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The Notion of Presence in the Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy

Abstract

The notion of *presence* is the cornerstone of Bonnefoy's entire poetics, the common element linking his earliest pronouncements about poetry to his latest. The insistence on presence emerges as the animating principle of a selfconsciously anti-Mallarmean concept of poetry that seeks to align itself with hopefulness and with an affirmation of this life. The term is never defined once and for all, however, and the great range of evocations and applications of the idea in Bonnefoy's work has triggered a significant critical debate about its significance and validity.

Keywords

presence, Yves Bonnefoy, poetics, poetry, anti-Mallarmean, self-consciousness

THE NOTION OF *PRESENCE* IN THE POETICS OF YVES BONNEFOY

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The notion of presence is a common element, linking Yves Bonnefoy's earliest pronouncements about poetry to his latest. Just as the polarity between *incarnation* and *excarnation* has helped to clarify his poetics, so too the idea of presence, together with its opposite, absence, is useful for an understanding not only of Bonnefoy's conception of poetry, but also, to a certain extent, of the poetic texts themselves. The emergence of what Bonnefoy calls "presence" creates the "true place," as he says; providing centrality, it invests the world with irrefutable significance and coherence, although at the moment these certainties are lived outside the sphere of words. It is the experience of presence that convinces Bonnefoy that it is in this world that the poet must work, and it is the knowledge that any aspect of this life may suddenly become the pathway to essential being that leads him to refuse the worlds proposed by words, and indeed all modes of representation, since these may tend to become ends in themselves, and as such, forms of absence and excarnation. These notions are, by now, fairly evident to students of Bonnefoy. On the other hand, the insistence on presence has triggered something amounting to a critical debate about Bonnefoy's work, and this debate is a highly significant one, since the controversy over the nature and destiny of poetry is central to it.

Although 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. In a letter to the Swiss critic John E. Jackson, written in 1980 and published in the volume called *Entretiens sur la poésie (Interviews on Poetry)*, Bonnefoy is very specific about the possibility of some change in his thought.¹ "I readily admit that what I say may seem to contradict this or that remark made earlier," he says, "although I do dream of understanding, some day, the reason for these shiftings, which sometimes are nothing more than differences in point of view brought on by the changes in priority—be these intellectual or emotional—that are a part of one's life" (*E*, p. 130). It is fair to say, furthermore, that it is part of the very nature of what Bonnefoy means by "presence" that it should be at once the simplest and the most ineffable of realities.

His first important essays—those from the early fifties, when one can sense quite clearly the influence of the "Philosophie de l'Existence" (Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Shestov)—would seem to suggest that Bonnefoy is not far from the *chosistes* and from the widespread intellectual tendency that was seeking at the time to free the object from the subjective, anthropocentric mists that had traditionally surrounded it. Thus, when Bonnefoy writes in his essay "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne" (1953) that "l'objet sensible est présence," it is natural to assume that it is the presence of the concrete world that he is evoking, since the phrase seems to mean, at least on one level, that physical objects, or whatever makes its appeal to the senses, can be presences. "Whoever attempts the crossing of physical spaces (*l'espace sensible*)," he adds, "reconnects with a sacred water that flows through all things":

And if he makes even the slightest contact with it, he feels himself immortal. . . . That this world exists, I am certain: it is, in the ivy and everywhere, the substantial immortality. (*I*, pp. 23, 26)

Similarly, in his essay on "Shakespeare and the French Poet" of 1959, Bonnefoy speaks of "the metaphysical *thereness* of things, most remote from verbalization." Poetry, he writes, "conceives of the Thing, the real object, in its separation from ourselves, its infinite otherness, as something which can give us an instantaneous glimpse of essential being, and thus be our salvation, if indeed we are able to tear the veil of universals, of the conceptual, to attain it."² In these essays, Bonnefoy initiates what will be an unflinching attack on the intellectual categories of language, which tend to replace the richer

and more complicated world in which we live and make choices, and to smother those moments of mutuality and relation that sometimes mysteriously surge up in it. Although by “thing” and “real object” Bonnefoy means any of the “signs of being” apprehended by the speaking subject, it is nonetheless true that the early texts emphasize such “objects” as ivy leaves and stones, the one to suggest the “immortality” or continuity of being, the other to mark the unalterable limitations that impinge upon it. More recently, however, and doubtless in an effort to clarify misunderstandings, Bonnefoy has insisted that by “presence” he does not mean simply the “concrete,” but rather the illumination that springs from “meetings,” a kind of wordless epiphany experienced by consciousness in a wide range of circumstances, a *recognition*—filled with wonder and awe—of being. “What counts for me,” he says in another interview, “is not simple appearance, or the texture of the world, but rather what escapes perception—although with the possibility of restoring to perception all its intensity and its seriousness. . . . It is . . . an experience of the present moment in all of its memoryless plenitude” (*E*, pp. 57–58).

