never attain the objects it seeks to circumscribe.

For, though Bonnefoy perceives the risk of what Denis, following Barthes, calls the "intransitivity of poetry," that is, its capacity for self-absorption and closure, he insists on the fact that this danger is merely *potential*, not inevitable. And to the question of: "what is the value of poetry today?" he answers that this value lies in our attitude toward it, our profound reception of it: "plus on voudra analyser les finesses, les ambiguities expressives [de l'objet poétique], plus on risquera d'oublier une intention de salut, qui est le seul souci du poème" (*I*, 253). This shift in his perception of the capacity of language derives from an undoubted change in Bonnefoy's thinking over the course of his writing. For in spite of Barthes' description of modern poetry as "objective poetry," and in spite of the very specific position Bonnefoy takes in "Anti-Platon" ("il s'agit bien de *cet* objet"), *in fine* what Bonnefoy is seeking to "ensnare"—in the "leurre" of his imagery—is less an object than a relation. As he stated at the Pau colloquium, "Maurice Blanchot a dit quelque part que la création littéraire, c'est de passer du JE au IL. Je répondrais pour ma part, que c'est bien plutôt de passer du JE au TU […]. Et cela est difficile, cela rencontre bien des obstacles" (*Pau*, 330).

Bonnefoy's comment reiterates, of course, the strong parallels between his thinking and that of Martin Buber. Its focus on relation points, moreover, to a certain devaluation of the object, which is also perceptible in Bonnefoy's multiple descriptions of *présence*. Indeed, in the ivy leaf episode, as well as the salamander encounter analyzed in the following section, the object described exists in order to point elsewhere. And as we saw in Chapter 6, this function is

particularly patent in the definition of *présence* given by the leaf, which speaks to us of its own passing, of its ephemerality, in order to guide us to the idea of the theoretical access to presence that *any* object can provide. For if the text does give us to see the particularity of the leaf, we are perhaps no closer to the leaf as object at the end of the passage than we were at the beginning. But we *are* closer to the idea of *présence*. And by absorbing the image, we are perhaps also, Bonnefoy would suggest, closer to salvation: "cette feuille infinie est présence pure, et par consequent mon salut" (*I*, 27).

Combined with the historical theo-philosophical roots of the word *présence*, the use of this type of vocabulary in his essays, inevitably conditions reader response, lending a certain moral *gravitas* to the relation Bonnefoy is conveying. Indeed, the character of his essays, the complexity of the language he uses and of the notions he introduces suggests that this philosophical turn and the moral seriousness associated with it is perhaps be even more acutely felt by him than by other essayists. His essays abound with terms whose best interpretation would appear to be a philosophical one. Consequently, beyond the ostensible subject of each essay, many readers and critics have glimpsed the outlines of something that resembles more a struggle to redefine oppositions into a unified vision of reality.

## Fragmentation and Unity: The Double Nature of Presence and the Essay as Exemplum

*Présence*, as we have repeatedly seen, has inscribed within its very core a form of duality that Arnaud Buchs underscored when he described it as *both* an experience and a concept. Considering the pains Bonnefoy has taken to express his rejection of concept, seeing it as the antithesis of the direct, non-intellectual experience of presence, there is unquestionably a certain

challenge in Buchs' observation. I suggested earlier that one means to resolve this apparent paradox is to look more closely at the language Bonnefoy himself employs when he uses not just the word *présence*, but also the expression "ce qui est" as a benchmark to evaluate the work of other writers and artists. And although the terms appear to be juxtaposable under certain conditions, it is clear that Bonnefoy makes a palpable distinction between *présence* and this nebulous "ce qui est." This distinction is far from banal, for it represents a form of paradox that can really only be resolved by examining the terms through a phenomenological prism. For if Bonnefoy's "ce qui est" is a shorthand for the incontrovertible existence of the world that lies beyond the observing subject, that existence itself can only be accessed through the subject's dynamic gesture, the "act" which is so crucial to the notion of *présence*. This intrinsic duality can, I would argue, be transferred into writing, and is seen in his work in the tension between fragmentation and unity that is so prevalent there.

The present concern is Bonnefoy's essays. By comparison with his poetry, they present not only an additional level of interpretive complexity, but perhaps even an additional level of urgency, and offer what would appear to be at least a partial solution to the paradox. Indeed, given the strange duality of *présence*, they provide a textual space singularly able to provide a forum flexible enough to give multiple expressive forms to a single thought process. Once again, I suggest that although Bonnefoy's stated ambition is to convey the notion of *présence* through his poetic writing, ultimately that goal is perhaps even more completely obtained through means other than pure poetry. In some highly significant sense, the very existence of Bonnefoy's essays is a mute testimony to the fact that he cannot be satisfied solely by presenting a vision of *présence* that is given shape by the imagistic capacity of poetic language; he must also attempt to circumscribe the more intellectual nature of *présence* by means of the selfsame language, whether it assumes an explicitly poetic form or not. As we saw in the earlier chapters on the

essay, its capacity to be open to different forms of expression allows it to do things that pure poetry cannot do. In Bonnefoy's case, perhaps only in the essay can he address the relationship between writing and *présence* in a polysemous manner that most adequately captures the plural nature of *présence*.

Although Bonnefoy does not explicitly refer to the double nature of presence, he does recognize the existence of this duality, deflecting it, however, into a problem of language: "nous sommes des êtres doubles, à la fois langage et expérience" (*EsP*). In point of fact, this duality is inscribed into the very warp and weft of his writing, and nowhere is this more evident than in the essays, which are constantly drawing upon this double attraction, this hesitation between the fragmentation and unity inherent in *présence*, while struggling with how to incorporate both aspects into writing. One of the solutions Bonnefoy seems to have found –whether consciously or not—lies in the production of texts that themselves engage in a constant interaction with fragmentation, at times resolving it into some form of unity only to return to a different level of fragmentation.

## Presence and Fragmentation: A Positive Value

As Chapter Four showed, the fragment engages with truth, authenticity, and spontaneity, and seems to provide a tool that would allow us to connect writing more directly with reality, largely because this reality itself has increasingly appeared to be fragmentary rather than unified. And as Bonnefoy suggests, the fragment allows us to connect more spontaneously to others by enabling the expression of important things that we might not be able to say otherwise: "Il y a des moments, dans l'existence, où, s'engageant à un avenir, partageant cette décision avec d'autres êtres, on cite des vers, c'est-à-dire un simple fragment, pour faire entendre d'un coup quelque

chose de complexe et d'obscur qu'autrement on ne saurait dire" (*EsP*, 226). If this capacity of a fragment to overcome an incapacity to communicate can be connected with the essay's relation with fragmentation, it also evokes his own literary practice in texts such as the "Tombeaux" passage or "Anti-Platon."

In both those texts, the trope of fragmentation is given as emblematic of a true access to *présence*: the over-determined fragmentation of the twice-broken leaf is shown to provide an authentic image of it, while the hypothetical whole leaf is presented in profoundly negative terms as the equivalent of the concept. In parallel, "Anti-Platon," shows us that one of the means of rejecting the concept is to bring our attention to bear not on the globality of things, but rather on the parts that render them unique: the "stained dresses" rather than the general idea of dresses. Bonnefoy's focus on the fragment thus provides him a rhetorical tool to counter our natural tendency to assimilate ideas by conceptualizing them. He seems so forthright in his stance that it is almost disconcerting to see that in another celebrated description of *présence*, which is the cornerstone of the essay "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité," he seems deliberately to eschew the notion of fragmentation in favor of a highly positive notion of unity. This essay, whose ostensible object is the capacity of the French language to fully engage in poetic expression, is located in *Un Rêve Fait à Mantoue*, the second volume of essays from *L'Improbable*. It contains one of the most frequently quoted passages from Bonnefoy's essays, namely a definition of *présence* given in the narrative description of a chance encounter with a salamander.

The essay first appeared in the July-December 1965 volume of the *Revue d'Esthétique* before being collected in *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* in 1967. Interestingly, however, especially in terms of blurring the distinction between different genres, that same essay, accompanied by etchings by Belgian artist Raoul Ubac, was also published in a very limited edition by the Maeght

Galleries in 1967. As I noted in an earlier chapter, this combining of visual arts and text is frequent in Bonnefoy's work: there are numerous other examples, among which an edition of "Anti-Platon" accompanied by the artwork of Joan Miro and a version of the poems of *Pierre Ecrite* illustrated by nine lithographs by Ubac. Essay and poetry alike are thus accompanied by artwork, these parallels suggesting that the distance between them is perhaps not as great as is commonly supposed. Indeed, the fact that two such overtly different forms of writing can serve as a basis for artistic illustration tends to reinforce the idea of a "single continuum of thought" between essay and poetry.

And if the "Poésie Française" essay is frequently cited by the critical community, doubtless that is because it clearly has the intent of showing a thinking process. Indeed, just as the "Tombeaux de Ravenne" essay constructed the opposition between *présence* and concept, the "Poésie Française" essay works to define the interaction between *présence* and language. A certain sense of urgency emanates from the essay, and it becomes rapidly clear that its contents are intended to strike a blow against the Saussurian theories of language and the status of the literary object within those theories. As Bonnefoy writes: "la fonction que [Saussure et ceux qui l'ont suivi] reconnaissent au mot est toujours de simplement signifier, et leur richesse même devient dès lors un danger pour la réflexion sur la poésie" (*I*, 247). His reading of the *effects* of Saussurian linguistics–as distinct, of course, from his own use of the *tools* of Saussure's nomenclature—is highly negative. He attributes to it a trivializing of the role of language that appears to him as inherently dangerous for society as a whole, his anxiety stemming from what he sees as the human capacity to retreat from an active engagement with the world into the comfort of ready-made signs such as those proposed by linguistics. Thus a large part of his criticism is focused on systems that work to remove or stifle individual agency. Again and again, Bonnefoy returns to the image of the tree, which is—coincidentally perhaps—the very image that

Buber uses, saying, for instance: "Nommer l'arbre trop aisément, c'est risquer de rester captif d'une image pauvre de l'arbre; ou en tout cas, abstraite, et qui ne pourra grandir dans l'espace de l'absolu qu'à partir d'un des aspects, seul retenu—par distraction—de l'objet" (*I*, 272).

In point of fact, it is precisely in the "salamander" essay that Bonnefoy develops the idea of the distinct levels of "poeticity" that are inherent in certain words. And yet, even this potential capacity of language comes with a caveat: it is not simply a question of choosing the right words, and poetic expression will automatically follow. On the contrary, what is really required is the phenomenological gesture of intention that allows the speaker or writer to convert language to his or her purpose. This phenomenological gesture lies at the heart of the central moment of the essay, which is Bonnefoy's description of his chance encounter with a salamander. He proposes the description as an example designed to obviate any obscurity in what he is trying to express: "Mais je crains d'être obscur, et je vais prendre un exemple" (*I*, 248). The whole episode is thus placed under the aegis of the need to communicate, for it explicitly responds to a distinct goal: clearly transmitting a position. Its importance can hardly be overstated: like the earlier description of the ivy leaf, the salamander episode can almost be read as a shorthand expression of the relationship between *présence*, poetry and essay that I have been developing. Not only does the whole episode encapsulate a number of the techniques that Bonnefoy uses to give immaterial ideas a corporeal form within language, but also, given the crucial importance of the notion of *présence* for him, the initiating "je crains d'être obscur" expresses the fear that poetry might not suffice to adequately convey it. The essay provides a response, becoming indeed the exemplum that might dissipate this fear.

## Presence and Unity

In the description Bonnefoy gives of the salamander episode, he clearly identifies the moment with an intuition of the unity that can arise when one chooses to construct a relation instead of remaining at the surface of an encounter. Bonnefoy's description is particularly interesting because his careful delineation of the different possibilities available in accessing *présence* puts his text into strong parallel with Buber's description of the I-Thou relation. For both writers, the seemingly autobiographical description of an interaction with an element of the natural world appears to serve an obvious teleological ambition with a latent prescriptive value: neither Buber nor Bonnefoy want simply to transmit the emotion that was felt at the moment of the interaction. Rather, what both are intent on showing is the *prise de conscience* associated with the episode. The method they both use is inherently pedagogical, taking the reader through all the possibilities that were available at the instant of consciousness, and then presenting the choice that was subsequently made by the observing subject. Ultimately, the larger aim is thus didactic, and seeks to show the reader not only that such an experience is within the reach of any person, but also, more prescriptively, the "correct" choice to make.

Parts of Buber's description of the I-Thou relation in the description of a tree were briefly evoked in the last chapter. Here, the entire Buberian text is used because it is the overall construction of the argument that is interesting. Indeed, in terms of its rhetorical strategies and the message it conveys, Buber's text is strikingly pertinent to the salamander episode that Bonnefoy describes in his own essay. Buber's text is rather long, but it warrants being quoted almost in its entirety, partly because it is difficult to cut it without losing some of its comparative impact, and also because the highly poetic qualities it demonstrates in its language and its physical disposition would be less apparent in smaller fragments. Needless to say, the intense poetization of the text,

with its striking imagery and language, combined with equally ostensible poetic devices such as the liberal use of blank spaces to subdivide the highly imaged text, recall the "Dédicace" to *L'Improbable* or the "leaf" passage from "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne." In addition, given Buber's image, it is impossible not to remember Bonnefoy's comment to John Jackson: "La poésie est aussi la théologie de la terre, la pensée qui fait de l'arbre un intercesseur, de la source, une révélation symbolique" (*EsP*, 47).

Buber writes:

> I consider a tree.
> I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.
> I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air—and the obscure growth itself.
> I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.
> I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law—of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substances mingle and separate.
> I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.
> In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.
> It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it.The tree is now no longer It. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.
> To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.
> Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars are all present in a single whole.
> The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood, but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way. (7-8)

Perhaps the more important thing to retain about Buber's description is the plethora of options offered up to the individual contemplating what begins as a simple object but subsequently becomes the other half of the relation. A very similar process takes place over the course of Bonnefoy's salamander text, which begins thus:

> Et j'imaginerai, ou me rappellerai—on verra [...] que les deux notions s'équivalent—que j'entre un jour d'été dans une maison en ruine et vois soudain, sur le mur, une salamandre. Elle a été surprise, elle s'est effrayée et s'immobilise. Et moi aussi, arraché à ma rêverie, je suis prêt à me laisser retenir. Je regarde la salamandre, je reconnais ses traits distinctifs, comme l'on dit,—je vois aussi ce cou étroit, cette face grise, ce cœur qui bat doucement. (*I*, 248)

The first striking element is Bonnefoy's equating of imagination and remembrance, as well as his use of the future tense. The explicit equivalency Bonnefoy creates here between "imaginer" and "se rappeler" is strongly reminiscent of the surprising and destabilizing effect he creates by identifying the word "l'improbable" with the expression "ce qui est." In addition, his rather similar use of the future tense in the leaf passage confirms the idea that this is a conscious rhetorical strategy rather than a mere accident of the pen.[113] More telling is the fact that both Bonnefoy and Buber use the present tense, thus lending a certain sense of immediacy to the texts, which is highly pertinent to their larger goals of providing a deictic union with the notion of presence.

Further, both the tree and the salamander experiences describe a conscious act of observation leading to a conscious analysis of the intellectual and emotional possibilities that the experience might afford. For Bonnefoy, as for Buber, the initial observation gives rise to seeing the object either as immobile ("I can look upon it as a picture"/ "elle s'est effrayée et s'immobilise") or seeing movement within that stillness ("I can perceive it as movement"/ "ce coeur qui bat doucement"). For Bonnefoy, this initial act of physical perception leads to three possible reactions. The first consists in remaining at the surface of the interaction by simply registering and classifying the information before turning away:

> Eh bien, plusieurs chemins se sont ouverts devant moi. Je puis analyser ce que m'apporte ma perception, et ainsi, profitant de l'expérience des autres êtres, séparer en esprit cette petite vie des autres données du monde, et la classer, comme ferait le mot de la prose, et me dire : « *Une* salamandre », puis poursuivre ma promenade, toujours distrait, demeuré comme à la surface de la rencontre. (*ibid*.)

This form of experience is in close conjunction with Buber's "I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life." In addition, Bonnefoy's insistent use of the indefinite article, the italicized "*une,*" coupled with his rather disparaging "comme ferait le

[113] See on this point, Dominique Combe, ("Poésie et Récit"26).

mot de la prose" demonstrates both rhetorically and grammatically the negative value he gives to this option.

The second possibility intensifies the act of classification by focusing more intently on the initially spurious act of identifying the salamander as "*a* salamander." This possibility, with its increasingly developed scientific and linguistic analysis, seems at first to be positive because it is clearly associated with a more profound action on the part of the speaker/observer:

> Mais d'autres mouvements, plus en profondeur, sont possibles. Car, par exemple, je puis garder les yeux sur la salamandre, m'attacher aux détails qui m'avaient suffi pour la reconnaître, croire continuer l'analyse qui en fait de plus en plus *une* salamandre, c'est-à-dire un objet de science, une réalité structurée par ma raison et pénétrée de langage. (*ibid*.)

Bonnefoy's "objet de science…, réalité structurée par ma raison" seems to echo Buber's evocation of the scientific laws that govern the constitution of the tree, allowing and disallowing its physical expression. And yet, for Bonnefoy, this second possibility leads, in the intensity of its misplaced focus, to a frightening dislocation of the self; it leads to no longer seeing anything in the salamander but a terrifying series of meaningless signs because it has become "pénétrée de langage":

> Mais tout cela, bientôt, pour ne plus rien percevoir, dans ces aspects brusquement comme dissociés l'un de l'autre, dans ce contour d'une patte absolu, irréfutable, désert, qu'un faisceau effrayant d'énigmes. Ces choses ont un nom, mais se sont faites d'un coup comme étrangères au nom. Et ces concepts, ces définitions, ces aspects, tout cela ne m'est plus qu'une cohérence vide, sans réponse à nulle question (*ibid*.).

Tellingly, this horrifying sense of being cast entirely adrift in a meaningless universe is absent from Buber's text, perhaps because Buber, writing a few decades before familiarity with the structuralist paradigm became commonplace, does not, as Bonnefoy so clearly does, have a contentious relationship with language. Indeed, it is precisely on the issue of language and by using what is clearly a structuralist definition of the relation between words and the things they are supposed to represent that Bonnefoy describes his *mauvaise présence*. The latter, again, is a transformation of the original structuralist position: where structuralism sees the arbitrary quality

of the relationship between signifier and signified in a perfectly neutral manner, Bonnefoy transforms it into a sort of *descente aux enfers*:

> Mais je viens en somme de découvrir l'angoissante tautologie des langues, dont les mots ne disent qu'eux-mêmes, sans prise vraie sur les choses—qui peuvent donc se détacher d'eux, s'absenter. J'appellerai *mauvaise présence* ce mutisme latent du monde. (*ibid*. emphasis in original)

Bonnefoy does not often speak or write about this *mauvaise présence*, but it clearly is the antithesis of *présence* and is linked through language to what might be considered as an emotional understanding of conceptuality experienced at its utmost paroxysm. The fact that *mauvaise présence* should be so closely associated with language highlights once again the idea that the positive definition of *présence* would ideally be above or outside of language.

After leading us through indifference and *mauvaise présence*, Bonnefoy finally presents a third possibility to the observer, and that is the stated central object of his poetic enterprise:

> Car voici la troisième voie: et que, par un acte toujours soudain, ce réel qui se dissociait, s'extériorisait, se *rassemble*, et cette fois dans une surabondance où je suis pris et sauvé. C'est comme si j'avais accepté, *vécu* cette salamandre, et désormais, loin d'avoir à être expliquée par d'autres aspects du réel, c'est elle, présente ici comme le cœur doucement battant de la terre, qui se fait l'origine de ce qui est. (*ibid.*, emphasis in original)

I will not dwell here on the highly complex issue of the interaction between origin and "ce qui est" as I am more concerned with the parallel with the Buberian passage. Bonnefoy's "acte toujours soudain" reiterates the suddenness Buber evokes in the words "seized" and "event," while the notion of coming together (the italicized "se *rassemble*") is the crux of the matter for Buber: "Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars are all present in a single whole." Similarly, the "*vécu*" that Bonnefoy italicizes is present in Buber's assertion that "the tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood, but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it." And if Buber's point here is highly

evocative of phenomenology's rejection of psychologism, Bonnefoy, it seems, takes the phenomenological approach further in his own text, writing:

> Disons—bien que cette expérience soit peu dicible—qu'elle s'est dévoilée, devenue ou redevenue *la* salamandre—ainsi dit-on *la* fée—dans un acte pur d'exister où son « essence » est comprise. […] [T]ous les aspects, coagulations de visible, se sont dissous en tant que figures particulières, sont tombés comme les écailles d'une mue dans la connaissance, *ont découvert le corps de l'indissociable*. [...] J'appellerai cette unité rétablie [...] la *présence*. (*ibid*., emphasis in original)

Without belabouring the point, I would suggest that it is almost impossible not to read in Bonnefoy's lexical choices ("dévoilée", "découvert", "redevenue", "présence", "tombée comme des écailles dans une mue de la connaissance") and semantic trajectory (from unveiling /uncovering to knowledge/understanding) a subtext highly suggestive of Heideggerian disclosure, and through it, an affiliation with the various philosophies of presence that also subtend Bonnefoy's own version of it. Just as clear, however, is his explicit association of the notion of unity with that of presence. In some senses, there is nothing particularly surprising about this association; it has frequently been reiterated, either by his readers, or by Bonnefoy himself. Indeed, I quoted earlier a statement from one of his most recent books to show that the close connection between poetry, presence, and unity has spanned the six decades of his writing career, remaining one of his central preoccupations: "La poésie," he writes there, is "l'intuition d'une unité qui demeure en tout et partout présente sous les réseaux serrés de la signifiance conceptuelle. La poésie atteste cette unité, ce qui recentre la pensée sur l'existence en sa finitude" (*Inachevable*, 16).

That said, the correlation between *présence* and unity is by no means specific to Bonnefoy. Perhaps what makes his own notion of unity more specific is his struggle to provide a theoretical and even rhetorical justification for the possibility of presence *within language*. But because of the great distance separating them, the passage from presence to language requires a significant intensity of focus in order to overcome the barriers of language. That, at least, is what

Bonnefoy seems to suggest in a description that seems almost to give more a feeling of fusion than a conception of unity: "La salamandre s'est dégagée de ce monde d'objets qu'avait produit la raison qui analyse, qui prend le risque de demeurer extérieur. Et devant moi, *en moi*, elle n'est plus que visage" (*I*, 250, my emphasis)[114]. The intensity of the experience is such, suggests Bonnefoy, that it necessarily carries over into other aspects of life, for in the very next section of the essay, he indicates that "en continuité naturelle avec l'expérience que j'ai décrite" (*I*, 251), language also can be the bearer of *présence*: "la langue […] semble promettre au-delà de son moment conceptuel la même unité que celle que propose la vie au-delà des aspects qui ont fragmenté sa présence" (*ibid*.).

This statement returns us to the double nature of *présence*, caught, in Bonnefoy's mental landscape, between fragmentation and unity. Both the leaf and the salamander text point to experiences of *présence*; each seems to provide legitimate theoretical reasons for upholding fragmentation in the first case, or unity in the second as the emblem of *présence*. And yet, because these ideas appear to be such flagrant opposites, there is an apparent contradiction in the fact that they can both point to *présence*. Again, it is useful to return to Buch's suggestion that it is both an *experience* of reality and the *idea* of the nature of reality (12). This duality, Bonnefoy is quick to recognize, it is not a problem *per se*, but only becomes problematic when it encounters the language that seeks to express it. And if Bonnefoy has so often stated his faith in the capacity of *poetry* to express presence ("La poésie n'exclut pas la présence, elle la crée" [*NR*, 280]), what is the situation of the essay?

[114] Buber touches upon this idea also, but much more glancingly when he writes, regarding the tree: "I become bound up in relation to it. […] I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness," suggesting thus also that the self is no longer "outside," that it has merged with the other in a relation.

## The Essay: an "Ideal" Solution to the Problem of Presence?

Even accepting Bonnefoy's idea that poetry and poetic language can give access to *présence*, however, does not cancel the subsidiary question of the *raison d'être* of Bonnefoy's essays. What can the essay, taken for itself, *do*, that is, why the *essay* and not some other form of writing? An element of response can be found in the idea that if *présence* itself is inherently dual in nature, might it not require a double form of expression as well? A first element of this response can be brought by examining the distance that separates the essay from poetry. As we saw earlier, a naïve perspective places them at polar opposites of the literary spectrum, but a more informed study of the essay's characteristics suggests that the distance between them is perhaps not as great as customarily imagined. Consolidating these points with the double nature of the *présence*, we will now turn to the crux of the matter: how Bonnefoy's transformations of the ancient notion of presence combines with the functional paradigm proposed by theories of the essay to really and materially affect the way he uses the essay and the information he transmits through it.

The close reading of the "Dédicace" demonstrated that it can quite readily be seen as a space used by Bonnefoy to concatenate poetry and philosophy: it is more than just an esthetic use of language whose purpose would simply be to present an idea more attractively. On the contrary, Bonnefoy's use of language there conveys a global meaning that supersedes the individual capacities of poetry and philosophy, for the "Dédicace" evokes neither a purely esthetic or emotional response, as poetry might call forth, nor yet a solely intellectual response, as true philosophy might engender. Its originality lies rather in the symbiosis between the approaches it seems to integrate, simultaneously using both intellectual *and* esthetic means to project the reader

into a space where *présence* might become available–perhaps as something less than a lived experience, but certainly also as more than a mere idea.

The point of examining the "Dédicace" was to introduce the idea that what was observed in its structure, choices, and approach can in fact be generalized to Bonnefoy's essays taken as a whole. That close analysis served thus as a practical demonstration to sustain the notion that the essay is important for Bonnefoy because it can do something that the poetry, taken alone, cannot quite achieve, and that it is, in fact, the only genre that can respond to Bonnefoy's two dominant preoccupations, to wit: the need to create a literary artifact and, in parallel, the urgent necessity of transmitting a vitally important philosophical "prise de position." But how does this capacity devolve to the essay, and why should it be the most appropriate response to Bonnefoy's double objective? As we saw earlier, one of the salient characteristics of the essay is the difficulty of establishing stable and unvarying definitions of it, and it is precisely this polymorphic quality that makes the genre uniquely able to encompass and indeed simultaneously maintain multiple conflicting positions—much like particles suspended in a liquid. Consciously or not, Bonnefoy relies upon and uses the crucial question of form and definition of the essay to present and hold opposing ideas and notions at the forefront of the reader's attention.

Claire de Obaldia, in her analysis of Lukàcs and Adorno's contrasting positions on the essay, evokes this constant double pole of the essay when she writes:

> La définition lukacsienne de l'essai comme « une critique sous une forme artistique, sous la forme d'une œuvre d'art », qu'Adorno conteste d'abord, doit dès lors être « pesée » contre cette tendance « positiviste » de l'esprit scientifique à établir un divorce « rigide » entre la forme et le contenu […] Les positions apparemment opposées des deux essayistes trouvent ainsi un terrain d'entente dans le même crédit qu'elles accordent à toute science des arts sachant prendre la forme alternative d'une écriture sur l'art que Lukàcs définissait comme « expérience sensible du concept et de l'intellect ». La double dimension esthétique et cognitive de l'essai, loin de le discréditer, apparaît alors comme sa principale ressource." (176)

De Obaldia suggests that it is precisely because of its combined esthetic and cognitive capacities that the essay can resolve Lukàcs and Adorno's initial dissention on whether it can be

considered to be an "art form." The idea of the essay as a textual zone that allows for the interpenetration of seemingly disparate elements plays rather exactly into the concerns that emerged in the "Dédicace" and, through it, the larger scale of Bonnefoy's essays as a whole. De Obaldia's description of the dual nature of the essay also seems to reiterate Bonnefoy's own grappling with the double nature of *présence*, particularly along the axes of fragmentation and unity so omnipresent in the theorization of the essay. The essay, then, would appear to have greater *theoretical* value for the expression of Bonnefoy's ideas, which, again, renders all the more surprising the fact that it remains largely unexamined by Bonnefoy.

## "Familiarly Known": the Unexamined Essay

Bonnefoy's third volume of essays, *Le Nuage Rouge,* contains an essay entitled "Sur la Fonction du Poème," in which Bonnefoy salutes the wisdom of those who have had "la sagesse de suggérer que l'on réflechisse, concrètement, à la fonction du poème plutôt qu'avec abstraction, angéliquement, à une définition de la poésie" (*NR*, 267). This comment highlights the difference Bonnefoy himself sees between poetry, which *should* be the object of collective reflection, and the essay, which requires no such effort. I pointed out earlier that over the course of his work, Bonnefoy has avoided giving explanations of his interest in the essay. The only comment I was able to glean was the almost off-the-cuff remark quoted earlier, indicating that the essays are placeholders, opening a place that poetry will come and fill.

In this seeming disengagement with the specificity of essay as form, Bonnefoy is not alone. Even the single critical volume wholly devoted to Bonnefoy's essays, Daniel Acke's densely researched *Bonnefoy Essayiste,* does not address the problem of the essay as a specific genre. Acke is more particularly interested in the problem of modernity and how Bonnefoy's

theoretical elaboration of the notion of presence is a response to the crisis of modernity and its well-known struggle with the capacity for language to express thought. For Acke, "les essais offrent un témoignage de premier ordre sur le problème difficile des rapports entre la pensée philosophique et la littérature" (5), his brief comment reiterating the persistence of the idea that Bonnefoy's essays can only be analyzed as derivative, in the sense that they are "témoignages," witnessing another battle, another struggle, and are not themselves producers of something new. Another critic, Concetta Cavallini, devotes a chapter of her work to Bonnefoy as an essayist. She notes that "une bonne partie de la critique sur Yves Bonnefoy parle de ses essais en les étiquetant comme 'critique littéraire' et 'critique d'art,'" and that "il n'y a que de rarissimes études consacrées uniquement à ses essais" (140). Cavallini's focus, however, is not so much on the essay as a contemporary genre, with modern imperatives and qualities, but rather on her own subject of predilection, the essays of Michel de Montaigne. Thus she tends to read Bonnefoy's essays from the rather specific angle of their alignment with the Montaignian essay: "notre impression est que l'écriture de Bonnefoy se situe dans le sillon de l'essai de la Renaissance et du XVIe siècle" (141).

Cavallini's suggestion that Montaigne's universalization of the individual ("quiconque me lit peut se reconnaître en moi et tirer profit de mon expérience"), and his valorization of "experience" over "knowledge" has resonance for Bonnefoy's essayistic project is undoubtedly pertinent, but one of the significant differences I see between Montaigne's approach and that of Bonnefoy is precisely on the self-conscious nature of the textual construction. If Montaigne seems to be highly aware of the novelty of the type of writing he is engaging in, Bonnefoy does not provide a rationalization for his use of the essay. For even if the sheer volume of essays is a mute testimony to his attachment to the genre, Bonnefoy has not gone much further than express a veiled preference for the essay over other similar genres. In a 2009 interview given to

"Agitateur d'Idées," Bonnefoy describes the importance of the reader's interaction with texts, suggesting that it is only by putting personal experience into resonance with great writers that one can really approach them:

> La seule chose qui vaille, pour s'approcher de Rimbaud, ou aussi bien d'un Leopardi, d'un Baudelaire, c'est de rester au cœur de nos soucis les plus personnels, aussi quelconques ceux-ci nous paraissent-ils au regard de ceux de ces grands esprits. Et ce sera donc lire *Les Fleurs du mal* ou *Une saison en enfer* d'une façon qui évoluera avec notre propre devenir, voilà en quoi ce sera bien plus une sorte de journal qu'une tentative de synthèse. Un journal ? Mais sans que ce mot signifie de ma part le moindre goût pour les notations impressionnistes, satisfaites de soi, qu'on associe souvent et avec quelques raisons à ce genre littéraire. Je ne déteste rien plus.

From the perspective of the essay, the important aspect of his comment is his complete dismissal not only of the "notations impressionistes" associated with the journal/diary, but equally, his rejection of any "tentative de synthèse" that might be associated with a more academic pursuit. These, it would seem, represent the two extremes of his disaffection. And they provide a good picture of his quest for a common ground that would be located at some point between those two poles. That point might very well be the essay.

## Theoretical Concerns: the Parallels between Essay and Poetry

From a purely theoretical perspective, poetry presents greater kinship with the essay than with many other forms of writing, and many of the criteria included in generic descriptions of the essay can easily be transposed to thinking about the function of poetry, most notably the essay's capacity to address the status of the speaking 'I' and to integrate deixis into writing. Both of these more "concrete" issues are linked to a cardinal point of struggle for contemporary thought, namely the question of whether "truth" can in fact be contained and expressed in language. Indeed, it is hardly coincidental that this last question finds substantive echo in Bonnefoy's writing: the expression "vérité de parole" is one of the leitmotivs of his work, appearing repeatedly in the early poetry and essays, and subsequently becoming the title of the third volume

of the collected essays. More crucial yet is the fact that the close theoretical relationship between essay and poetry starts with their common attitude. In some senses, they face the problem of converting experience into writing in a very similar manner, which is, indeed, precisely the point Adorno makes when he writes, "the essay […] does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; it tries to render the transient eternal" (11). His comment is equally applicable to poetry.

One of the more pragmatic ways in which the essay can connect the eternal and the transient is through the place it gives to the speaking "I." Thus Concetta Cavallini writes that "l'essai se configure comme une forme personnelle, qui permet à l'essayiste de s'envoler vers l'universalité du tremplin d'un argument particulier" (140). Generally speaking, it is precisely in this mental gesture of going from the personal to the universal that the essay most resembles poetry, particularly poetry in English. Bonnefoy himself is clearly aware of this quality. He remarks in "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité," that "la poésie anglaise s'engage dans le monde du relatif, de la signification, de la trivialité (le mot est intraduisible), de l'existence de tous les jours, d'une façon presque impensable en français" (*I*, 259). And it is telling that the cohesion between the transient and the eternal, between the particular and the universal shared by poetry and the essay also parallels the manner in which Bonnefoy describes *présence*: "s'attacher à l'anecdote, cette vision 'extérieure' du fait humain […] c'est découvrir—ironie secrète de la Présence—que c'est dans notre réaction à l'inessentielle que notre essence se manifeste" (*ibid*.). The essay and poetry thus share something that one might regard as a similar attitude toward the interrelation between lived experience and writing, and this insistently recalls the descriptions of *présence* that we saw in both the ivy leaf and the salamander episodes, where the seemingly insignificant incidentals of real life things are made to point to much larger and more abstract notions.

Along more "technical" lines, certainly, the essay's so-called "protean" form allows it greater latitude to incorporate something resembling poetic language. Indeed the essay's notorious lack of closure allows it to easily encompass—even within the same text—a variety of different tones, styles, and types of language—up to and including poetic discourse itself. And, as we saw critic Zubiate arguing, many of the defining elements that seem proper to the essay can transfer with relatively little difficulty to poetry, particularly their identical predilection for a voice that takes the experience of the speaking "I" as the central dynamic of the text and purports to show that the experience of the individual can have significance for others. Zubiate further suggested that the essay's propensity to speak from the point of view of an "I" allows for the re-integration and even "redemption" of the lyric voice from the discredit into which it has fallen since the end of the 19th century. Certainly, the idea of redemption cannot but strike a responsive chord for the reader of Bonnefoy, particularly associated with the idea of rehabilitating the subjective, deictic "I."

Indeed, the importance of the speaking subject is omnipresent in Bonnefoy's essays. But because that particular ubiquity coincides with reader expectations of the essay, it is almost invisible, and provides for him, as for a great number of essayists, the ostensible mediation between the reader and the object examined. Bonnefoy, however, sometimes goes further, materializing the mediating role of the "I" in the actual construction of his text, as in the "Dédicace," or in the leaf passage, where the "I" acts as the pivot allowing the transition from the voice of Phèdre to the "natural" description of the broken leaf associated with *présence*. Granted, these particular moments are pivotal in his work, precisely because they point to *présence*, but it is notable that in these instances, as in the salamander episode, Bonnefoy foregrounds the *action* of the "I" by associating it with an Austinian performative: in the "Dédicace," it is the opening "je dédie;" in the leaf episode, it is both the action of saying itself, "je dirai," and the allegory-

making associated with it; and in the salamander encounter, it is the double possibility of "j'imaginerai" and "je me rappellerai." These theoretical defining characteristics of the essay are not just abstract constructs, but really *useable* tools for Bonnefoy's larger project of transmitting the notion of *présence*.