It is in the very nature of the kind of “meeting” or relation that Bonnefoy means by *presence* that it should not be easily definable, that its power and its mystery should disappear in the words that seek to describe or to analyze it: “this experience,” Bonnefoy says, “can hardly be spoken” (*I*, p. 248). To encounter a being as a presence is to come into contact with the unity of all being, for, as presence, any being, however seemingly insignificant, becomes central, becomes the gateway to being itself, since its essence can “spread into the essence of other beings, like the flow of an analogy by which I perceive everything in the continuity and sufficiency of a *place*, and in the transparency of *unity*” (*I*, p. 248). And as for words which would seek to account for the reality of presences, or to preserve something of their depth and their mystery in the poem, Bonnefoy reminds us that “in the hope of presence, one cannot ‘signify’; one tries to free a light from the efforts to make sense of it that in fact cover and conceal it” (*I*, p. 249).

If the nature of presence cannot be reduced to a simple formula or a neat definition, if it is rather the cumulative resonance that must be discerned—the notion grown dense, rich with meaning through various evocations and applications—it is nonetheless unmistakably clear that the term is associated with poetry’s positive, life-affirming mission, with its desire to align itself with hopefulness. Bonnefoy’s

emphasis on presence appears as the self-conscious determination to distinguish his idea of poetry from that of Mallarmé, Valéry, and their descendants. The encounter with presence is the guarantee that this world has meaning and coherence and that it can therefore be the proper home for man—a hearth even, providing light and warmth. Much of the emphasis of the French poetry inspired by Mallarmé has been on the idea of *absence*: the recognition of the fatal abolition of the signified by the signifier; the feeling that the “real life” is elsewhere and that society’s use of language is a hopeless corruption; the conviction that the poet’s mission is therefore to “give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe” and thus to establish, through a rarefied poetic speech, access to the true, to the ideal world compared to which the sorrowful world we languish in is an unfortunate impoverishment ruled by chaos and chance. Critics from Edmund Wilson to Jean-Paul Sartre have been quick to call into question the anti-social and world-denying implications of Symbolist poetics. Sartre, in fact, praises Bonnefoy himself in his book *What Is Literature?* for recognizing, even as a “young Surrealist,” the fundamental difference between the exercise of words and the practice of living.³

Having once experienced presence, and despite its immediate disappearance, consciousness is, in Bonnefoy’s view, changed, and hope arises. This hope is based, as I have tried to show, on a faith in the world we live in. It is built on a ready acceptance of all things, on an openness and a waiting. Any element of the creation, however simple and “impoverished,” may become a presence, may become the lamp that beckons toward unity, toward the convinced intuition that the world has meaning. But this is not to say that such moments of being are other than fleeting and impermanent, for Bonnefoy knows how quickly they vanish and how rapidly they are replaced by the more durable sense of futility and decline, by the awareness of limitation and death. And yet, it is the experience of these moments of presence that gives the sense of purpose and direction to Bonnefoy’s poetic quest:

Something has happened, something of infinite depth and gravity . . . but already the veil of time has wrapped us in its folds, and as the instant draws near we are exiled anew. Something was offered to us . . . but we were unable to grasp it. . . .

And yet, in spite of this missed opportunity, we are no longer the same, we are no longer so poor, some hope remains.

Although indeed the question of what might save us remains unanswered, although we have had to doubt in so far as, and almost at the very instant when, we were given to believe, nonetheless we have received the boon of certainty; we know on what basis . . . we can build. Henceforward, we have a reason for existence, which is that sudden act. And a duty and a moral goal—at any rate provisionally—which will be to recover it. And all our actions, lost, crippled creatures that we are, should be a call to this; or rather should recognize that this is what they have always been, in depth. . . . (*I*, pp. 122–23)

Still, all of Bonnefoy's work will insist that the presence of things is made bright against the backdrop of eventual disappearance and absence. It is this background that gives a certain urgency to the evocation of presence, especially in Bonnefoy's earlier work, since it is against the threat of nothingness that things "cry out" their being.

It is important to stress, I think, 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 relation. And the world of presence is always abolished, or made absent, through writing and all forms of representation, even, though to a lesser degree, in the writing or painting most conscious of the problem. "We would have very little if we only had words," he says in his essay on *The Song of Roland*. "What we need are the presences that words leave in dotted lines in the mysterious spaces between them and that words in themselves will never know how to restore to life" (*NR*, p. 175). What is hoped for from words, from the "few," from the "deep" words, is that they might be able to commemorate the experience of unity, of plenitude, experienced in real time and space (*here and now*, as Bonnefoy loves to say), and that the encounter with the "place" of presence—be it the sudden intuition of finitude or the vaulted spaces provided by eroticism—shine forth in them. Readers of poems, especially professional readers, can of course reduce them to words, to an identifiable rhetorical strategy. They can, in fact, place even the idea of presence, which in Bonnefoy's work is so clearly opposed to the habitual response created by words, within the flow of language and make it recuperable as itself: a simple phenomenon of the language that invents and constitutes it. But when Bonnefoy speaks of presence, he asks the reader to find his or her own moments of special intensity that initially come to impose themselves before the

words that later seek to give expression to them have come into being. (When he writes of presence, Bonnefoy will often evoke what “speaks” without language: the sound of a stone falling in a ravine; the cry of a bird; the movement of leaves against the darkness; the running of water. These are the elementary, “pre-theological” features of a language all men share, and Bonnefoy has said that the elements are the stuff of the only authentic poetic idiom, the “speech of being” that poetry tries to draw forth. [See *I*, pp. 125–26]). That all written language, even that most acutely conscious of the contradiction, should be estranged from the mutuality and transparency of presence, that all evocation of it should seem a part of the flow of intertextuality, is, I believe, rather perfectly obvious. Words can never really recreate the impression of presence, which is fatally absent in them. But what poetry can do is “tell of presence, ‘cry out its name,’ thus helping the reader to rediscover the memory of it, and making of the confinements in which we are all caught, and of which one’s writing is only one example, the occasion, at last fully apprehended and grasped, for a superior form of lucidity.”⁴

Bonnefoy’s notion of presence obviously has its affinities with the project of *voyance* announced in 1871 by Arthur Rimbaud—the French poetic ancestor who seems to have exercised the most lasting influence on Bonnefoy. On the other hand, one would not want to confuse Bonnefoy’s idea of presence with the practice of “simple hallucination” experienced and then denounced by Rimbaud. Bonnefoy has repeatedly insisted that the experience of presence does not necessitate a complete repudiation of those faculties given us for discerning and deciphering the world, although of course the purely conceptual mediations proposed by these may in fact come to smother or replace the world of presences. In short, Bonnefoy has never sought to deny the contradictions of the Western person:

But so that this movement of return be more than mere simulation, it is essential that the two terms of the contradiction be kept face to face, and that this separated and unhappy life of the mind, which would like to return to the substantiality that was lost, be itself affirmed to the very end in its profound difference. We are from the Western world, and this cannot be denied. We have eaten of the tree of knowledge, and this cannot be denied. And far from dreaming of a cure for what we are, it is through our

irrevocable intellectuality that we must try to reinvent presence, which is salvation. (*I*, p. 40)

These statements may be said to constitute a response of sorts to the assertions sometimes made about the nature of Bonnefoy's nostalgia and quest for presence—namely, that it evokes what is outside the experience of language in a highly abstract mode of discourse which is easily recuperable within a recognizable philosophical tradition; that his work—both the poems and the prose—while ostensibly concerned with non-mediated immediacy, is in fact a meditation on historically canonized forms such as the plays of Shakespeare or the great works of Poussin, Tintoretto, and Constable. Steven Winspur, for one, has tried to show that even non-conceptual poetic speech “is itself a sign dependent on an underlying code for its meaning, and hence not a way out of the circle of signs.”⁵ Winspur points to the network of intertextual elements that flow through Bonnefoy's work and argues that “it is the institution of Western literature . . . that gives meaning to Bonnefoy's project of describing the human life that grounds, and yet is outside, all sign-systems” (pp. 161–162). I do not believe that Bonnefoy would attempt to say that his project seeks to establish itself entirely outside literary, artistic, or philosophical tradition. Rather, he would argue, I think, that the reason we love certain works and can have confidence in them and can “reflect” upon them is that they pursue the same dialectic we do: “sketching out intelligible worlds, personal languages, only in order to simplify them, to the point of seeing born in them, as it were, on its humble bed of straw, an absolute form, this time that of life itself” (*NR*, p. 280). In this way, not only one's own work, but also that of many other artists, who have similarly sought “that immanence in which the personal expression of the artist tends to dissipate” (*E*, p. 58), becomes dialectical: “the crucible in which, through a dialectic of our life and our book—action and dream reconciled!—presence will not only emerge, but deepen its relation to us” (*NR*, p. 280). Thus the evocations of Poussin's paintings on “The Finding of Moses” in Bonnefoy's long poem *Dans le leurre du seuil* (*In the Lure of the Threshold*, 1975) are evocations, it is true, of mediation, but of mediations that speak of the need to rid oneself of mediation, to banish the image that stifles the world. These works hint at the “even breathing” that says that world and spirit are in harmony.