Along those lines, Bonnefoy's use of the speaking "I" engages in a larger project that aims to use deixis as a linguistic tool to make the notion of presence textually available to the reader. We earlier saw critic Philippe Hamon associating the voice of the lyrical "I" with the text as the locus for the presence of the speaking subject, and writing that because of the mediation of the speaking "I," the text can become a place, "un site de parole, à la fois lieu, centre, présence et identité" (21). This notion of text as place has, of course, great resonance for Bonnefoy. Additionally, his insistence on the value of the *hic et nunc* and on the necessity that poetry should provide it is a recurrent theme in his essays: poetry, he writes, "doit se vouer à cet Ici et ce Maintenant que Hegel avait orgeuilleusement révoqués au nom du langage" (*I*, 101). Of course, Bonnefoy's focus on the deictic elements that poetry should—and indeed *must*—incorporate, also dovetails perfectly with the deictic substratum of the essay, which is also explicitly associated with the "I-here-now" of deixis. Adorno himself writes that "the essay moves in so close to the *hic et nunc* of the object that the object becomes dissociated into the moments in which it has its life instead of being a mere object" (14). If we translate Adorno's comment into Bonnefoyian terms, it is difficult not to see his expression "has its life" as a variant of *présence*, suggesting that because of its theoretical receptivity to deixis, the essay also might be a textual place for *présence*.

Might then the essay not *also* be the "vrai lieu" that poetry is supposed to be? Bonnefoy writes in *L'Improbable* that "Le vrai lieu" "est toujours un ici" (*I*, 22). This question of the "true" place that the deictic *hic* points to reiterates the theoretical parallels between poetry and essay,

and thus perhaps, its practical value for Bonnefoy. Both seem, in the perception of readers, to provide an experience of truth, which, as we saw in Chapter Three, is linked not only to the seemingly unfiltered voice of the subject that speaks directly to the reader, but also to the fact that absence of narrative fiction bespeaks an authenticity of the expression that seems to validate the truth contained in the text. And yet, as we saw, this under-examined general perception of how both essay and poetry can be vectors for the truth exists in sharp contradiction with the equally prevalent idea that *poetic* language is the real path to truth, because through metaphor it can show a new and intensely felt connection between two different terms of reality. Thus, in contradistinction to the positivist idea of the complete separation between form and content, form can be set as equal to content, which is exactly what Nietzsche pointed to when he stressed the importance of poetic language in expressing a more authentic truth. Bonnefoy's essays seem to play on both fields: the use of poetic language, as well as the reliance on the authenticity of personal experience linked to the essay's inherent plurality. What Bonnefoy does in an exemplary manner is harness those capacities of the essay because they enter into complete resonance with the double poles of the notion of *présence*. The essay allows him to speak in the voice of poetry, but say things that lie more often in the domain of philosophy.

As we saw in the Introduction, Bonnefoy himself places essay and poetry in a single continuum, associating the writing of essays with an attempt to fill in the gaps left by poetic language. In response to Bernard Falciola's question, "Quels sont les moyens de l'écriture de la prose? Pouvez-vous en donner une idée?" (*EsP*, 50), Bonnefoy responds that "je n'en connais guère que ce retour […] sur des faits que le poème avait laissés au dehors" (*ibid*.). The essays, he seems to suggest, are almost a private means of understanding the more obscure corners of his own poetry. Given this position, it would seem that the essays should naturally demonstrate a form of intellectual clarity that would eschew explicitly poetic language. And yet, what one

observes is a sort of blurring of the frontiers between poetry and essay, which, in certain key instances, extends to the *increasing* poetization of the language, as is particularly flagrant in some of his essay titles. Thus, the original title of "Un Rêve fait à Mantoue" was the far more pedestrian "Le Voyage de Grèce." Similarly, the title *Nuage Rouge* of the third volume of essays is taken from an essay entitled simply "Quelques Notes sur Mondrian." These rather overt instances are counterbalanced by the more subtle but far more frequent interweaving between poetic image and intellectual idea that the generic capacity of the essay so easily enables through its ability to integrate multiple modes.

## Esthetic Concerns, the Essay's Poetic Potential

I have already evoked the fact that it is the poetic nature of the writing that tends to first impinge on the consciousness of the reader of Bonnefoy's essays. This reaction can take place at two very different levels. At the micro-level, it is clear that there are certain instances in his prose where the text veers toward a form of writing that can potentially be examined with the tools of poetic analysis. In his "Eléments pour une Grammaire de la Poésie Moderne," Jean-Michel Gouvard suggests that although the analysis of poetry continues to be heavily dependent on tools developed for older, more classic forms of poetry, modern poetry can profitably be analysed through the use of more flexible devices that examine patterns and echoes in structures larger than single lines or stanzas of poems (3). Thus he writes: "Toute composition métrique repose sur un principe de retour du même au même, formalisable sous la forme '$A_1$, $A_2$, $A_3$ …$A_n$'" *(ibid.)*. This is precisely what Bonnefoy's prose texts provide, as for instance, the poetic "feeling" of the "Dédicace's" pattern of assonance and rhythmic cadence in the sentence "A une poésie désirée,

de pluies, d'attente et de vent." In yet other cases, such as the leaf passage from the "Tombeaux" essay, the prose sentence itself takes on the cadence and rhythm of a line of poetry.

These, however, are the more glaring examples of the blurring between poetry and prose in the mechanics of textual construction. What is far more immediately striking for the reader of Bonnefoy's work are the internal dynamics that *literally* connect poetry with prose. Globally speaking, we have seen that the essay can, perhaps more easily than other types of prose, integrate a genuinely poetic discourse by calling upon poetic images to uphold and even intensify its contents. There are innumerable examples of essayists whose images lift their essays above the more pedestrian level of lesser texts—even, for instance, Borges' comparison of the good reader with "des ténébreux oiseaux rares." The specificity of Bonnefoy's essays is different; it lies in the *identical* images that navigate back and forth between his poetry and his prose.

A passage in "L'Acte et le lieu",where Bonnefoy links a conception of death with the image of the *orangerie*, is a case in point.. The passage in question is particularly interesting for it reaches back through the poetry to an even older text, *L'Ordalie,* a novel Bonnefoy wrote in the late forties, and subsequently destroyed almost completely[115]. Comparing the texts suggests that the rather unusual relationship we see in the essay between the notion of death, being, and the architectural structure of the orangery is based on an underlying metonymic relationship that connects novel, poetry, and essay through the image of the *orangerie*. In the novel, a substantial part of the action takes place in an orangery where one of the main characters, Jean-Basilide, shot almost ritually by Anne, goes to die. Anne, in turn, is killed there by Cassandre. The numerous lexical equivalencies demonstrate the parallels between the poem and the novel: the character of Cassandre, the description of the space of the orangery, the image of a key, the sound made by

[115] Only the last two chapters escaped destruction, and were subsequently published in 1966 in *L'Ephémère*, in 1975, accompanied by Claude Garache's watercolor illustrations by Maeght Editions, and finally, in the 1987 *Récits en Rêve*.

the footsteps, etc. These parallels substantiate Richard Vernier's suggestion that the distance separating *Douve* and *L'Ordalie* is simultaneously an "espace infranchissable […] puisque l'auteur dut employer une autre forme, un autre 'genre'," while being at the same time an "espace parcouru de correspondances, les unes ténues (une intuition, une atmosphère), les autres (images, personnages, rythmes) s'imposant au contraire par une reconnaissance qui en abolit le vide" (37).

Clearly, Bonnefoy was dissatisfied with the novel: the partial destruction of the text can hardly be interpreted otherwise[116]. Critic Franck Merger postulates that Bonnefoy found the form of the text too polished and contrary to "la recherche d'un texte qui ne soit pas clos sur sa beauté" (27). Comments by Bonnefoy himself suggest that the destruction of *L'Ordalie* was predicated at least in part on its "recategorization" into poetry. Bonnefoy writes: "à peine *L'Ordalie* eut-elle été déchirée, certains passages achevèrent, par la grâce des mots continuant à chercher leur sens, et leur lieu, de se reclasser dans l'autre livre *–Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve,* surtout dans sa quatrième partie, *L'Orangerie*" (*RR*, 251). Particularly interesting in Bonnefoy's comment is the idea of words "searching for their *place*," not finding it in a particular form of writing, and so needing to shift to another form.

If the parallels between the novel and the poems of *Douve* are perhaps legitimized by the fact that both forms tend to deal with imaginative structures, the images that echo between the poetry and the later essay surprise by their because they transcend these rough divisions between fiction and non-fiction. In the essay, Bonnefoy, speaking of Racine's brush with a *real* understanding of the role death writes: "l'homme qui meurt *sous notre ciel*" (*I*, 114, emphasis in original). The italics doubtless have multiple functions: disavowing an ideal sky to underscore the material importance of our own world; a fragmentary citation of Racine. But we cannot exclude

[116] Equally telling from a different perspective, however, is the fact that Bonnefoy has allowed three re-printings of the extant chapters. We will return to this in a later discussion on the single continuum of thought that Bonnefoy's work provides.

the idea that they also point as an indirect quotation to the earlier "Orangerie" poem cycle and its present image of the sky: the opening line of the first poem, "Ainsi marcherons-nous sur les ruines d'un ciel immense," evokes it, while the second poem, "Hic est Locus Patriae," begins with "Le ciel trop bas pour toi se déchirait" (*P*, 93-94). Other parallels are just as arresting. The third poem describes the orangery: "Le lieu était desert, le sol sonore et vacant,/La clé facile dans la porte" (*P*, 95), while the first poem says: "Regarde, diras-tu, cette pierre:/Elle porte la présence de la mort" (*P*, 93). Encountering the prose text of the essay after the poem, the reader cannot help but make the textual connections through the images of death, sky, key, orangery, emptiness, footsteps, etc.:

> La mort reste conçue, du sein du monde essentiel, comme l'invisible, comme l'absence. Et ainsi, je suppose, s'approchait-on, dans ce siècle qu'on dit solaire et sur le sable qui crisse, des orangeries fermées. Car je les tiens pour la clef emblématique, la conscience latente de cette époque, elles que leurs grandes fenêtres, sous l'admirable plein cintre, ouvrent au soleil de l'être, elles qui n'ont pas de parties sombres, elles qui préfigurent, par ces fleurs et ces plantes exemplaires qu'elles accueillent, le jardin mallarméen à venir —mais que la nuit, ou le souvenir de la nuit, emplit d'un léger goût de sang, sacrificiel, comme si un acte profond devait une fois y avoir lieu. (*I*,114)

The three texts exist thus in a continuum that allows the transfer of images from one to the other. But what, *in fine*, does this shift from show us? What does the essay do for Bonnefoy that the earlier texts may have failed to do? At some level, the repetition responds to a form of fascination for certain images, which Bonnefoy himself evokes a little later in his essay. "L'orangerie française," he writes, "est l'index de nuit, l'un des « mille chemins ouverts » que Racine avoue, et plus encore ce *moi vacant*, la poésie classique elle-même, […] qui va exercer […] sur la poésie ultérieure, une irréductible fascination" (*ibid*., emphasis in text). The fascination the orangery exercises upon Bonnefoy resides, at least in part, in the fact that it represents an empty but fill-able space that is both physical and architectural, or ideal, as suggested by the classical *moi vacant* with which Bonnefoy also identifies it.

Interestingly, this capacity allows the orangery to metaphorically recapitulate the function of the essay, which also has the capacity to go either toward the "admirable plein cintre" of pure ideas, or, conversely, toward the night and the "acte profond" of the experience that takes place there. And in terms of the functional capacity of the essay itself, we can note that it is only there that the orangery acquires its *double* vocation: in *L'Ordalie*, it is explicitly associated with pure idea by Jean Basilide: "Il la reconnut [l'orangerie] identique à l'Idée dont la phrase abstraite avait toujours, mais furtive, sonné ou murmuré à ses oreilles." In the poem cycle, by contrast, while being the place of rest, the "nécessaire repos," it is given the living quality of *présence* not only by being directly invoked, "O terre d'un destin," but also because this "terre" in turn is metonymically associated with the "here-ness" and place contained in the poem's title, "*Hic* est *Locus* Patriae" (my emphasis).

Once again, we find ourselves at the notion of "place" that plays such a key role in Bonnefoy's *imaginaire*. And if the orangery seems to acquire its full potential—both idea and desire—in the essay, the salamander episode from "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité," shows poetry actually finding its place in the essay, suggesting thus that essays are the "true place" of writing. Though the salamander image does not occur in the two extant chapters of *L'Ordalie*, substantive parallels exist in the poetry to prose transformation of the salamander and orangery images, most notably in the increased symbolic value of the images that made the transfer from the narrative of *L'Ordalie* to the poetic mode of "L'Orangerie." This transformation is exacerbated in the salamander image for if the process of symbolization is visible throughout the poem cycle, it only reaches its apotheosis in the essay.

In an essay on Paul Valéry, Bonnefoy clearly indicates his stated goal, and the task he assigns poetry: "Quel souci y a-t-il dans le poème, sinon de nommer ce qui se perd? " (*I*, 101). And yet we can wonder whether that naming, that locating in language of those things that are by

definition fleeting and evanescent can ever wholly suffice.[117] For if poetry represents the attempt to retain the ephemeral, can it truly anchor that ephemerality, even in specific qualities of poetic language? For it is indeed intriguing that although twelve years separate the 1953 *Du Mouvement et de l'Immobilité de Douve*, from the 1965 "Poésie Française" essay, both texts contain what can only be read as an *identical* image of a salamander. And though the problem of the reality of the referent as an authentic event is interesting, particularly *per* Patrick Née's earlier comment that all images in Bonnefoy's poetry correspond to real places and things in the world (*Rhétorique Profonde*, 7), here I am less interested in the reality of the salamander episode than in the similarities and transformations incurred in the passage from one type of writing to another.

The importance of the image cannot be doubted. In a patient taxonomic study of the word patterns of Bonnefoy's early collections of poetry, Jérôme Thélot notes that the word "salamander" appears no less than eight times in *Douve* (141), and then ceases to occur in subsequent collections of poetry. It finally reappears in the essay, where, as we saw, it is explicitly linked to *présence* and unity. Indeed, the strikingly high level of determination of the word salamander in the poems (it is the title or a subject in no less than seven poems) parallels the fact that the image is directly associated with *présence* in the essay. As we saw in the Introduction, Bonnefoy himself is very clear about the fact that his poetry contains textual places that remain shadowy and obscure, even for him: "de mon côté du poème," he writes, "j'ai surtout l'expérience d'images qui me viennent obscures et qui le restent, et de contradictions que je n'arrive pas à lever" (*EsP*, 63), thereby suggesting that his essays represent an attempt to shed some light on these areas. Along the lines of his own argument, we could certainly read the relationship between the salamander episodes of *Douve* and the later essay as the self-same process of addressing unresolved issues. And though the similitude between the texts lies

[117] On the subject of naming, see Hochman, "Yves Bonnefoy's Materialist Words," or Dimitrios Kargiotis.

essentially in lexical equivalences, it also exists in the semantic parallels between the poem and the essay and in the function of the image within the economy of each text. Indeed, from a lexical point of view, more conclusive, it would seem, than the actual occurrences of the word "salamander" is the remarkable number of syntactic groups that appear in identical configurations in both texts.

The first cycle of poems, containing four Roman-numbered poems, is entitled "La Salamandre," and occurs in "L'Orangerie," the penultimate section of *Douve*. A title-less poem immediately follows the first four, and opens with the image of the salamander. After that, the salamander image disappears from "L'Orangerie," only to appear again in "Vrai Lieu," the last section of *Douve*, in a poem called "Lieu de la Salamandre."

In the first poem of the Salamander cycle, we read:

> Une salamandre fuit sur le mur. Sa douce tête
> d'homme répand la mort de l'été. « Je veux m'abîmer
> en toi, vie étroite, crie Douve. Eclair vide, cours sur mes lèvres, pénètre-moi !' ». (*P*, 96)

The third poem of the cycle expands the description of the event into what might be read as its logical progression from flight into stillness:

> […] Salamandre
> surprise, tu demeures immobile.
> Ayant vécu l'instant où la chair la plus proche se mue
> n connaissance (*P*, 98).

And finally, "Le Lieu de la Salamandre" constitutes the crucial point of articulation between poem and essay. Condensing a number of the themes broached in the previous poems, it projects them explicitly into the allegorical dimension suggested by mythological qualities associated with the image of the salamander itself.

> La salamandre surprise s'immobilise
> Et feint la mort.
> Tel est le premier pas de la conscience dans les pierres,
> Le mythe le plus pur,
> Un grand feu traversé, qui est esprit.

La salamandre était à mi-hauteur
Du mur, dans la clarté de nos fenêtres.
Son regard n'était que pierre,
Mais je voyais son cœur battre éternel.

O ma complice et ma pensée, allégorie
De tout ce qui est pur,
Que j'aime qui resserre ainsi dans son silence
La seule force de joie. [...] (*P*, 111)

It is impossible not to see the parallel between these poems and the narrative the essay provides: "j'entre un jour d'été dans une maison en ruine et vois soudain, sur le mur, une salamandre. Elle a été surprise, elle s'est effrayée et s'immobilise […] je vois […] ce cou étroit, cette face grise, ce cœur qui bat doucement" (*I*, 248). The number of identical images and syntactical expressions tends to confirm the notion we saw above of "words seeking their place" in another form of writing.

Taken together, the seven poems demonstrate a clear trajectory going from what seems to be presented as a "real" encounter at the beginning of the poem cycle toward an increasing symbolization of the image that reaches its apogee in the mythologizing dimension given to the image of the salamander. As we saw earlier, the essay shows the salamander becoming indissociable from a unified whole that Bonnefoy describes as an epiphenomenological experience of presence. And though Bonnefoy insists on the fact that the encounter allows his consciousness to be "saved", to become aware of itself as partaking in a larger whole, at the same time the salamander, *qua* salamander, having served as catalyst for conscious realization, is subsumed into the experience, much as the leaf was in the earlier text. This process of metamorphosis, of becoming an increasingly abstract figure is, I would argue, the defining characteristic of the salamander image, and is at work from the very beginning of the salamander poem cycle all the way through to the essay. More precisely, what we see over the course of the

seven poems is a visible shift from an un-mediated to a mediated experience as the salamander image is increasingly absorbed into the more formal structures of language.

Two intricately enmeshed vectors furnish the impetus for the conversion of the hypothesized real encounter into the creation of a trope: its absorption into an increasingly structured linguistic paradigm, and its explicit integration into the structure of myth. From a purely formal perspective, the first four poems of the "Salamander cycle" are prose poems, but the untitled salamander poem that follows is in verse, as is the "Lieu" poem. In the first four poems, Bonnefoy's use of more prose-like forms, his use of the indefinite article "une salamander" coupled with the present tense description of the actions, as well as his repeated recourse to direct address all seem to indicate an attempt to transcribe what seems to be a direct encounter. Over the course of the "Orangerie" section, however, and culminating in the "Vrai lieu" poem, this unmediated encounter is increasingly integrated into a poetic paradigm, as the last poem, which is visually structured so as to make it immediately poetically identifiable, begins with a five-line stanza regularised over the three subsequent stanzas into four lines.The increasingly formal structure of the poems into lines and stanzas, along with the recourse to alexandrines and other regular meters parallels the increasingly formal structuring of the narrative into coded linguistic structures whose apogee, linguistically speaking, is the allegorising of the salamander. From a semantic perspective, it is telling that the reference to the encounter with the salamander gives way to the imperfect tense only in the last ("Lieu") poem, and then only after its association with myth ("le mythe le plus pur"). It is thus the recollection of the mythic resonance of the originating event that allows the salamander to become allegory, hence acquiring a meaning which, in turn, can become the transmittable idea that we then see occurring in the salamander passage of the essay.