In this sense, these works of art are but “reflections” of the poet’s desire: his longing for simplicity and transparency; his will to purify images of the unduly “imaginary”; his refusal of the false prestige assigned to a self that is merely contrived, to the purportedly special or privileged psychology called the poet; his affirmation of an earth of simple presences that all men share.

This embracing of contradiction and paradox—the insistence on reason *and* on its limitations; the love and yet the suspicion of the image, of representations—in part explains Bonnefoy’s break with the Surrealists, whose project was based, in Bonnefoy’s view, on an over-determined faith in “magic” and “occult powers.” By focusing only on certain dimensions of the object, by evoking presence as a detached or arbitrary entity, isolated from coherence or meaningful context, the surrealist image achieves, from Bonnefoy’s point of view, a kind of “negative intensity,” becomes what he calls “la mauvaise présence,” a terrifying or absurdist manifestation of presence. True, the surrealist image breaks free from the world of conditioned response and forces attention to the marvelous and improbable “being-there” of things. Still, the presence of which Bonnefoy speaks, and which is the object of a quest that is both artistic and lived, is revealed rather through all simple things whose very finitude allows them to participate in the greater unity of which they are a part. Of this unity Bonnefoy has said:

It is what asks us to put our faith in finitude, since totality only exists through the mutual recognition of each part, which has limitation as its essence: but this is what grants us, in the very assumption of our nothingness, access to the universal. And here is what I would call the religious act, here is the potential sacred order—and enough for me to break with surrealism (*E*, pp. 123–24)

Bonnefoy’s idea of presence has its parallels not only in Rimbaud, but also in the experiences of more modern, and even contemporary thinkers, as well. One thinks, in this connection, of Roland Barthes’s encounters, while studying photographs, with what he calls the *punctum*—that moment of shock, of rupture in the known and the acquired, during which, as he says, “words fail.”⁶ It is in his *La Chambre claire* that Barthes begins, in Bonnefoy’s view, to draw closer to the spirit of poetry than in any of his other books.⁷ In his

search for traces of presence left in the photographs of his dead mother (a search which leads him to examine the medium generally), Barthes contrasts the *punctum* to the *studium*, which he says is “ultimately always coded.” What can be named, Barthes goes on to say, “cannot really prick me” (p. 51). I once maintained that the relation that Barthes establishes between the *punctum* and the Zen *satori* experience seems applicable to Bonnefoy’s notion of presence as well, especially as the latter is presented in Bonnefoy’s most recent work.⁸ I still think that the parallel is worth exploring, since the Zen man’s insistence on the transparency between subject and object in the *satori* experience, his idea that the simplest of realities may trigger the moment of wordless illumination, although no amount of effort or will may guarantee it, all have clear affinities with Bonnefoy’s statements about presence. On this occasion, however, I would prefer to mention another possible connection: Martin Buber’s “Thou.”