The interaction between myth, allegory, and language in Bonnefoy's work has a fundamental importance in the mechanics of making language work to transmit *présence*.. To continue, however, with the connection between Bonnefoy's poetry and his essays, what we have seen in both the orangery and the salamander images is the struggle to give a written form to what appears in each case to be a single originating image. But if the orangery image was able to transmute from narrative to poetry to essay in order to find what Bonnefoy describes as its "proper" place, what is truly fascinating about the salamander image is that as it moves from poem to poem, and finally crosses the boundary between poetry and essay, it actually internalizes this quest for the true place of its expression. Indeed, the fact that the concluding section of *Douve* is explicitly titled "Vrai lieu", and that within it, the last use of the salamander image occurs in a poem entitled "Lieu de la Salamandre" suggests that closure can be attained when the object has "found its place," its "vrai lieu," and been integrated into it. In point of fact, it has convincingly been argued by a number of critics that the entire trajectory of the *Douve* cycle of poems indicates that the notion of place is the very objective toward which the whole collection tends[118]. And yet, as the analysis of the interaction between poetry and essay shows, the notion of place as the *telos* of poetry is itself highly problematic in the work of Bonnefoy. In some highly significant way the fact that the *self-same* salamander image recurs in the later essay indicates that the closure seemingly attained through poetic place cannot be maintained, and that the initial notion of "true place" must not only be deferred, but also substantively rethought.

Where, then, is the true place? Generally speaking, one could define textual closure as the moment when the text can end because it is felt by the writer that the message it carries has unambiguously been transmitted. However, for a number of the poetic images, this clearly has not happened, and the message continues to seek its place. In a sense, we have come back full

[118] See, for instance, Alex Argyros, "The Topography of Presence: Bonnefoy and the Spatialization of Poetry."

circle to the problem of the dual nature of presence, for if the salamander poems are structured to bring the reader to the implicit underlying idea that these images *are* the sign of *présence*, the crux of the problem lies in the fact that the same images have been transposed into the more conceptual prose of the essay, suggesting thus, that the images must contain both experience and idea. And the way in which that takes place is, as we have seen, the increasing absorption of the "real" salamander of the first poems into the structured linguistic paradigm of the "Vrai Lieu" poem, and finally into the idea-bearing image of in the essay.

Unsurprisingly, the problem is really one of language, and Bonnefoy himself recognizes the difficulty when he says: "On ne peut se passer du système, même s'il est notre manquement à être. Telle est l'ambiguïté de l'écriture, disons" (*Pau*, 134). Indeed, what seems to emerge inescapably from the duality of *présence* is the need for some form of conceptual language, or at least for some form of writing that is more hospitable to conceptual language than poetry. But given Bonnefoy's theoretical construction of *présence* as a poetic experience, the question that follows on the tail of that statement is, why can't we "do without the system"? Why is it not enough to simply provide the experience of *présence* through poetry? The answer, I would argue, is linked to a sense of moral obligation that is itself connected to the ontological gravity Bonnefoy associates with *présence*; "c'est cette présence étrange, presque étrangère," he writes in "L'Analogie Suprême" that needs to be revealed "tout entière à l'attention collective ; et il est donc naturel que celui à qui il échoit d'en être en cette occasion le représentant ne cherche qu'à indiquer, aussi clairement que possible, ce que peut et demande en sa généralité la plus grande cause à laquelle il a voué sa propre pensée" (*EsP*, 172). His defense of poetry thus explicitly incorporates the larger goal of making it clearer and more usable for the reader. And patently, he uses all possible forums to provide this accessibility, for the statement originally occurred in Bonnefoy's acceptance speech for the Prix Montaigne. It was, however, subsequently reprinted as

an essay in *Entretiens sur la Poésie*. Like many of Bonnefoy's essays, thus, it started as spoken discourse and then became written text, showing the communicational importance of the essay in his work. Functionally, not only is it able to parallel poetry by very naturally incorporating a genuinely poetic discourse, but its very characteristics can provide a more complete response to Bonnefoy's urgent need to transmit his position and to show presence by all means at his disposal.

## Effectiveness and Efficiency, the Power of the Essay

Indeed, the question of materializing the *usefulness* of the essay and thus its function in the work of Bonnefoy is actually visible in the passage from poetry to essay. "Vrai Nom" is the title of a poem in "Derniers Gestes," the second section of *Douve*. Its opening lines, "Je *nommerai* désert ce château que tu fus/Nuit, cette voix, absence ton visage" (*P*, 73, my emphasis), are highly evocative of a passage from the "Acte et Lieu" essay where we see Bonnefoy referring to what must also be a last gesture, that of Dante naming his lost Beatrice: "Ainsi Dante qui l'a perdue va-t-il *nommer* Béatrice. Il appelle en ce seul mot son idée et demande aux rythmes, aux rimes, à tous les moyens de solennité du langage de dresser pour elle une terrasse, de construire pour elle un château de présence, d'immortalité, de retour" (*I*, 107, emphasis in text). Again, as is so frequent in Bonnefoy's work, the italicization of the verb can be read both as an intensification of the term as well as a direct reference, in this case, potentially to the title "Vrai Nom." As concerns the images, the essay clearly seems to echo the poem. More interesting however, from the perspective of the function of the essays, is the fact that in the passage from poem to essay, Bonnefoy calls upon all the means, "tous les moyens," of language to build the "château de la présence." This poetically imaged appeal reiterates, of course, the

interconnection between poetry and essay, providing, I would argue, an imaginative materialization of Bonnefoy's need for the essay, which can also, as we have seen, harbor the "rythmes" and "rimes" that are the formally poetic structures of language.

But beyond merely echoing the methods of poetry, how can the essay actually be a *superior* mode of expression in allowing Bonnefoy to accomplish his larger goals? And in parallel to that question, in what way is his systematic recourse to the essay symptomatic of an underlying anxiety regarding the possibilities of poetry? We have seen that from a certain perspective there is no real rupture between poetry and essay, and that they can even be seen to exist on a single continuum of expression and thought. It is, I feel, this similar existence on a common plane that allows a writer such as Bonnefoy to shift rather intuitively between the two genres in order to compensate for perceived inadequacies in one or the other. In a comment to Bernard Falciola, Bonnefoy clearly pinpoints some of the similarities between poetry and essay, while simultaneously highlighting the potential limitations of poetry:

> Par exemple, je puis certainement garder ma parole au plus près de mes affections les plus immédiates, perçues dans ce qu'elles ont de plus intérieur, de plus apte à l'universel, et cela sous le signe de quelques moments si chargés de sens qu'ils sont déjà comme des symboles, dans la recherche plus vaste qui est en jeu. De telles constellations de figures ou d'impressions parlent alors avec des mots d'une grande généralité, qui représentent à eux seuls l'essentiel de son univers, ce qui permet, dans sa brièveté, le poème. Mais cette approche très synthétique, si elle place des cimes dans la lumières, laisse aussi des vallées dans l'ombre. (*EsP*, 48-19)

Bonnefoy's comments on the brevity of the poem once again place essay and poetry on similar ground, for one of the essential definitions of the essay lies also in the notion of brevity. And though this commonality is perhaps no more than a matter of detail, it might also, for a poet, facilitate the appropriation of a genre which "feels" similar to poetry, but allows for a broader textual space for expression. The important aspect of Bonnefoy's comment resides however in his recognition of the limitations of poetry. For if the images of the illuminated summits of poetry and the shadowy valleys of the thought process that led to the poetry are themselves a poetic

evocation of the difference between experience and thought, they provide an equally poetic description of the essays as the potential means of illuminating the path without which the summits might forever remain inaccessible, suggesting thereby its greater potential for transparent communication.

Indeed, the problem, for Bonnefoy, is clearly linked to the difficulty of communication. We briefly touched earlier in this chapter on the notion of the "intransitivity" of poetry. In "Ecrivains et Ecrivants," Roland Barthes brings up the question of "transitive" and "intransitive" writing, highlighting their differences by associating each type of writing with a type of writer: "l'écrivain accomplit une fonction, l'écrivant une activité […] l'écrivain est celui qui *travaille* sa parole […] et s'absorbe fonctionellement dans ce travail […] Les écrivants, eux, sont des hommes 'transitifs' […] pour eux, la parole supporte un faire" (emphasis in original, 148). It is this notion of transitivity that is at the heart of the problem for Bonnefoy in his choice of genre. Clearly, Barthes's comment recalls the Sartrian theme of the transparent transfer of a written message. And though Bonnefoy is hostile to both Barthes and Sartre on many points of theory, particularly on the idea of language as an autonomous instrument, he cannot avoid expressing his own anxiety in Barthesian terms, writing in *Nuage Rouge*, "L'écrit transpose l'intention, défait la voix *transitive*" (268, my emphasis).

Indeed, Bonnefoy's difficulty lies in the fact that poetry has remained, or even *become* the most intransitive of genres, as he himself recognizes when he writes that

> le poète dit désormais *autre chose* que ceux qui cependant sont restés ses proches. Et il le dit d'une façon qui ne peut que leur demeurer obscure, puisque dans cet emploi figuré qu'il fait des vocables dont l'intuition symbolique s'est effacée, le hasard de sa condition personnelle, de son point de vue sur le monde, joue un rôle déterminant, lui ouvrant tel mot non tel autre, d'où, très en profondeur dans son effort de partage, cette langue qui n'est qu'à lui, cet idiome comme privé. (*EsP*, 208, emphasis in original)

Potentially, the result of this latent obscurity and "private" quality that poetry has taken on is the disaffection of readers for the genre, which in turn engenders a loss in the communicative

capacity of poetry, not only because the language that poetry uses is obscure, but also mechanically, because the sheer number of readers is diminished. And if we go back to the idea of Bonnefoy's moral imperative to transmit *présence*, it is clear that the desire for transitivity calls for a genre that will allow for greater communication through some form of authentic exchange between writer and reader.

This kind of communication is precisely what the essay can furnish, and perhaps more efficiently than many other genres—certainly, it would seem, more effectively than poetry. As Bonnefoy writes: "ce qui me frappe le plus, dans la poésie d'aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas l'affaiblissement de sa vigueur créatrice, […] non, c'est celui de sa relation au groupe social: ce qu'on pourrait appeler sa capacité–ou son besoin, ou sa volonté—de *communiquer* avec le lecteur" (*EsP*, 204, emphasis in original). This desire, he suggests, though still vital, no longer encounters the people who would receive it with spontaneity, for we have lost a common language that poet and people share: "la poésie, en somme, fut longtemps le dire commun simplement porté à son intensité la plus grande" (*EsP*, 205).

But if this "dire commun" no longer abides in poetry, it can more easily be found in the essay, which by theoretically constructing something resembling a common ground that both writer and reader can inhabit, presents a greater capacity for communication. It is, as we saw Pierre Glaudes commenting, "un genre qui vise l'ensemble de la communauté, qui empêche les individus de s'isoler dans leur domaine de compétence ou leur espace privé" (x). This concern for preventing the isolation of individuals is coupled with clear moral issues that the genre itself can carry and which parallel Bonnefoy's concerns. In a statement quoted earlier, critic Korhonen writes that "one cannot understand either the aesthetics or the epistemology of the essay without first considering the ethics of writing, assuming that the ethics of writing are understood as a reflection on the conditions that make the encounter with the Other through written texts

possible" (*Essaying Friendship,* 276). Korhonen's useful statement allows us to address another significant difference between poetry and essay. It is, of course, because both essay and poetry exist as quintessentially subjective spaces that they can address a "you" more easily than other genres. But if they both have the potential to provide "an encounter with the Other" through the subjectivity of the speaking "I," the relation of this "I" to a potential "you" is not identical. In poetry, Bonnefoy writes, the "tu" is invited to take the place of the "I," for the reader must

> revivre le JE dans son mouvement même vers l'Autre, vers celui ou celle qui est désigné par le TU. Un autre est interpellé dans le poème alors que lui, le lecteur, a précisément, par rapport à l'auteur, cette nature de l'autre. Et pourtant tout l'appelle à prendre la place, non de cet autre du texte, mais du JE qui s'y est tourné vers le TU de son expérience propre. […] N'est-ce pas revivre ce JE, seulement cela, qui va lui permettre d'être, à son tour, le sujet qui veut se tourner vers l'autre—vers le 'tu' qui hante sa propre vie? (*Pau*, 331)

And yet, though the premise seems very similar in the essay, where the reader is also invited to "relive" the speaking "I"'s reaction to a piece of artwork, to a text, to the construction of an idea, the fact that the essay also explicitly points outside itself to identifiable elements of the world precludes the solipsism of the "I." The "you" of the reader, understood as "other-but-similar" thus becomes crucial in its difference from Bonnefoy's description of a type of fusion or transposition between the "tu" and the poetic "je": ("tout l'appelle à prendre la place…du JE"). Indeed, the importance of the essayistic "you"–or even the "we," which is also an eminent possibility for the essay—is capital when we remember that the essay is presented as an enthymematic form aiming to persuade the reader on the grounds of a shared understanding of the world rather than through the deductive logic of scientific discourse. With regard to Bonnefoy's work, the theoretical connection between enthymeme and essay is important from two aspects. The first is that the inclusion of the "you," or in other terms, the "we potential" of the genre mirrors the fact that his own essays tend to be critical essays that take their starting point in well-known objects of cultural construction, and the second is that the essay's deliberate creation of a discourse that takes distance from scientific systemizing parallels Bonnefoy's very

explicit questioning of how scientific modes of function henceforth seem to extend to all realms of thought.

Further, and in terms of cultural constructs, it is useful to remember that Jean-Marcel Paquette characterizes the essay as a genre "ayant pour objet un corpus culturel" (623). The essayist's choice to write about an element taken from the broader cultural corpus can be linked to Woolridge's comment that the essay's attachment to citation and quotation implicitly recognizes a community of people who are either already familiar with the cultural object being examined, or are being brought by the essay to discover it and thus join an existing community (3). This point is particularly pertinent in understanding why Bonnefoy includes in his collected essays a number of texts that were originally published as prefaces to other works. The list is long, and includes essays that deal, for example, with collections of poetry ("Dans la Lumière d'Octobre" for the poems of Georges Séféris, or "Les Fleurs du Mal," for Baudelaire); books on art history ("Deux Livres sur Caravage," or "Degas"); philosophical works ("L'Obstination de Chestov," for Shestov's *Athènes et Jérusalem*); or art exhibits, ("Proximité du Visage" for Raoul Ubac's 1966 exhibit).

*A priori*, one can wonder what the place of such texts is in a collection of essays, especially insofar as the actual object of the introduction is, of course, absent. Indeed, certain critics have questioned Bonnefoy's attachment to the work of other artists in terms of his expressed desire to provide access to "l'immédiat." For instance, in that interview statement already quoted in Chapter Six,Bonnefoy is asked: "votre oeuvre se donne—explicitement—pour une quête de la présence du sensible. Et pourtant, cette quête, vous la menez très souvent par le relais d'autres œuvres. N'y a-t-il pas là une manière de contradiction?" (*EsP*, 57). Bonnefoy's answer indicating the collective nature the quest for *présence*, shows that part of the task lies in incorporating the thinking of other artists into a single continuum accessible to the greatest

number of people. “Pourquoi,” he asks, “se fermer à cette présence d’un être–Baudelaire, Poussin, tant d’autres—qui est là, risquée, vaincue, recommencée, intense d’autant plus, dans une œuvre?” (*EsP*, 58). His introductions to other texts and works of art figures thus the importance of cultural constructions in creating a common ground allowing readers to adhere to the enthymematic qualities of the discourse, for they speak to the idea of how citation supposes community. By separating these prefaces and introductions from their original texts and integrating them into a new structure, Bonnefoy presumes the existence of a community of readers either already familiar with the work in question, or searching for the knowledge that will allow them to join that community.

Moreover, what makes Bonnefoy’s use of these cultural constructions specific is that it works to facilitate a form of communication that is properly ontological inasmuch as the pivot point of his essays is invariably the question of whether the poet, painter, or artist has addressed the question of *présence*. This point integrates Bonnefoy’s practice into a larger vision of the relation between art and philosophy, for in its attention to the ontological dimension of art, Bonnefoy’s thinking parallels that of a number of philosophers, most notably Heidegger, who also suggests that “Being can be discovered through the investigation of, the listening to, and meditating upon the language of genuine thinkers and poets” (as quoted by Gray, 417). And this attention to the thinking of other artists provides another reason for the generic importance of the essay *per* essay, for the idea of community and common ground inherent in its construction suggests the openness of the genre, as against, perhaps, poetry. From the essay frequently emanates the idea of “thinking together,” particularly in the discovery of an exterior subject. As Michael L. Hall suggests, “The rhetorical technique of the essay is somewhat dialectical in that it involves both author and reader in an implied dialogue—or at least in heuristic, cooperative exploration of a subject—that leads to moments of revelation though not necessarily to any final

synthesis" (82). By contrast, one can imagine that the "private language" many contemporary readers associate with poetry might have more difficulty in attaining this "heuristic, cooperative exploration" that the essay's enthymematic underpinnings requires.

But if the cooperative effort of the essay is a philosophical and rhetorical choice in the sense that it deliberately creates a space within which to include the "you," the essay can also, from the perspective of its enthymematic qualities, be opposed to the logical deductive reasoning of scientific discourse. This opposition is, as we have seen, highly congruent to Bonnefoy's thinking. Indeed, in addition to the need to create a common terrain, his work can be seen as motivated by more pragmatic concerns related to his need to transmit a message. Naturally, the primary thrust of this message is the notion of *présence*, but an important subtext lies equally in warning about the impediments to it. Bonnefoy's animus against scientific discourse is clear. Part of his ambivalence concerns, as we saw, the loss of a feeling of connection with the material elements of our concrete world: though atoms are a part of our world, they are so far removed from the scale of the human apparatus that they cannot "speak" to us in a language we can understand. Hence he laments that fact that in our day, "il n'est plus de science que de la matière, dont les lois sont des relations numériques et non plus désormais ces correspondances où trouvaient place naguère toutes les créatures du monde, toutes les apparences, toutes les qualités de l'individu" (*EsP*, 207).

In many ways, he constructs the limitation of science in terms of the ontological value of language, which can show us how to *be*, whereas science can only show us concrete things in their pure materiality:

> Les pouvoirs de la langue, c'est qu'elle peut rebâtir une économie de l'être-au-monde, une intelligence de ce qu'il est, par opposition au regard désincarné de la science ; et c'est qu'il y a dans ses mots fondamentaux une incitation à se souvenir qu'il peut y avoir de l'être, c'est-à-dire du sens, des lieux, de la présence et non de l'absence, là où notre parler scientifique n'accepte de percevoir que l'objet. (*EsP*, 21-22)

And yet, Bonnefoy is also uneasily aware–and intellectually honest enough to recognize—that we cannot blindly reject science to pin our faith on language alone; we must accept the reality of what we are. As he writes: "Nous sommes des Occidentaux et cela ne se renie pas. Nous avons mangé de l'arbre de la science, et cela ne se renie pas. Et loin de rêver d'une guérison de ce que nous sommes, c'est dans notre intellectualité définitive qu'il faut réinventer la présence, qui est salut" (*I*, 42).

His statement demonstrates an interesting concatenation of image and idea and serves as a vivid illustration of the enthymematic qualities of the essay, which can so easily provide an image to serve as common coin for writer and reader. Indeed, the acceptance of our inextricable alliance with science is couched in the same religious imagery that subtends the theological notion of *présence* and condenses both the Old and New Testament—the "arbre de la science" is a clear evocation of the Genesis myth while the reiterated use of the connoted verb "renier" evokes Peter, who, in all four Gospels denies Christ three times. The use of the word "salut" is, of course, a clear indicator of Christian theology.

But from the perspective of the *function* of the essay, it is interesting to observe that the manner in which Bonnefoy's constructs his argument parallels many of the thematic and literary concerns that are germane to the essay as genre. Globally speaking, his ambivalence regarding scientific discourse reproduces one of the central paradigms of the place of the essay in contemporary literature, for as we saw, the essay has been theorized as a genre which struggles to maintain a literary space against the onslaught of scientific discourse. Again, the difficulty is not with scientific method *per se*; rather, but in its representation as the *only* accurate means of intellectually understanding the world. The essay provides a means to counter this understanding, while substituting another definition of intellectuality.

This is precisely what we see in Bonnefoy's "Biblical" extract, which can be seen to highlight exactly the same points that theories of the essay attribute to the genre. First, his reliance on Biblical mythology deliberately turns its back on science in order to provide an enthymematic connection with the reader, thus demonstrating not only the essay's hospitality to a cultural and literary past, but reinforcing thereby the value of such a past in constructing contemporary knowledge. And second, Bonnefoy's concession—particularly in terms of the immediacy of the experience of *présence*—that we must accept our "intellectualité définitive" indirectly acknowledges that poetic experience might not be enough to account for our interaction with the world. The potential inadequacy of poetic experience points again to the dual nature of presence, suggesting also again the fact that the essay is perhaps the only form of writing that can account for this duality. As Lukàcs points out concerning the need for the essay: "There are experiences, then, which cannot be expressed by any gesture and which yet long for expression […] I mean intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as immediate reality, as spontaneous principle of existence" (7). The essay allows for the material realization of these experiences, for it is the openness of the essay that allows it the function of preserving a writing space that can serve as a sort of a zone of free circulation between the experience of poetry and more conceptual thinking of philosophy.

Bonnefoy frequently plays with this freedom of essay to take and combine constructions from varying domains. For instance, in a poetic description he gives of linguistic terms, he says that "la parole est feu et la langue, qu'elle transcende, la langue est le bois qui brûle dans la commune présence" (*Pau* 133). In another example, he provides a more philosophical analysis of the same image: "N'oublions pas le symbole, oui, c'est la relation entre un objet et un autre, indiquée à l'aide d'un mot, par exemple le feu pour dire la vie" (*EsP* 216). Comparing these statements with a passage from *L'Improbable*, where he gives an example of the limitations of

linguistic analyses, shows how the spontaneous flexibility of the essay allows Bonnefoy, in mid-argument, to change his example. He writes:"Pour tous les linguistes, semble-t-il, ce que le mot *cheval* représente, c'est ce qui est, disons, ni l'âne ni la licorne" (*I* 248). But, "justement," he adds, "la poésie n'est pas un « emploi » de la langue," and he then continues with an example of a word used poetically: "Que je dise « le feu » (oui, je change d'exemple, et cela déjà signifie)" (*ibid.*). Such a radical change, which might be impossible in scientific discourse, is eminently possible in the essay, thus it is an interesting coincidence that when Adorno refers to the freedom of the essay, he uses an example that has immediate resonance for Bonnefoy's own image of fire: "The essay […] does not permit its domain to be prescribed. Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done. (152). It is this freedom that allows Bonnefoy to seamlessly integrate "conceptuality as a sensed experience" by taking elements of theory and transforming them into poetic image within the essay.

## Strange Conversions: Theory into Image

One of the most striking examples of the essay's possibility to co-opt and poetically transform theory occurs in the "mauvaise présence" described the salamander episode. We have already seen Bonnefoy's ambivalence regarding structuralist analyses of language. Structuralism, he argues, had the impact of a "bomb," whose effect allowed people to believe that "toute communication était illusion ou mensonge, et qu'il n'y avait plus désormais qu'à laisser le langage, repéré ainsi en son être propre, manifester son autonomie en dérivant, selon ses lois inconnues, dans des phrases de pure forme" (*EsP*, 206). And yet, the hostility of this type of comment is mediated by his great familiarity with these theories of language, which he himself

acknowledges having "longuement médité," because "la poésie qui dénie l'empire du signe a tout intérêt à en connaître les lois" (*YB*, 156). From this perspective, it is particularly fascinating to see him using theory itself to furnish the matter for poetic image.

In the salamander episode, there can be no doubt but that the focal point lies in showing unity as the avatar of *présence*.[119] But if the text wants to give us to see a holistic understanding of *présence*, it also shows us its frightening obverse, an experience which Bonnefoy puts into obvious antagonism with the positive value of *présence* by calling it "mauvaise présence." This latter experience, which leads to dissociation, fragmentation, and, ultimately, complete loss of meaning is presented as a problem of language, and more precisely as a predicament linked to the obstacle that language can create between the self and the world. In many ways, however, it can be seen as the imagistic vision of the theorization of language. Indeed, with the sentence, "je viens en somme de découvrir l'angoissante tautologie des langues, dont les mots ne disent qu'eux-mêmes, sans prise vraie sur les choses," (*I,* 248), what Bonnefoy gives us to see is the materialization of one of the leitmotivs of structuralism, namely the arbitrariness of language. Here, Bonnefoy has annexed the theoretical notion and reinserted it into the poetic image. And if the problem originates in language, Bonnefoy shows us in the continuation of his text that a form of solution can be found by reintegrating those theoretical constructions of language back into images that function as a place of exchange between theory and cultural constructions.

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[119] Mais d'autres mouvements, plus en profondeur, sont possibles. Car, par exemple, je puis garder les yeux sur la salamandre, m'attacher aux détails qui m'avaient suffi pour la reconnaître, croire continuer l'analyse qui en fait de plus en plus *une* salamandre, c'est-à-dire un objet de science, une réalité structurée par ma raison et pénétrée de langage.
Mais tout cela, bientôt, pour ne plus rien percevoir, dans ces aspects brusquement comme dissociés l'un de l'autre, dans ce contour d'une patte absolu, irréfutable, désert, qu'un faisceau effrayant d'énigmes. Ces choses ont un nom, mais se sont faites d'un coup comme étrangères au nom. Et ces concepts, ces définitions, ces aspects, tout cela ne m'est plus qu'une cohérence vide, sans réponsànulle question.
Mais je viens en somme de découvrir l'angoissante tautologie des langues, dont les mots ne disent qu'eux-mêmes, sans prise vraie sur les choses—qui peuvent donc se détacher d'eux, s'absenter. J'appellerai *mauvaise présence* ce mutisme latent du monde. (*I*, 248, emphasis in original)

Bonnefoy's use of the definite article, "*la* salamander," "*la* fée" ("Disons—bien que cette expérience soit peu dicible—qu'elle s'est dévoilée, devenue ou redevenue *la* salamandre—ainsi dit-on *la* fée—dans un acte pur d'exister où son « essence » est comprise" [*ibid*. emphasis in original]) cannot but startle. There is no doubt that Bonnefoy intends the definite article to carry a semantic weight far beyond its ordinary grammatical purpose: the italicization and repetition of the word force us to focus on it.[120] And this, perhaps, is Bonnefoy's larger objective. The definite article, "la salamander," seems like a logical progression. Immediately, however, Bonnefoy associates it—seemingly to provide a further illustration of his point—with "*la* fée." His choice appears puzzling, for though the passage from "*une* salamandre" to "*la* salamandre" over the course of the passage appears as a transparent evocation of the increasingly specific relation that is the point of the whole text, the same cannot be said for "*la* fée," which does not obviously clarify the definite article of the salamander. Indeed, it requires some effort to work through Bonnefoy's reasoning.

In the previous chapter, I quoted Patrick Née, who pointed to the importance of the idea of proper names in Bonnefoy's goal of transmitting presence ("Si donc il y a une chance que de la 'présence' se fasse jour au sein des mots du langage (ou des images de l'art), c'est à la condition que ces mots en poésie soient comme des noms propres" [*Yves Bonnefoy*, 49]). Née links proper names with Bonnefoy's predilection for metonymy as a theoretical instrument to integrate presence into poetic texts, consolidating the idea by pointing out that this is supported by linguistics theory because proper names coalesce the signifier, the signified, and the extra-linguistic referent into one word (*ibid.*). Stephen Winspur also addresses the capacity of proper names to act as linguistic artefacts able to point directly to the "thing-in-itself," but concludes by rejecting the idea that proper names are special elements of language. What has interested me in

[120] Dickson comments briefly on the interaction between particularity and generality in this passage (568).

Winspur's analysis is that because "even the so-called proper names are signs" (44 *et infra.*), he sees this perception of the higher poetic value of proper names as a myth that we tell ourselves about how language works. This question of myth with respect to proper names is fascinating because in Bonnefoy's text, what we see is the exact opposite of proper names becoming signs, and the way it works is precisely by going through myth and reactivating the metonymic relationship between language and reality that Née pointed out (*YB*, 50).

What does the text give us? A common noun, "fée" that is associated with a definite article for which we have no textual referent. In other words, there is no other place in the immediate vicinity of the passage where Bonnefoy has previously referred to the word "fée," and which would allow us to understand his use of the definite article. In addition, his italicizing of the article clearly indicates that the word cannot, in the French context, be taken in its generic sense of "fairies." From a purely grammatical perspective, the use of an unreferenced definite article is possible only in the context of a shared culture allowing writer and reader to refer to the same reality. Thus if one can easily speak of "the" moon or "the" sun to any person on earth, the words "the" nation or even "the" river require a closer cultural connection, each cultural sphere delimiting the grammatical possibility of the definite article. Bonnefoy's use of "*la* fée" thus compels the reader to search within his or her cultural construct to find the missing referent, which, it will occur to most French readers, *must* be a proper name of mythological resonance, inasmuch as the word "fée" can only point in that direction. Given the image of the salamander, the serpent/lizard-tailed Mélusine fits rather better in the context than Morgane, but this hardly matters, because the important step is the way Bonnefoy has made his text point to a proper name without himself furnishing it.

It would, of course, have been easy to provide the name. The question is: why did he refrain from doing so? The answer, I believe, lies in something that Bonnefoy is doing perhaps

unconsciously, but with concrete results, and that is converting linguistic theory into a functional tool within language. In other words, Bonnefoy seems to be trying to open a breach in language, and to function as an opening, that breach needs to invoke a larger cultural context. He has structured his text to engender a specific response from the reader, namely, searching through myth for the missing referent. Indeed, it is the absent referent that allows the text to integrate the reader because he or she must participate in the construction of the meaning that is given. This sense of participation is in turn reinforced by Bonnefoy's seemingly casual use of the construction "ainsi dit-on," which provides a clear sense of inclusiveness, of the "we-ness" we saw earlier. The whole structure works in the following manner: by activating the larger cultural context of myth while simultaneously suppressing it, Bonnefoy uses the absent proper name to create a direct connection between his own use of language and some form of exterior reality that is shared by both writer and reader. The specificity of the proper name is, as we saw, that it is not a metaphor equating two different elements of reality, but that it is the *exact* equivalent of the reality it points to. Metonymically, thus, the proper name the reader must provide becomes identical to the textual "la fée;" it *is* "la fée." Remarkably, thus, what Bonnefoy seems to have textually created is a space with a greater potential to include *présence*, for the referent has managed to escape language.

Tellingly, this use of an absent proper name and its metonymic connections has happened in an *essay* and, additionally, is not an isolated instance, for something of the same nature takes place in the "Lierre" of the *Convoi* article. One might therefore go further and suggest that looking for the missing referent is *only* feasible in an essay insofar as the rather hermetic nature of poetry tends to preclude as active a search for the missing referent. Would the reader of poetry not simply accept the opacity of the word, as, for instance, he or she does for "Douve?" And as a corollary to that question, can it be that it is the nature of the essay, its supposed transparency,

that makes the reader resist a perceived lack of information and thus seek to fill it? The concept, thus, after having undergone a poetic metamorphosis, which the essay is eminently able to integrate, can actually *become* form in Bonnefoy's essays. And to the question of what the function of this hard-won form is, I would suggest that much of the rationale for these transformations lies in the question of wresting back some dimension of writerly choice in order to better obtain his larger teleological objectives.

## Form and Function: A Return to Subjectivity

The importance of form appears very early in Bonnefoy's essays and is brought to light by comparison with critic William Marx's analysis of the theoretical significance of ornamentation. In his *Naissance de la Critique Moderne*, Marx suggests that the early-twentieth century interest in the purely formal aspects of literature is a position derived from experimental thinking in the visual arts. It was in the analysis of ornamentation begun in the nineteenth century, he argues, that form began to be perceived as an abstraction with its semantic and theoretical own value (16). This position is particularly arresting for the reader of Bonnefoy's essays, for it is through his reflection on the ornamentation of tombs in "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne" that Bonnefoy opens the collection of the essays of *L'Improbable*, the liminal position of the essay highlighting the importance of the theory it contains. He writes: "J'avais tracé le dessin d'une théorie de l'ornement. Je l'ai laissée pour une autre" (*I*, 17). His evocation of "another" theory is intriguing because although he is referring to a theory of the concept, in many ways, his reflection on ornamentation recapitulates the theoretical function of the essay. He writes that "l'ornement est de cette espèce d'êtres qui conjoint dans sa pureté profonde l'universel et le singulier. Il est l'Idée faite présence et j'ai goûté dans la joie qu'il éveille la saveur d'une *vraie* éternité" (*I*, 19,

emphasis in original). The terms he uses in this description are so strikingly similar to the essay's simultaneous possibility to combine idea and experience, that it is difficult not to see it as one of the same "espèce d'êtres" that Bonnefoy equates with the ornament.

Taking the notion a little further, it is not too complicated to see that the parallel between ornament, on the one hand, and form in the essay, on the other, lies in their common "uselessness." The ornament is the giving of form to something that *need* not have it; similarly, the information contained in the essay need not pursue an esthetic objective. Both are choices that have the potential to transform the utilitarian into the sublime, thereby making it "unsubstitute-able." And it is exactly along these lines that Lukàcs theorizes the essay when he writes that we continue to read essays whose academic content is no longer up to date because certain essays "are not like a hypothesis in natural science, like a design for a machine part [that] lose all their value at the precise moment when a new and better one becomes available" (2). In other words, the ornament recapitulates the same artistic gesture that Lukàcs spontaneously attributes to the essay, saying that "the essay has a form which separates it, with the rigour of law, from all other art forms […]; I want to try and define the essay as strictly as possible, precisely by describing it as an art form" (2).

For both essay and ornament, the central impulsion must be given by a subjectivity that is conscious of itself and of its own function: in order to be a work of art, a form requires an agent, the author of the *poesis*, and paradoxically it can be argued that it is the *essay*, not poetry, that can afford a writer a greater sense of being the agent of choice. Indeed, Bonnefoy suggests that poetry "appears" to the poet, whereas the essay is a secondary activity deriving from the poetry that preceded it. (*EsP*, 22 *et supra*). In this, he is seconded by other writer-essayists, suggesting that distinction is not unique to him: D.H Lawrence, in a passage quoted by critic Duane Edwards,

draws a very similar distinction between essay and poetry. Lawrence writes in the Forward to *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that

> this pseudo-philosophy of mine—"pollyanalytics," as one of my respected critics might say—is deduced from the novels and poems, not the reverse. The novels and poems come unwatched out of one's pen. And then the absolute need which one has for some sort of satisfactory mental attitude toward oneself and things in general makes one try to abstract some definite conclusions from one's experiences as a writer and as a man. The novels and poems are pure passionate experience. These "pollyanalytics" are inferences made afterwards, from the experience. (xiv)

Bonnefoy's position, particularly in the way in which he explicitly puts a number of his essays into parallel with "their own" collections of poetry, is highly similar, both with respect to the "absolute need" for some "definite conclusions" Lawrence evokes, and to the idea that "one's experiences as a writer and as a man" require some specific form of expression.

The notion of subjectivity is clearly omnipresent in this type of discourse, for if both Lawrence's and Bonnefoy's comments suggest that poetry is created by a process wherein the subject is virtually effaced–or at least substantively attenuated—in favour of form received *per se*, the essay, by contrast, must be constructed by a clearly defined subjectivity. And it is this higher degree of *conscious* subjectivity, strangely enough, that might provide the attractiveness of the essay for the poet. From a psychological point of view, the essay allows, indeed, insists upon the centrality of the subject, whose presence guarantees, as it were, the truth of the essay. In this, the essay takes a certain distance from the poem, which can be seen to sublimate the position of the speaking instance. As Heidegger writes, regarding the Trakl poem he analyses in "Language," "Who the author [of a poem] is remains unimportant [...], as with every other masterful poem. The mastery consists precisely in this, that the poem can deny the poet's person and name" (195). The essay, by contrast, takes the opposite path: not only does it not deny the individuality of the author, but it embraces it, making the author's personal existence the anchoring point of its own existence, a point which Peter France underscores when he writes that "whatever the ostensible subject or thought, a central feature of the essay is the felt *personal presence* of the essayist,

whether explicit or implicit" (28, emphasis in original). This point is, I believe, crucial to the manner in which Bonnefoy conceives the subjectivity of the essay with relation to poetry, as a comment on Jean Wahl shows. He writes: "Que disait mon maître Jean Wahl, l'admirable philosophe auquel nous devons les Etudes kierkegaardiennes? Dans un petit poème il donnait la parole à la philosophie. Et celle-ci disait: 'Poésie, grande sœur, je t'écoute et c'est moi qui parle" (*Agitateur des Idées* interview). This subjectivity, this sense of individual choice, "c'est *moi* qui parle" is vitally important to the manner in which Bonnefoy organizes his essays into collections whose structure can be seen to have something resembling a semantic trajectory.