Readers of Bonnefoy’s work will have noticed the extraordinary predominance of the “Tu” or “Thou” form in his poetry.⁹ Furthermore, the “I” of Bonnefoy’s poems often addresses the “Thou” in such a way as to underscore the affinities with Buber. Both writers emphasize the boundlessness of *relation* and the capacity of whatever we relate to with the whole of our being to open into the eternal and the universal and thus to invest the world with a meaning and a coherence, the certainty of which, though ineffable, appears nonetheless irrefutable. It is a moment, as Bonnefoy says, that will vanish a thousand times, but which has the glory of a god. Buber insists just as strongly as Bonnefoy that the relation to the “Thou” in no way involves a repudiation of our normal, rational faculties, and like Bonnefoy, he maintains with emphatic conviction that the intuition of meaning, of unity, of eternity emerges from a relation to this world and to this life, and not another. Both writers evoke, furthermore, an experience of the “timeless present,” and both stress *mutuality*, since, as Buber says, in “I-It” relations only the “I” is active and engaged. And yet, both are also aware that nothing in human will or effort can ever guarantee the emergence of presence, that the “Thou” always meets us as a kind of “grace.” “How powerful is the unbroken world of *It*,” writes Buber, “and how delicate are the appearances of the *Thou!*”¹⁰ And Bonnefoy has said that “it is enough to hold onto anything—to ‘no matter what,’ be it only a stone,” for the sense of meaninglessness to vanish and for loving mutuality to triumph. And yet, he adds, “however important this may be, one knows as well that

it cannot be forced: there is no power for making sure of this power" (*I*, p. 324).

Bonnefoy, like Buber, has also said that we make contact with "essential being" by means of our relation to "unessential being," thus stressing the conviction that any dimension of our life, however seemingly banal or trivial, may become a presence. "In our contact with being," says Bonnefoy, "we cannot do without the mediation of specific beings" (*R*, p. 126). The "beings" on which Bonnefoy focuses, however (and hence the particular way in which he envisions presence) vary, as might be expected, over the years of his development. In lectures, Bonnefoy sometimes tries to evoke what he means by presence through the use of the philosophical distinction between *quiddité*—that is, what makes a thing what it is; its formal definition or essence—and *eccéité*—the sudden emergence of the thing from behind the veil of its definition; the bold imposition of its presence; the principle by means of which essences are made individual. And certainly one function of the poem is to try to bring a universal category into the realm of specific experience. On the other hand, the experience of presence is also an intuition of the universal in the particular, as I hope to show in a moment. I have suggested elsewhere that the distinction Bonnefoy establishes in Shakespeare's work between the "readiness" of Hamlet and the "ripeness" of Lear might be applied, cautiously, to his own development.¹¹ It does seem that the work before the sixties, and in particular the poems of *Douve* (1953) and *Hier régnaient désert* (*Yesterday's Desert Dominion*, 1958), are marked by an iconoclastic violence, by the "negative theology" that aims at discovering the world of presence through the destruction of representations. Even this very destructiveness must be contested if the poet is to avoid some "fine art" of disillusionment. In a first phase of his development (which is not without its affinities with contemporary deconstructionist tendencies), Bonnefoy is trying to burn away the hard bark of mediation, to expose the illusory protection of the idea, in order to venture to a depth, to a calcinated earth where, though "images no longer work," a new departure might be envisioned. Presence is often evoked in poems that have an unmistakably allegorical quality, however. The salamander of *Douve*, Bonnefoy's first book of poems, for instance, becomes the symbol of a silent adherence to simple earth, and as such, assures a disillusioned resurrection from the world of the imaginary which has been put to the flames:

Lieu de la salamandre

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 qu'une pierre,
Mais je voyais son coeur 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.

Que j'aime qui s'accorde aux astres par l'inerte
Masse de tout son corps,
Que j'aime qui attend l'heure de sa victoire,
Et qui retient son souffle et tient au sol. (*P*, p. 89)

Place of the Salamander

The startled salamander freezes
And feigns death.
This is the first step of consciousness among the stones,
The purest myth,
A great fire passed through, which is spirit.

The salamander was halfway up
The wall, in the light from our windows.
Its look had turned to stone,
But I saw its heart beating eternal.

O my accomplice and my thought, allegory
Of all that is pure,
How I love what draws up thus in silence
The only force of joy.

How I love what is in harmony with the stars through the inert
Mass of its whole body,
How I love what awaits the hour of its victory,
And holds its breath and clings to the ground.