## Larger Structures: The *Collected* Essays of Bonnefoy

With regard to the larger aim of conveying *présence*, it is crucial to note that Bonnefoy's individual essays are inserted into a larger structure, the *collected* essays. As concerns *L'Improbable*, these collected essays have a textual existence as integrated structures, and have repeatedly been reprinted as such, at times with a significant number of modifications.[121] And yet, though a structural effort has clearly taken place to construct them, as *volumes* they have not yet been the object of critical study. This is clearly a lacuna, for Bonnefoy's use of individual essays to complement the poetic transmission of *présence* is no less significant than the choice to select, collect, and organize a number of essays and then present them in structured groups. Clearly, this purposeful decision is of significance. Indeed, Alexander Butrym hypothesizes that "the writing of essays as a group expands an author's ability to highlight subtleties of theme and style, allowing the author to guide a reader, whether didactically or unobtrusively, more easily

[121] The Mercure de France edition of L'Improbable has been reprinted twice, (1959, 1980), to which must the added the reprintings of the "Folio" edition (1980, 1990).

toward that author's philosophy or theory" (148). This guiding toward a larger idea is precisely the effect of Bonnefoy's collected essays.

As we have seen, the space of the essay is itself open to poetic incursions, thus allowing it to play on a double field in the difficult problem of how to effectively transmit both the notion and the experience of *présence*. Like a number of philosophers, Bonnefoy proposes in his essays texts that are essentially motivated by teleological concerns. In the same vein as, for example, Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*, not only are Bonnefoy's texts descriptions of the diverse paths that have brought him to his current understanding, but they also suggest a means by which his readers might arrive at the same understanding. And although the organization of *L'Improbable* does not necessarily give the impression of adhering to a rigid structure, it follows, in reality, a specific project: each essay—each description of a voyage, a place; each reaction to an artist or a writer; each thought on an abstract notion such as perspective in painting or place in poetry—marks a milestone along the path of thought that has brought Bonnefoy to his current position. Thus each collection of essays represents a whole, and each whole is, in turn, part of a progression that represents an intellectual trajectory.. This point is capital, for it allows us to recognize the underlying didactic purpose that not only characterizes the tone of Bonnefoy's individual essays, but also configures the structure of the collections. Indeed, it is my contention that if the collected essays present what can be read as an itinerary, the individual essays within this itinerary reveal elements of a method that itself has the goal of making the itinerary *useable* for others. This method, I would argue, is largely determined by the essay's inherent characteristics—its capacity to incorporate various rhetorical strategies; its similarity with allegory, its relationship with fragmentation, etc.—all of which seek to integrate readers into a common space which might serve as a map to guide them in their own encounters with *présence*.

## Itinerary, the Road Taken

In *Entretiens sur la Poésie,* Bonnefoy remarks: "Il n'y a pas que des livres, il y a des destinées littéraires, où chaque ouvrage marque une étape" (*EsP*, 193). His comment compels interest, for the notion of "étapes," of way-stations on a path is a trope that is particularly germane to the essay and its capacity to engage the reader through what appears as random meandering. As Pascal Riendeau writes, "l'écriture de l'essai peut s'appréhender par le concept métaphorique de *dérive*" (92). Indeed, Bonnefoy explicitly formulates the ontological value of this notion of wandering when he writes "Je prétends que rien n'est plus vrai, et plus raisonnable ainsi, que l'errance, car—est-il besoin de le dire—il n'est pas de méthode pour revenir au vrai lieu" (*I*, 130). If we can agree that there might be no formal method to get to the "vrai lieu" of *présence*, his remark integrates the notion of "errance," so inherent to definitions of the essay, suggesting thus the importance of the genre for his project.

And yet, if he highlights the notion of wandering, the truly crucial point is that "errance" itself is no more than a trope. In other words, it is an image that has the functional purpose of obtaining reader complicity, but the real function of the collected essays is by no means arbitrary; it is a conscious structure constructed for a purpose. The goal, then, of collecting the essays is no different than the overall aim of showing *présence*, but I would suggest that in terms of this *telos*, both the notion of wandering and its opposite are important to Bonnefoy. Like Descartes, who tells us that "Mon dessein n'est pas d'enseigner ici la méthode que chacun doit suivre pour bien conduire sa raison, mais seulement de faire voir en quelle sorte j'ai tâché de conduire la mienne" (48), Bonnefoy rejects the idea of a didactic purpose. For both writers, the way to circumvent a patently didactic position that could be rejected by the reader is to present their own experience as no more than a *possible* model. Hence the seemingly random organization of the essays

ostensibly points to the path that Bonnefoy himself took: the fact that they speak about very different subjects and seem to be arbitrarily juxtaposed suggests that their ordering replicates their occurrence as experiences in his life. All of this is profoundly anchored in the essay's anti-didactic function, and returns us to the question of the individual and the personal subjectivity which are so germane to it.

Bearing in mind de Obaldia's caveat about the difference between the flesh-and-blood essayist and the essayist made of words (33), we could say that the essay, much more than poetry, gives the impression of allowing the author to be him or herself *completely*. Indeed, inasmuch as one's "experiences as a writer and a man" (Lawrence) can be a felt experience as well as the conversion of an intellectual relation into experience (like the transformation of an understanding of linguistic function into a poetic image), the essay can integrate both the "sensate" and intellectual forms of personal experience. This totality guarantees, as it were, the "truth" of the experience, thus allowing for its greater acceptance and heightened didactic potential. As Bonnefoy frequently reminds us, one of the signal characteristics of "flesh-and-blood" individuals is that they are subject to time. The semi-autobiographical quality of the collected essays incorporates this notion, as the progression through the different collections reinforces the notion of the integrity of the writing subject and his or her movement through time. Thus Bonnefoy's comments regarding his different volumes of poetry are particularly apposite for the essay collections as well: "quand j'ai commencé à écrire, j'ai perçu que j'avais plusieurs ouvrages à produire, à produire, disons, *d'un même souffle*, la fragmentation en plusieurs volumes venant du fait que c'est la vie même qui doit y jouer son rôle, de par ses différents âges, —de par leurs propositions diverses à quoi se préparera l'écriture, mais qu'elle ne peut dominer d'avance" (emphasis Bonnefoy, *Pau*, 330).

Hence the topics we see in Bonnefoy's essays are presented as authentic intellectual encounters with various cultural constructions, and this is just how they are received by the reader, who is rhetorically guided not only to believe in the veracity of the information furnished, but also to perceive the essay as a sort of work in progress in which he or she is participating. Statements such as "Je me suis égaré, si tant est que la vérité que j'appelle contredise de tels égarements" (*I*, 22) reinforce the generic possibilities of the essay—wandering, losing one's way, finding it again—and further the idea of *présence* as "vérité." And though the information as well as the underlying desire to transmit this *présence* are true and need not be put into question, at the same time—and far more subtly—this same information is also *constructed*, for the ultimate objective of the collected essays is their usefulness. The notion of wandering thus has the function of helping to mute the underlying didacticism of the principle of transmitting *présence*, but it is important to be aware that it can, *per se*, serve no pragmatic purpose in getting to that goal. On the contrary, if the wandering suggested by the seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions of essays were just random, that would defeat the purpose of the objective.

Patrick Née points out that Bonnefoy's literary corpus contains a great number of essays that have never been collected nor even, for some of them, been published (*Rhétorique profonde,* 1). Consequently, the fact that the essays included in the various collections were selected from a much larger mass of possible alternatives underlines the idea that their choice and position was the object of a conscious construction. In this, Bonnefoy's response is very similar to that of Buber, who, also faced with the impossibility of "teaching" presence comments that: "Going out to the relation cannot be taught in the sense of percepts being given. It can only be indicated by the drawing of a circle which excludes everything that is not this going out. Then the one thing that matters is visible, full acceptance of the present" (77). In a similar manner, we can see the essays of *L'Improbable* as a circle drawn around all things that are not related to engaging in the

experience of *présence*, with the idea of inclusion suggesting again the subtle variety of didacticism at hand.

What, *in fine*, do Bonnefoy's collected essays do for us? The simple answer is that they show us a series of personal experiences, which, at a first level, might appear as a solipsistic attempt for Bonnefoy himself to understand these encounters. But all that has been said on the urgency of transmitting the notion of *présence*, indicates that Bonnefoy capitalizes on the possibilities of the essay, its function as a common ground, its openness to a relation with the other, by constructing a demonstration of how he himself arrived at his reflection on *présence*. The essay for him represents precisely this capacity to extract himself from the potential solipsism of poetry and engage in the world. He writes with respect to poetry that "le cœur du poème est cette relation même du JE au TU en tant que rapport difficile, parce que ce qui se cherche dans le poème, ce qui en constitue le drame, c'est la façon dont le JE va y briser sa clôture, va s'arracher aux mythes du moi" (Pau 331). The idea of "briser sa cloture," "s'arracher aux mythes du moi" coincides even more precisely with the attention to the exterior objects that have impinged on the "je" and that are the subjects of the essays.

## A Description of the Path

The essayistic trope of writing-as-itinerary is present from the very beginning in the first two volumes of *l'Improbable*: each of them starts with the description of a voyage, in *L'Improbable*, it is to Ravenna, while *Un Rêve Fait à Mantoue* starts with the mythico-real "Byzance." The idea of voyaging is important for Bonnefoy: the notion of the place that is not here, but which may reveal some supra form of reality in its own "here-ness" is an image that he returns to repeatedly in his work, most notably in *L'Arrière-Pays.* Along those lines, it is significant that he feels it necessary to begin his collections with something resembling a precise

location, a "place-ness." More globally, though the itinerary of *L'Improbable* shows the different steps that he has taken, the places and things that have moved him forward on the path of his own progression toward *présence*, we can distinguish between two different types of essays: first, those he specifically gives as the inward attempt at understanding, and then those that represent his interaction with the work of other artists.

In the first category are the essays he himself gives as the essayistic counterparts to his volumes of poetry: "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne" paralleling *Douve*, "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie" *Hier Régnant Désert*, and "La Poésie Française et le Principe d'Identité" *Pierre Ecrite*. These more obviously abstract works can be contrasted with a second category of essay which addresses the works of other artists and poets from the perspective of their relation to *présence*. Along with the essays on specific individuals—Valéry, Baudelaire, Balthus, Ubac, Shestov, etc.—we can include in this category essays whose point of entry is a specific work—*Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Athens and Jerusalem*—for the thrust of each of these rapidly extends to more general considerations on the nature of the relationship between that artist and *présence*. The latter is thus portrayed as a universal notion and through his essays Bonnefoy shows us the places he has encountered it—or not, as for instance, his strongly voiced criticism of Valéry: "Valéry a méconnu le mystère de la présence" (*I,* 100). And if that notion is unquestionably the common denominator of these essays, there is also a clear notion of progression, showing the construction of a position. This is particularly patent in the first volume of *L'Improbable* where, for instance, the rejection of the concept which is such an important element of the "Tombeaux" essay is much less present in subsequent essays.

The examples are numerous, for in point of fact, each of the essays adds to the intellectual position Bonnefoy is framing, giving the reader not only the capacity to enter the subject of the essay, but in parallel giving him or her also the key to the Bonnefoyian philosophy under

construction. Thus the second essay, on Baudelaire's "*Les Fleurs du Mal*," broaches the question of "vérité de parole" ("Jamais la vérité de parole, forme supérieure du vrai, n'a mieux montré son visage" [*I*, 31]) and suggests that language can undo the attacks of conceptuality, if it can preserve itself from becoming "discours," that is, the empty rhetorical capacity to argue any position. Both the "Tombeaux" and the "Fleurs du Mal" essays show the importance of accepting and integrating the notion of death into our own mental landscape ("l'exigence têtue que la mort soit dite" [*I*, 34]) in order to counteract the false values of the concept, but where the "Tombeaux" text gives us to see finitude in the "real" ivy leaf, the "Fleurs du Mal" essay shows us that we can have the same experience in a literary text. This same idea is extended to art in two following essays, which show that the same experience can be had when faced with a painting. There, the essay on Balthus evokes for the first time the need to find an equilibrium between intellect and "l'expérience sensible."

Essay by essay, thus, Bonnefoy constructs the relation between himself, *présence*, and the past and present outside world by using the very characteristics of the essay to reinforce his own goal of showing how *présence* can appear. The wandering nature of the essay, its easy accommodation of pauses, hesitations, changes of direction ("mais je laisserai là ces imprudentes remarques" [*I*,259]; "j'ai en esprit une toute autre question" [*I*,123]; "la peur de la mort, disais-je, est le secret du concept" [*I*, 28]) allows him to affect a spontaneous exchange with the reader, marking each experience described with the stamp of authenticity. Coupled with the feeling of following a path already taken, this adds to the adhesion of the reader. And this subtle pact is important, for it allows the reader to acquiesce more easily to the rhetorical strategies that Bonnefoy employs to render his path usable and useful for others.

## Methods and Strategies: Writing for a Purpose

But if the notion of "itinerary" shows the directions he has taken, Bonnefoy himself is pertinently aware of the symbolical path that his own experiences must show in order to become *useful* for others; without this step, his encounters remain ineluctably linked to personal existence and cannot but have limited value. As he says, "pour que se reforment les symboles, j'ai à méditer les événements de mon existence où ce qu'ils enseignent s'est révélé de soi-même, à mi-chemin entre ma particularité et les constantes de toute vie" (*EsP*, 22). These elements that he himself learned must, through diverse rhetorical techniques, find their place in language so that they can serve as tools for others. Here, we will examine how Bonnefoy's demonstration or even integration of *présence* can be seen as a proto-method allowing him to transform the itinerary of his own intellectual progression into something resembling a usable map. If some of these techniques are more conceptual and narrative, such as his use of myth and allegory, a number of them rely on more "technical" elements of rhetoric. Jean-Claude Pinson indicates concerning Bonnefoy's poetry that "C'est avec les intuitions sensibles qu'ils suscitent, avec des images et des figures de rhétorique, et non en s'en s'abstenant radicalement, que le poème tente de dire l'épiphanie, toujours terrestre, de la présence" (13). Unsurprisingly, Pinson's suggestion the poetic expression of *présence* cannot avoid the use of rhetorical devices,echoes the functioning of the essays as well.

### Rhetorical Breaks and Mends

A first axis of analysis concerns the problem of form in the essay. Certainly, one of the significant points we have seen in Bonnefoy's essays is the way in which it can appropriate poetic language for various purposes. The "poeticization" of the language of the essay is thus one of the primary methods allowing the essay to approach the notion of *présence*. And yet, *présence*,

as we saw, is as much concept as experience. In this, of course, it parallels the essay, which also deals in both, thus enabling form to obtain more importance in the essay than in other forms of "factual" writing. Because the essay is always dealing with both objects and concepts, it must rely on form to fill in a meaning that is semantically incomplete. Indeed, Adorno writes that "the essay takes presentation more seriously than do modes of proceeding that separate method and object and are indifferent to the presentation of their objectified contents. The manner of expression is to salvage the precision sacrificed when definition is omitted, without betraying the subject matter to the arbitrariness of conceptual meanings decreed once and for all" (12). Form thus allows the essay to remain true to an authentic representation of its subjects.

As we have seen, there is a distinctiveness in Bonnefoy's construction of his essays. Even from a purely visual perspective, their characteristics tend to parallel his poetic work. Alex Gordon writes: "Rhythmically, Bonnefoy's poetry bespeaks [an] authoritative hand. Any opening in the form is a calculated effect, a variant on the high manner of tradition. Bonnefoy looks even to visual effects, as in the beautifully arranged epitaphs of *Pierre Ecrite*" (433). The same "authoritative hand" is clearly at work in the internal arrangement of the essays. Cavallini, for instance, basing her perception on the typography of Bonnefoy's essays, suggests that their visually dense quality mirrors the Renaissance essay (140). Her analysis certainly accounts for the compact appearance of individual paragraphs, but her overall evaluation must be nuanced, for what one observes rather systematically in Bonnefoy's essays–the "leaf" passage provides a striking instance—is that the visual subdivision of the text through obvious rhetorical means (blank spaces, Roman or Arabic numerals, etc.) is frequently undermined by the semantic construction of the message, which flows unchecked through the breaks. This purely formal characteristic of the essay resembles the poetic technique of enjambment, which itself is a means of intensifying the semantic depth of the poem by creating breaks that structure meaning and

provide connections not otherwise possible in the text. This indeed demonstrates exactly what critic Korhonen suggests more generally: "The poetic essay can, of course, be poetic in several different ways. It may use language that comes near to poetry with its different figural expression and strong presence of sensual experience; it may use the textual space in ways that are common to verse-poetry (making for example, the empty space between the lines meaningful)" (245).

An important complement to this use of poetic language is the way in which the textual breaks inside essays reinforce its connection with fragmentation. For if, in Bonnefoy's work, the question of form is guided by the imperatives of *présence* and the need to find forms consistent with its dual nature of experience and concept, the high value of the essay resides primarily in the fact that it not only maintains a space encompassing the two aspects of *présence*, but it also functions as the very figure of these needs by integrating linguistic tools vital to the construction of Bonnefoy's position. Indeed, the essay simultaneously internalizes modern ambivalence regarding totalizing structures by presenting a form akin to the fragment, and it integrates the notion and practice of deixis into its very fabric.

## Fragmentation, Deixis, and Proper Names

Adorno writes that "the customary objection that the essay is fragmentary and contingent itself postulates that totality is given, and with it the identity of subject and object, and acts as though one were in possession of the whole" (11). The "leaf episode" from "Les Tombeaux" showed that Bonnefoy himself attributes philosophical value to the fragment. And if he shares the modern anxiety that we can never be "in possession of the whole," he plays on the essay's capacity to point, by choosing a narrowly delimited subject, to a fragment of reality, thus circumventing what Sousini-Andropoulos described as the "crise de totalité perçue comme monstrueuse" (2). On a larger scale, the essay thus has a methodological function in Bonnefoy's

work, allowing him to use the ontologically and even morally significant notion of fragmentation to reach the more significant underlying issue of the unity of *présence*. In some fundamental sense, however, fragmentation is a methodological tool for him and not a profoundly felt depiction of the nature of reality. He repeatedly stresses the importance of the unity that can be glimpsed through fragmentation, writing for instance in a passage where he evokes the "parenté" between prose and poetry, "ce que j'écris ce sont les ensembles dont chacun de ces textes n'est qu'un fragment : car ces derniers n'existent pour moi, dès leur début, que dans leur relation avec les autres" (*EsP*, 19).