The poem is first of all located in a common experience: the spotting of a salamander frozen on a wall. This simple experience, which is described in lines 1 and 2, and 6 through 9, opens, however, into “thoughts” and “ideas” which connect the salamander to a “myth” and allow it to become “allegorical.” Doubtless Bonnefoy is not unaware that the salamander has, through historical tradition, developed a symbolic identity: the creature who is able to pass through fire unscathed and who survives devastating floods is closely associated with the principle of resurrection. The power of this poem in part resides, therefore, in the co-existence of the banal and the profound; a moment of one’s daily life merges with, but is not overwhelmed by, a long tradition of representation. The salamander stands for what survives in the iconoclastic fury of Bonnefoy’s early tendencies toward deconstruction and disillusionment. Anticipating death with stony resignation, the salamander resides in silence and vigilant immobility. Its “mythic” or “allegorical” function, which is to symbolize spiritual wakefulness and persistence even in the face of death, is nonetheless seen as a “first step” of consciousness. Though clearly the pathway to more wide-ranging associations—with eternity and the immortal stars—its centrality is couched in the context of a characteristic “negativity,” since it is silent, motionless, restrained, waiting.

It seems to me that by the mid-sixties, Bonnefoy’s life and poetic emphasis clearly change. He comes to distance himself a bit from the earlier preoccupation with presence as revelation of human finitude and from the “words of war” raised against the world of the image. “I used to think,” he says in an essay of 1967 called “Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé,” “that words, desiccated by their conceptual use, failed to convey presence, were forever limited to a ‘negative theology.’ Now I sense that some sort of archaeology is possible, which would reveal, piece by piece, the essential elements of our form” (*E*, p. 91). “Fire and the name of fire *are*, so that life might have a center” (*E*, p. 90). The experiences of place, of shared love, of trust in another human being seem to have provided access to an apprehension of the unity of being, which the poet experiences, in this second phase, with a peace-

ful and radiant conviction. The theater of destruction and self-doubt, the evocations of terror and fragmentation yield to scenes of gentle, erotic binding and trustful participation in plenitude. (There is even an increasing confidence in the image itself, as a poem such as “On a Pietà of Tintoretto” from the book *Words in Stone* [1965] clearly shows.) A woman’s red dress is now added to the stone as a source of illumination and guidance, and poems such as “The Myrtle” (*Words in Stone*) are richly suggestive of the entry, through eroticism, into what Georges Bataille has called “the continuity of being”:

Le Myrte

Parfois je te savais la terre, je buvais
 Sur tes lèvres l’angoisse des fontaines
 Quand elle sourd des pierres chaudes, et l’été
 Dominait haut la pierre heureuse et le buveur.

Parfois je te disais de myrte et nous brûlions
 L’arbre de tous tes gestes tout un jour.
 C’étaient de grands feux brefs de lumière vestale,
 Ainsi je t’inventais parmi tes cheveux clairs.

Tout un grand été nul avait séché nos rêves,
 Rouillé nos voix, accru nos corps, défait nos fers.
 Parfois le lit tournait comme une barque libre
 Qui gagne lentement le plus haut de la mer. (*P*, p. 203)

The Myrtle

Sometimes I knew you as earth, and I would drink
 From your lips the anguish of the fountains
 When it wells up from the warm stones, and summer
 Would loom high above the happy stone and the drinker.

Sometimes I would say you were myrtle and we would spend
 A whole day burning the tree of all your gestures.
 These were great brief fires of vestal light,
 Thus I would invent you amid your bright hair.

A whole vast empty summer had dried out our dreams,
 Rusted our voices, strengthened our bodies, loosened our chains.

Sometimes the bed would shift like a ship set free
And which slowly moves out to high sea.

Once again, the poem begins with the perfectly mundane: one drinks from a fountain, then builds and watches a fire. The text is in striking contrast to the poem on the salamander, however, through the absence this time of the overtly allegorical and mythic element that characterizes the earlier work. Furthermore, the emphasis in the earlier poem on restriction and wakefulness yields here to a sense of erotic expansiveness and repose, signaled in the last lines through the notion of the marriage bed “moving out to high sea.” Here the poet abandons the impersonal and rather abstract formula of the poem on the salamander (“How I love what”) and instead addresses a “Thou” which emerges intermittently and in different forms—Bonnefoy organizes the text around the repetition of the initiatory word “sometimes”—and these various manifestations of presence are represented by the elemental realities of earth, water, and fire which are evoked in succession. Here again, there can be little doubt that Bonnefoy knows about the historical significance of myrtle—the fact that this evergreen shrub was sacred to Venus, the goddess of love, and that, while connected with resurrection and life-in-death, it is also closely associated with love, marriage, and bounty. That the myrtle in Bonnefoy’s poem keeps some of its traditional erotic symbolism is confirmed by the fact that the gestures—of bending to drink, of watching the flash of fire—are nicely ambiguous and could be read as suggesting the fundamental physicality of the sexual act itself. But this is the richness of presence—and this time evoked on a much less allegorical and stylized level—that it lead from one thing to another, that it encourage the poet, as a part of his “inventiveness,” to see hair in fire, or fire in hair, or to feel lips in earth’s water, water in lips.