But the notion of unity, even associated with *présence*, is essentially conceptual, thus Bonnefoy puts great store in the tool of deixis to connect this concept with its material realization in language. And if Adorno identifies deixis directly with the essay ("the essay moves in so close to the *hic et nunc* of the object that the object becomes dissociated into the moments in which it has its life instead of being a mere object" [14]), what we observe in Bonnefoy's work is the very materialization of this essayistic deixis. He writes:

> L'objet sensible est *présence*. Il se distingue du conceptuel avant tout par un acte, c'est la présence. Et par un glissement. Il est ici, il est maintenant. Et son lieu, parce qu'il n'est pas le lieu propre, son temps, parce qu'il n'est qu'un fragment de temps, sont les éléments d'une force étrange, d'un don qu'il fait, sa présence. O présence affermie dans son éclatement déjà de toutes parts ! (*I*, 26, emphasis in text)

In addition to the explicit connection between deixis and *présence*, this brief passage condenses all the major techniques that Bonnefoy uses to bring the reader to a textual experience that might bear the echo of that *présence*. Here we see again the obvious visual rupture of the blank line in the text that is "repaired" by the syntax, the "et" patently being the continuation of the idea. And here, again, the fragmentation is shown not only in the physical aspect of the text, but also as a metaphor within the text ("un fragment de temps"). Moreover, the *more* poetic character of the last sentence suggests that, as in the "Dédicace," the meaning carried by the text

has actually produced a poetic enunciation. This correlates well with Adorno's evocation of the essayistic deixis giving the object "moments in which it has its life," for the invocation, "O présence" suggests a vocative and carries the implication that the poetic utterance addresses a living quality.

The personification of *présence* in the passage quoted above is closely associated with the use of proper names, which is so useful to Bonnefoy's functional appropriation of language, Clearly, he has struggled with the question of the metonymic value of the proper name in showing *présence*, for his early poetry, which is roughly contemporaneous with the essays of *L'Improbable*, demonstrates a hesitation between the powerful trope of proper names and the equally powerful vacuum of their complete absence. Thus in the character of Douve, Bonnefoy created a proper name out of a common (though infrequently used) noun,[122] while the majority of the poems from *Pierre Ecrite* are simply called "Une Pierre." Writing in *L'Improbable*, however, Bonnefoy unequivocally propounds the value of proper names over common nouns. In the ordinary way, he writes, a word has "pour contenu une quiddité, rien d'autre, et ainsi n'est-il nullement dans sa fatalité d'évoquer, comme peut le faire un nom propre quand on le crie, l'existence effective" (*I*, 247). Proper names, thus, are indicators of presence, for they point to the real, temporal existence of a being. This point highlights again the potential theoretical value of essays for Bonnefoy. Because of their very nature, essays typically deal with a form of "proper name" in the sense that they frequently have an objective and identifiable referent in the world. This identification creates a common ground between writer and reader and brings us to the last two points concerning the methods and strategies that allow Bonnefoy to use the essay to convey *présence*.

[122] See, on this point, Carrie Jaurès Noland's extremely interesting: "What's in a Name? Yves Bonnefoy and the creation of Douve."

## "S'Arracher aux Mythes du Moi": The Tools of Myth and Allegory

If the previous topics concerned rhetorical strategies related to theoretical definitions of the essay—fragmentation, deixis, a theory of proper names—this section deals with narrative forms of rhetoric to see how Bonnefoy mobilizes these more cultural constructions to serve methodological ends in his work. Myth and allegory, by calling upon larger cultural structures to create a common ground between writer and reader, share a certain kinship with the generic definitions of the essay. And in his quest to go from the itinerary of personal experience to the creation of a useful map to facilitate the access to *présence* for others, myth and allegory are the forms Bonnefoy calls upon most frequently. For him, it is clear that they provide a methodological pillar allowing him not only to transform individual experience into a collective utility, but they also—like the essay—present a discursive space that can counter the dominance of scientific discourse. Again and again Bonnefoy returns to the idea that language has lost, or is losing its capacity to create immediate connections between individuals; "La parole qui s'obstine dans les poèmes est devenue elle-même de plus en plus complexe et dissociée de l'usage, du fait de la disparition des mythes et symboles—j'entends des mythes conscients" (*EsP*, 172). His evocation of "mythes conscients" shows his definition of myth: the conscious transformation of ordinary things and events into meaningful constructs via the imagination. Myth allows us to see in lightening, for instance, an angry god throwing bolts of light, or in the changing seasons, the grief of a mother weeping the loss of her child. In Bonnefoy's "imaginaire," it is opposed to scientific vision, whose attention is limited to the object, and disregards the human dimension of existence. Myth, in allowing people to give meaning to things, provides an added depth to human experience guiding our vision past the concrete object, and enriching it with a narrative construction that can then be exchanged and shared between individuals, and even modified to form new connections.

This point is highly significant for Bonnefoy; he returns to it often in his essays and interviews. More tellingly, he even replicates and integrates myth into his work. A case in point is the salamander text from "L'Acte et Lieu," which opens with a very strange association: "J'imaginerai ou je me rappellerai—on verra peut-être plus tard que les deux notions s'équivalent—que j'entre un jour dans une maison en ruines" (*I*, 249). Not only is the concatenation of "imagining" and "remembering" unusual, but Bonnefoy deliberately reinforces the equivalency: "les deux notions s'équivalent." Perhaps the only way to make sense of this equivalency is to see it as the materialization of the mythical gesture, which either imagines a narrative or recalls it from a shared past. Indeed, this interpretation is substantiated in the contents of the text, for the image of the salamander has historically been girded with the aura of myth. This can profitably be put into relation with the Benevenistian suggestion that the diachronic structure of language produces words that are no longer arbitrarily associated with their referents, but have, on the contrary, become motivated and obtained structural signification (53). Solely from a mythological perspective, then, "salamander" is a motivated image, and this might have inspired Bonnefoy in choosing it to identify the object of his experience. In his mediaeval *Bestiaire,* Pierre de Beauvais describes the salamander thus: "Cette bête ressemble à un lézard, et son corps est coloré de nombreuses couleurs " (55). Now the fact that de Beauvais's physically accurate description conflicts with the description Bonnefoy gives of the creature ('face grise', 'cou étroit', 'tête d'homme') can make one wonder whether the reality of the Bonnefoy episode does not perhaps rather describe an encounter with the ordinary grey lizards that are so prevalent in certain parts of France. If so, Bonnefoy's choice to narrate his experience along a mythological axis shows the methodological significance of myth, for undeniably this form is far more a cultural construction rooted outside individual consciousness, than a personal experience, and can therefore allows greater access to the common ground that is the goal of the essays.

Indeed, as concerns the appearance of the salamander in Bonnefoy's *essay*, the diachronic motivation of both word and image is compounded by the fact that they occurred *first* in his poetry. This is particularly important in terms of the goal of making experience useful for others, for in the poem cycle, it is indeed the activation of myth that engenders the transformation leading past the description of a potential real event in the first poem, into a paradigm that can first be rendered into language through the increasingly constructed quality of the poetry, and then, via the allegorising of the image, into the conceptual description of *présence* in the essay. Myth thus leads to allegory, for the primary mythological attribute of the salamander is, of course, its capacity to go through fire and remain unharmed. By correlation, thus, the salamander is associated in Christian iconology with purity. In the poem, Bonnefoy's double iteration of the word "pur" seems to indicate that this is precisely the intellectual pivot around which the salamander goes from myth into allegory: in the "Lieu" poem, "le mythe le plus pur" filters through "ma pensée" to become "allégorie de tout ce qui est pur," showing that *in fine*, myth conjoins with allegory to provide a rhetorical trope that has profound ramifications in Bonnefoy's struggle to transmit *présence*.

As we saw in the image of the leaf, which is also given as an exemplum of *présence*, the notion of allegory has singular resonance in Bonnefoy's work and is intricately interwoven into his writing. Understanding how he uses it is vital to obtaining a better understanding of how to read the collected essays. Indeed, it is hardly banal that both of Bonnefoy's most memorable definitions of *présence* are set under the sign of allegory. In large part, the usefulness of allegory is not merely rhetorical, but lies in its theoretical characteristics, which afford language a greater possibility to express *présence*. One of the striking elements of allegory is its explicit association with the same theological vocabulary that Bonnefoy uses for *présence*, particularly through the idea of the "salvation" or "redemption" of literary documents, and thus of the past. This

hearkening back to the past echoes, of course, the value of myth. Another important facet of allegory is that in contrast with symbol, it must be spoken consciously. I believe it is this idea of conscious use that allows Bonnefoy to turn toward allegory, for he associates symbolism with the dangers of an "ailleurs rêvé," saying "peut-être alors faudrait-il […] nommer le symbolisme" "le *mal* inherent à l'intuition poétique […]" (*I,* 254, emphasis in original). Symbolism, he suggests, stays on the surface of things, because of its "confiance naïve dans le 'lac dur' du visible" (*ibid.*). Allegory, by contrast, allows him much greater latitude in his theoretical objectives, both linguistic and didactic. Indeed, allegory, like the essay—like *présence* itself—is yet another element in Bonnefoy's constellation of notions that can hold several different ideas in place at the same time. More precisely, allegory, while globally conveying the premise of resources shared with the reader, parallels the essay at a rhetorical level by creating a relation between language and meaning which simultaneously maintains both language and idea.

Allegory's impulsion to say "otherly" (*allos* + *agoreuein* ) points away from language toward the idea contained in the allegorical image, At the same time, however, allegory points to its own structure because *this* image, *these* words are the ones that have been chosen to replace another image, another set of words. This double polarity with respect to language parallels a didactic potential also contained in the essay, for in addition to its attachment to language, allegory signals in two directions, toward the past contained in the literary documents it is reinvesting with value, and toward the future, which is the teaching it hopes to pass on. This is particularly significant when we remember Fineman saying that "allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. […] He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured, […] rather, he adds another meaning to the image" (69). Bonnefoy's transposition of identical imagery (leaf, salamander, orangery, etc.) from poetry to

essay does precisely that. In each instance, he manages to "add another meaning" by using language to actually materialize a highly theoretical position. For not only do the essays appropriate the images from the anterior poems, thus performing allegory's "confiscation" of the past, but Bonnefoy's explicit use of the future tense ("je dirai" for the leaf episode; "j'imaginerai" and "je me rappellerai" for the salamander text) explicitly indexes the future. The apotheosis of this double indexing is reached in the salamander episode, where the verbs Bonnefoy uses, "rappeler" and "imaginer," also *semantically* point: to the past for the first, and to the future for the second.

Now that we have seen the elements leading up to it, we can perceive more clearly the function of the transformation of a poetic image into allegory. The salamander episode provides the clearest demonstration because it concretely evokes the "true place" of *présence* that is the goal of poetry, inscribing the name of this place into the poetic text. However, the fact that the poetic salamander "narrative" reappears much later in essay form, suggests that in the long run even the possibility of finding a "true place" for the experience of the salamander has failed in the poetry. Allegory therefore is vital, for it provides a tool to recuperate the poetic image and re-inscribe it into a structure whereby it can be reinvested with significance.

Finally, a most important corollary to the function of allegory in Bonnefoy's work is that through its link with allegoresis, it provides a highly useful framework for reading the *collected* essays. In other words, as readers, we are always interpreting his collected essays in the mode of allegoresis, that is, looking past the specific subject of each essay toward a larger meaning of which each individual essay is merely a fragment. Having been primed by Bonnefoy's explicit use of allegory in the key passages defineing *présence*, we unconsciously apply allegoresis to read the whole allegorically. Consciously or unconsciously, Bonnefoy inscribes this allegorizing function into his writing: because allegory becomes the only viable mode of understanding the

overall function of the collected essays, the overt appearance of allegory as a distinct rhetorical figure becomes increasingly internalized. This, for instance, is why allegory is explicitly given as the mode of reading for the very early leaf episode, "je dirai par allégorie" but is a much less obvious presence in the salamander episode, where the allegorical nature of the salamander becomes patent only through comparison with the much older poem. The theoretical significance of allegory is thus evident: it provides the framework through which Bonnefoy's collections of essays can be read. And while it is true that allegory reinforces the didacticism of the overall project and thus mirrors the potential didacticism of the essay, the Bonnefoyian didacticism is motivated not so much by an unequal hierarchical relation with others, but rather by the moral imperative suggested by the notion of *présence* itself. And this sense of moral imperative is instrumental in the transformation of Bonnefoy's individual experiences into a usable guide for others.

## Teaching by Showing: the Essays as a Map

Bonnefoy, I have suggested, implicitly presents his essays as a sort of itinerary purporting to show the mental halts he himself has made in his quest to understand *présence*. In the end, however, this itinerary proves—at least partially—to be a fiction, inasmuch as the arrangement of the essays into collections is far from arbitrary and does not reproduce the "real" encounters of Bonnefoy's experience. The trope of the itinerary can therefore only be seen as motivated, its purpose being to allow us to become the "better readers" Borges evokes. But if the notion of itinerary is a literary conceit, its function is to provide readers with another image, that of a map to guide them in their own search for *présence* and ultimately, to become those better readers. Alex Gordon pinpoints this quality in Bonnefoy's poetry, writing that "if the first quality of

Bonnefoy's poetry is its eloquence rather than the negation of eloquence required by his poetics, this eloquence, it must be emphasized, calls up before the reader a route and not a destination" (434). The essays certainly equal the eloquence of the poetry, and thus arguably function in much the same way, replicating the path to take. And it is, of course, not trivial that Bonnefoy chooses to use this genre to provide this map and guide. For on the subject of the essay's affinities with the idea of maps and destinations, it is useful to recall Laurent Mailhot's analysis of the essay, which "says 'I'; it likewise says here and now; it shapes its own representation […] It drifts, it wanders in order to trace a map of its own questionings: its detours determine its contours" (76). Mailhot's indications on the deictic potential of the essay are equally pertinent to the immediacy of *présence*, and thus reiterate the functional purpose of the essay in Bonnefoy's work.

Indeed, the eloquence that is a hallmark of Bonnefoy's writing serves a larger ambition; it can never be an end in itself without betraying its own moral legitimacy and compromising the quest for *présence*. In the talk entitled "Poésie et Vérité," Bonnefoy insists on the necessity and moral legitimacy of poetry, writing that "*la poésie est nécessaire* […] [Elle] a un rôle que rien ne peut remplacer. Si elle disparaissait tout à fait, c'est la société humaine qui s'écroulerait avec elle. [Elle] est *légitime*, c'est-à-dire une activité que l'on a le droit, le droit moral d'entreprendre" (*EsP*, 273, emphasis in original). This observation, made with explicit reference to Adorno's own comment about the difficulty of writing poetry after Auschwitz, expresses with vehemence the vital need for poetry to counter the risk of the collapse of society. Commensurately, Bonnefoy has on numerous occasions written or spoken about the moral imperative of the poet not only to defend poetry, but to fight against its diminishing value in modern society.

## "Un Enseignement Moral"

But what is the role of the essay in this fervent defense of poetry? A rather lengthy comment Bonnefoy made in the *Agitateur des Idées* interview puts "poètes" and "penseurs" on a parallel plane by acknowledging that they can co-exist in a single person. In the interview, Bonnefoy speaks about Rimbaud, but his comment seems to have clear applications to his own thought and manner of functioning. He says:

> il y a bien en effet dans certains poètes des penseurs qui observent ce qu'ils font, et en tirent des conséquences. Ce qui fait de leur parole d'ensemble - celle du poème d'abord, mais aussi celle qui dans les marges de leur travail s'interroge sur celui-ci - quelque chose de méditable dans l'existence comme jour après jour on la mène : car c'est, remarquablement, un enseignement de sorte morale. […] La poésie est au-delà du philosophique mais le poète non, et celui-ci peut enrichir la réflexion du philosophe d'une expérience directement vécue de ce que ce dernier n'est que trop enclin à méconnaître : à savoir qu'il y a du rêve dans la pensée autant que dans les désirs les plus humbles.

Most important for the function Bonnefoy might attribute to his own essays is here the idea that it is *both* poetry *and* the reflection on writing, the "parole d'ensemble," that provides something that others can absorb and reflect on ("méditable") to the point that it can become a form of moral teaching. A second point is his evocation of the limitations of philosophy, bounded as it is by its incomprehension of "une experience directement vécue." Both of these observations play into our reading of the collected essays as a usable guide for readers.

The interaction between itinerary and map is one that is predicated on the larger notion of moral teaching, and even of moral commitment that emerges in Bonnefoy's above comment. In a sense, the only difference between the notion of itinerary and that of map is the engagement writer and reader take toward it. And if the picture of an itinerary minimizes the sense of authorial control, the notion of a map re-establishes the didactic impulse. But this is not without cause, for the high seriousness and gravity Bonnefoy attributes to the notion of *présence* forces him equally to emphasize the vital importance of our own attentiveness to it. It is this seriousness that subtends not only the need for the essay, but the complementary need to organize them into

functional tools with a didactic function. Thus, though Bonnefoy can by no means considered to be an "engaged writer" in the same sense as, for instance, Sartre or Camus, many of the qualities attributed to such writers play into his choice of a more transparent form of writing with a communicational *telos*. Critic Benoît Denis explains that:

> l'écrivain engagé désire être compris du plus grand nombre. Il a donc dans sa démarche une volonté de transitivité qui, si elle n'implique pas l'abandon de toute préoccupation littéraire, l'amène au moins à viser ultimement une certaine forme de transparence de l'écriture. C'est pourquoi l'écriture engagée tend souvent à se déployer en dehors des genres canoniques, dans des catégories de textes qui relèvent de ce que l'on nomme la *littérature d'idées*. Celle-ci constitue un vaste ensemble aux contours flous : elle accueille des types de texte très divers qui ont en commun d'exposer des *opinions* (régime doxologique) ou des *jugements* (régime enthymématique). Cela signifie donc que la littérature d'idées ne fonctionne pas selon les régimes dominants du littéraire, à savoir le poétique et le narratif. (76-77)

The desire to be understood is certainly germane to Bonnefoy's preoccupations, as is his recourse to the non-canonic genre of the essay. Indeed, his disqualification of philosophy because of its incapacity to connect with "une experience vécue," underscores the value of the essay, which has the inherent capacity to address the immediacy of lived experience, and can also take into account the writing individual. But as concerns this "volonté de transitivité," Bonnefoy's goal is a form of engagement that is particular to him. It lies not so much in pure transparency of writing, but rather in what he perceives an even higher moral cause, bringing readers to an *experience* of presence by providing as close a correlation as possible between poetry, essay, and the *notion* of *présence*.

## Common Constructions, Essay and Poetry

As I indicated earlier, all the essays of *L'Improbable* originally appeared elsewhere, either as individual essays published in various journals and reviews, or as talks transcribed into essays. Hence though each individual volume (*L'Improbable, Un Rêve fait à Mantoue, Le Nuage Rouge* or *La Vérité de Parole*) represents a coherent structure, the genesis of these structures is a recuperative work that derives from the conscious ordering of extant pieces. That structuring

itself reveals the authorial presence, as Peter France's comment suggests: "In a book of essays by the same hand, as one essay follows another, the essayist becomes more real and present than the authors of many autobiographies" (29). This presence once again underscores the importance of subjectivity in the organization of Bonnefoy's essays. More globally, however, they represent the development of an idea, of a theoretical position. It is certainly true that a rough chronological order exists for the different collections of essays with *L'Improbable*, grouping essays generally dating from the fifties, while *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue*contains essays written in the sixties, and *Le Nuage Rouge* and *La Vérité de Parole* comprise mainly essays published later still. However, within these general guidelines, the essays are not arranged in strict chronological order, suggesting that Bonnefoy intended the *position* of each to be of significance in the construction of the whole.

We have already seen that Bonnefoy's essays are characterized by their intellectual density and the literary quality of the expression, along with their capacity to elaborate what frequently becomes a genuinely poetic discourse while remaining within the conventions of prose. And yet, it is interesting to note that while individual essays can provide integration of esthetic concerns in the form of poetic—or quasi-poetic—discourse, Bonnefoy's collected essays actually provide for the material integration of poetry and essay. Indeed, taken as a whole, the collections of essays demonstrate what appears to be a conscious blurring at the margins which separate poetry and prose, which is seen in the fact that Bonnefoy's earlier collections of essays close with a poem. *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* ends with the prose-poem "Sept feux," while *L'Improbable* closes with "Dévotion," which then reappears in *Poèmes.* One could claim that the concatenation of essay and poetry is completely congruent with Bonnefoy's status as a poet. And yet, the systematic inclusion of poetry in texts published under the specific descriptive epithet "essais" invites some reflection. Indeed, in terms of the transmission of a larger idea, the fact that

the poems are physically conjoined with the prose in a single space seems to confirm the idea that—consciously or not—they are two facets of the same ambition to show the reader a place which might be accessible through writing.

Indeed, it noteworthy that the last essay of the first volume of *L'Improbable* is "L'Acte et le Lieu de la Poésie,"–the very essay whose "salamander episode" gives a definition of presence—and that in all editions of *L'Improbable*, this essay is directly followed by the poem "Dévotion." The essay thus literally opens the space of the poem, suggesting that in Bonnefoy's "imaginaire," the reader, having been prepared to understand the idea of presence through the conceptual construction of the essays, is presented with a poem at the end because he or she can then more easily enter into the poetic space of *présence*. Comments Bonnefoy has made to me indicate strongly the fact that the essays are for him a means to get closer to the poetry: prose prepares for poetry. His structuring of essays into collections suggests that just as "l'Acte et le Lieu" creates a "lieu" that the poetry then fills ("je dis que le vrai lieu, c'est le serment de la poésie" [*I*, 131]), their function is to guide the reader to attain the final goal. Quintessentially, thus, they seek the reader's transformation into the Borgesian "good reader" because they have provided the intellectual tools that allow for a true experience of the *présence* ostensibly encompassed in the poem.

But if the collected essays are constructed as a means for the reader to follow the same path Bonnefoy took, it is our interpretation of their function, our allegoresis, that transforms them from itinerary to map: reading them as a map implies the active engagement not only of the writer, who constructs his texts with a *telos* in mind, but also of the reader, who must use then the structure in order to organize his or her own actions. Thus, along the lines of engaging the transformation of the reader *qua* reader, one of the rather unusual functions of reading Bonnefoy's essays as maps toward better reading is that they engage the reader to reread the

poetry. Again, the salamander episode is particularly telling. The fact that the essay explicitly and insistently associates the image of the salamander with the notion of presence acts upon readers, prompting them to read backwards in order to re-examine and re-interpret the poetic texts in the light of this term. It thus teaches us retroactively how to read the poetry.

*In fine*, perhaps the most important aspect of the construction of the essays into collections is the impulsion toward the transformation of the reader. As Bonnefoy writes: "Et cette poésie qui se risque ainsi ne serait donc que naïveté si le lecteur ne la rechargeait d'une raison d'être en y inscrivant son élan propre. Mais il le fait, et révèle ainsi qu'une grande œuvre est bien moins la réussite d'une personne que l'occasion qu'elle donne à d'autres de commencer la recherche" (*EsP*, 231). But the optimism of this statement, which points toward the sense of common purpose inscribed into the very description of the essay is mitigated by the larger social concerns, the anxiety we saw at the beginning of the chapter and which is related to Bonnefoy's disquiet regarding the increasing isolation of the individual in society: "Au progrès de l'individu, il faut que la société collabore, par l'élaboration de symboles, et de valeurs. Or, aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas seulement à cause des lois de l'écriture que celui qui écrit est seul, c'est tout autant par le fait des aliénations du groupe, qui en est à déconstruire la vie dans cette substance du lieu terrestre" (*NR*, 281). And if, in the Bonnefoyian construction of writing, poetry provides the possible solution, a fragment from *Hier Régnant Désert* allows us to see his absolute need for the essay, for that the appeal to the "other," to the "you," can remain unanswered without it complementary intervention. Bonnefoy writes:

> Et vois, tu es déjà séparé de toi-même,
> Toujours ce même cri, mais tu ne l'entends pas,
> Es-tu celui qui meurt, toi qui n'a pas d'angoisse
> Es-tu même perdu, toi qui ne cherches pas ? (P, 98)

This “toi qui ne cherches pas” can metaphorically be seen as the unenlightened reader who is so lost that he does not even know he is lost, and who, consequently, must be brought to begin the quest. In part, the essay responds to the poetic anxiety of reaching that “lost reader,” for as the preceding analysis has hoped to show, in the contemporary literary context it is the essay far more than poetry that can straddle the fine and imaginary line separating pure abstraction from its concrete realization in language, and thus allow a writer to materialize the idea of a common quest for a more authentic way of being that will touch a broader readership. And this desire to communicate, this urgency to transmit the importance of a presence available not only in the world, but also through language is, it seems to me, the fundamental characteristic, the omnipresent catalyst of *L’Improbable*.

# CONCLUSION –
# Testament and Transformation: Beyond Better Readers

In 1991, Bonnefoy published his monumental biography of Alberto Giacometti. Its subtitle, *Biographie d'une oeuvre* is unusual yet emblematic, and recapitulates much of Bonnefoy's own struggle to find and transmit an adequate means of expression. His subversion of the "normal" schema bespeaks a purpose that is profoundly anchored in his vision of the function of writing. Certainly, the seemingly paradoxical quality of his choice startles in the same way as, for instance, his use of word the "improbable" in the "Dédicace," or a number of other stylistic decisions examined earlier. And yet, it is clear that, as for a number of texts seen in earlier chapters, the "shock-value" of the terms cannot be an end in itself: the high moral imperative we have seen Bonnefoy attributing–via the notion of *présence*— to the question of writing precludes such an interpretation. Rather, his choice must be understood to be linked to providing a very personal understanding of the relationship between art and artist. This understanding echoes his own relation with his essayistic work.

In his analysis of the *Giacometti* text, critic Jean-Michel Maulpoix comments on the surprising nature of Bonnefoy's title, writing:

> D'ordinaire, on rédige la biographie d'un auteur ou d'un artiste, c'est-à-dire l'histoire d'un être périssable qui a créé des objets moins éphémères que lui. Composer la biographie d'une œuvre consiste à renverser la perspective et à concentrer l'attention moins sur les péripéties de l'existence du créateur que sur les objets durables en lesquels elle s'est convertie et parfois délivrée d'elle-même. C'est écrire, plutôt que la vie d'un être éphémère, celle de ses successifs rendez-vous avec ce que Malraux eût appelé sa « part d'éternité ». (http://www.maulpoix.net/giacometti par yves bonnef.htm)

In many ways, Maulpoix's very pertinent analysis of Bonnefoy's reversal of the relation between that which is fleeting and that which persists substantiates the absolute necessity for the

essay in Bonnefoy's work. What does "biographie d'une oeuvre" indicate? On the one hand, it shows a desire to efface the subject, that is, the artist producing the work, but on the other hand, this effacing itself highlights the *useful* value of the art work. By focusing on the work itself, Bonnefoy underscores the lasting worth it acquires by becoming a transferable product that can be shared by the community as a whole.

That said, it is imperative to note that Bonnefoy did not write an analysis, a commentary, or a study of Giacometti's work, nor did he put the artist on the same plane as his artistic production by using, for instance, a title commonly given to such works: "Giacometti and his work." On the contrary, by using the word "biography" in connection with the work and not the man, Bonnefoy gives life, reintegrating *bios* into Maulpoix's "objets durables," and signifying thereby that *both* the artist and his art can harbor life. It is difficult not to see in this "giving-of-life" an intimation to readers that generic categories are the fluctuating indicators of an underlying communicative goal. In a way, this recapitulates the elsewhere-pointing so typical of allegory and allegoresis, inviting the reader to construct a meaning predicated on semantic categories lying outside the text. By extension, thus, this veiled reference can be read as an oblique reference to the double quest of *présence* to integrate both the ephemeral nature of the lived life and the manner in which the intellect has transformed that experience into a durable artistic element.This relation between art and artist can without difficulty be extended to the relationship between writer and text and thus indicates the multiple functions the essay obtains in allowing Bonnefoy to attain one of his main goals: making *présence* accessible not only to the individual reader but, on a larger scale, to society as a whole. It suggests the importance the genre's capacities hold in allowing him to convey his message and points on a larger scale to the significance of his collected essays in his overall project.

As the preceding chapters showed, the specificity of Bonnefoy's *présence* lies in significant measure in its dual nature, its fusing of a sensed experience with the intellectual understanding of the latter's conceptual import. Those chapters also showed that Bonnefoy's development of *présence* hesitates between the image of presence as fragmentation that accompanies his early disillusion with language, and the opposite image of presence as unity which subsequently appears in later texts, reflecting his integration of a wholly personal linguistic paradigm into his goal to transmit *présence*. And though the question of fragmentation and unity is clearly thematized in Bonnefoy's poetry as, for instance, in "L'épars, l'indivisible," the title of the last section of *Dans le Leurre du Seuil,* the same attraction to both poles was shown to be visible in the descriptions of presence given in the "leaf" and "salamander" narrations of the essays.

The essay, because of its own capacity to simultaneously play on both fields and integrate formal considerations into a conceptual framework, is, I suggested,the only really adequate means of expressing the duality of *presence* through the imperfect mechanism of language. More broadly, the genre itself allows a writer to incorporate language that is identifiably poetic while maintaining an argumentative discourse, with the net effect of making the rhetorical, artistic dimension of the text supplement and consolidate the argumentative position of the essayist. Indeed, Claire de Obaldia, contrasting Lukàcs and Adorno's positions on the essay, points to this constant double pole of the essay:

> La définition lukacsienne de l'essai comme "une critique sous une forme artistique, sous la forme d'une œuvre d'art," qu'Adorno conteste d'abord, doit dès lors être "pesée" contre cette tendance "positiviste" de l'esprit scientifique à établir un divorce "rigide" entre la forme et le contenu […] Les positions apparemment opposées des deux essayistes trouvent ainsi un terrain d'entente dans le même crédit qu'elles accordent à toute science des arts sachant prendre la forme alternative d'une écriture sur l'art que Lukàcs définissait comme "expérience sensible du concept et de l'intellect." La double dimension esthétique et cognitive de l'essai, loin de le discréditer, apparaît alors comme sa principale ressource. (176)

Obaldia's suggestion that the so-called "discredit" of the essay is, in reality, its principal asset indicates the value it obtains within a community of readers, and even of writers—who are themselves potential readers of essays. Her comment thus suggests that the generic capacities of the essay can have a functional *purpose* for writers.

For Bonnefoy, in particular, the polyvalent qualities of the essay itself are vital to his larger project, as, indeed, is his grouping of individual essays into collections. For if his primary mission is, as so many critics have pointed out, the expression and transmission of *présence*, the essay *per* essay allows him to expand and reinforce that goal both from a personal point of view and from the perspective of the reader. Indeed, as the final chapters indicated, the teleological objective of showing *présence* imperfectly masks the larger aim of making a mark on, and perhaps even transforming the reader. Bonnefoy obliquely suggests as much when he so emphatically exhorts the reader to "lever les yeux de son livre" and "interrupt" the reading in order to see that "il y a, au-dehors, du temps, du lieu, du hasard, des choix à décider, de la mort, mais aussi bien, en cela, un monde" (*EsP*, 229). In a larger sense, however, it is not so much the experience that matters for the reader as the change of his or her understanding of the world. Thus this goal of reader transformation in turn veils a yet greater objective–or more accurately perhaps, an "espoir," to use a recurrent Bonnefoyian word— namely that of providing a means for society itself to change. As he indicates: "La poésie a une certaine idée du fait social. Son avenir, son grand avenir, s'il se dégage un jour des contradictions de l'histoire littéraire, sera aussi une proposition sur la relation du sujet et d'autrui, et par conséquent sur la société humaine" (*Pau*, 4).

This high ambition for poetry remains, however, mired in a double contradiction encompassed both by the problem of language and by the ever-narrowing impact of poetry. Indeed, paradoxical as it may seem, despite Bonnefoy's insistence on "interrupting" reading to

turn toward real-life experience, he speaks, in the same essay, of the absolute need for words, for language in order to counter the social and even political ills of society:

> Il est facile de se persuader que les poètes autant que les philosophes, pour ne rien dire des représentants du pouvoir, répriment ou colonisent dans ceux auxquels ils s'adressent un « instinct » qui serait notre seul accès à la « vraie vie », mais c'est alors ne pas voir qu'il n'est de réalité, même dans la dépense la plus extrême, que construite par le langage ; et qu'à vouloir se passer des mots élaborés par les œuvres, on ne fait que s'abandonner sans s'en rendre compte à la tyrannie de certaines formulations qui sont bien plus pauvres, n'étant que de l'idéologie. (*EsP*, 234)

Clearly, he would want these "mots élaborées par les œuvres" to be the words of poetry. Just as clearly, however, as his sometimes urgent comments indicate, he is aware not only of the diminishing social force of poetry, but also that a purely lyrical poetry centered around the experience of the speaking "I" has a very reduced communicative power in the postmodern world. Indeed, Stamelman highlights this general characteristic of contemporary poetry to downplay the individual voice when he remarks in his "Syntax of the Ephemeral" article that "in the poetry of Bonnefoy, Dupin and du Bouchet the poet's presence is tenuous, if non-existent" (115). And yet, in Bonnefoy's case, clearly, it is the "vécu" of the individual consciousness, its slow construction through the experiences of a lifetime that has brought him to a realization of the personal and social value of *présence*.

The essay provides the solution to this dilemma of balancing functional usefulness to others of a personal *parcours* while downplaying what one might call the "vainglorious" cast that overt autobiographies might contain. Bonnefoy's extreme personal discretion further confirms his predilection for the genre, inasmuch as the essay frequently seeks to minimize any prescriptive ambition by highlighting the fact that its own motivation is fundamentally limited, and reflects only contingent choices and preferences. In Bonnefoy's case, this choice is further depersonalized by his essays' focus on the modalities of artistic production. As Vernier points out in his article on the "conscience of poetry": "The occasion of the essays may vary […] but whatever their immediate topic, they all gravitate to the same interrogation of the creative act –

not so much of the process, timeless and yet contingent upon the idosyncracies of a given craft, as of its relationship with, and its responsibilities to the here and now" (149).

Vernier's point is accurate as concerns individual essays. The matter is, however, substantially modified by the action of presenting essays in constructed collections, each of which have gone through several editions, at times with significant changes, which themselves indicate the structural and organizational principles subtending them. If a sense of reticence makes it impossible for Bonnefoy to present his own experiences as absolute guidelines for others, the idea of giving readers the possibility of vicariously experiencing his own encounters with the cultural and natural objects that provided the impulsion for his realization of presence is what lies at the heart of the project of gathering his essays into collections. The identity of the singular person is obviously always a latent subtext in the individual essay, as Joseph Bonenfant points out: "Dans sa méditation écrite, l'essayiste prend toujours, à des degrés divers, le dessein de se peindre. Il propose sa propre contingence comme point de départ, sa propre diversité comme inspiration et son acte d'écrire comme l'acte premier de la pensée" (16). If we return momentarily to Bonnefoy's Giacometti text, the subtitle "biographie d'une oeuvre" can, I would argue, be applied to his collections of essays, particular those of *L'Improbable*, whose overt and continuous construction—both chronological, over the different volumes, and intellectual, within each volume—reveals Bonnefoy's determination to provide a lasting contribution to the community and thereby perhaps give it the means to transform itself. The nature of the essay itself allows us to read this structured "biography" of his work allegorically, as a shrouded autobiography, which is, *in fine*, not so surprising, for as Paul Smith reminds us, "What, in fact, is being named and reinforced in postmodern allegory is the figure of the author" (119).

The essay, thus, particularly integrated into a constructed collections allows Bonnefoy to reinforce his preference for structures and ideas that have plural natures and functions: the essay

itself, but also presence and deixis. Through the conflation of an ephemeral being whose *experiences* matter, and the conversion of these experiences into a more lasting contribution to the larger community, Bonnefoy hopes to provide, through the authenticity of the authorial presence, some form of guidance that can only become available if the reader can be brought to read the collected essays through the matrix of allegoresis and perceive the path that they indicate. If Walter Albert suggests that "Bonnefoy is, in spite of the imminent disintegration of his subject, concerned with the construction of a place in which the poetic identity can endure" (590), the matter that drives the autobiographical collected essays is how to make that identity available to all.

# ABBREVIATIONS USED

*EsP = Entretiens sur la poésie: 1972-1990*
*I = L'Improbable et autres essais*
*NR = Le Nuage Rouge*
*P = Poèmes*
*Pau = Yves Bonnefoy: Poésie, Art et Pensée*, actes du colloque du Centre de Recherches sur la Poésie Contemporaine
*RT = Rue Traversière*
*RR = Récits en Rêve*
*VP = La vérité de parole*

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