There are three common criticisms levelled against Bonnefoy’s notion of presence. The first is that the affirmation of a world of presence is often presented in a highly abstract, even “conceptual” diction. The second is that Bonnefoy does not so much recreate the reality of presence in his poems as simply designate, or even list, its manifestations in the life of the poet. The third criticism is that Bonnefoy does not give the reader enough intimate detail about his personal experience, that the *specifically* human face is effaced or even obliterated in the highly “essentialized” landscape of his poetic world.

I have already spoken at length to the first criticism. There can be no doubt that there is a profoundly paradoxical dimension to Bonnefoy's work. As a product of history who speaks of the importance of moments outside time, and as a speaker in a personal, idiosyncratic tongue that nonetheless establishes a significant dialogue with the language that a tradition has erected and embellished, Yves Bonnefoy has elaborated a poetic speech that places itself both inside and outside a long line of Western representation. But all great poetry, it could be argued, is born from just such a fundamental contradiction, and we might profitably discuss this poet's work from the perspective of the way in which he confronts and seeks to come to terms with the contradictions that divide him. Clearly, the poet must at every moment both depart from the acquired and the known, thus venturing toward openness and renewal, and, at the same time, remain within a recognizable system of signs in order to communicate with others. If the poem were only the expression of what is initially experienced outside words, it would, presumably, be totally incomprehensible; if, on the other hand, it were only a description of this experience, it would become purely formulaic or conceptual, a kind of prose statement. Bonnefoy's poetry is neither of these things exclusively, and yet something of both worlds exists and may be discerned in it.

Two responses might be made to the charge—which was often levelled at T. S. Eliot as well—that, particularly in the later poetry, Bonnefoy tends to present the reader with an accumulation of lists, that he simply points to things, and that the evocation of presence is therefore insufficient: a kind of insistence rather than a rediscovery through words; an intellectual image which, through repetition, hardens into a verbal fetish. There is first of all, of course, Bonnefoy's own testimony that as his relation to language developed, as he attempted to "excavate" to the level of origins, to the place of absolute simplicity, he found the few, deep, elemental words that, in his view, are the "pillars upholding the vault of speech" (*E*, p. 90). For Bonnefoy, these words are so fully steeped in what they name as to become for the poet who uses them more signified than signifier. Thus the poem strives to designate and retain only the "simple abundance" of the earth all men share. And the poet therefore proposes "no longer to try to reabsorb what is in a formula, but, on the contrary, to reabsorb the formula in a participation in the real" (*I*, p. 250). Secondly, one might suggest that the "insufficiency" in the evocation of presence—

the mere listing of things—is in part intentional, a deliberate effort to prevent the poem from becoming an end, a world, in itself. Shouldn't the reader *not* be absorbed in the glimpses of presence that the writing may vouchsafe, since these are only moments in a poem, and—Bonnefoy will never cease telling us this—the poem does not matter as much as life does? Doesn't he then deliberately send us away from the work and into our own life, giving us hints only, following—or leading us forth—with mere glimmers?

No human face in Yves Bonnefoy's world? It is certainly true that this poet tends to de-emphasize the particular differences that exist between people (and that are often explored by the artist who fusses over what he thinks sets him apart or makes him unique and superior) in favor of those experiences that are universal. His poetics aims at a pure ontology, through which words seek to elaborate a "common speech," so that "no longer being concerned with anything separated, closed off, they [words] dissipate the last enchantments of the mythical self, they speak of the simplest of human desires in the presence of the simplest of objects, which is being; they bring together the universal self" (*NR*, pp. 279–80). On the other hand, the many essays that Bonnefoy has written as homages to his friends—the pieces on Gaëton Picon, Paul Celan, Georges Seferis, and Paul de Man—all bear witness to the importance in his life of those he has loved. Evoking the blue gaze, the prominent forehead, the ready smile of Paul de Man, for instance, Bonnefoy says: "a presence began to make itself felt, with all the mystery that this word entails."¹² But if friendship is clearly the arena for presence, it is also true that Bonnefoy is the least sentimental of writers and one of the furthest removed from the cult of personality and the fascination with individuality as such. And the poems, it seems to me, by expanding what is specific in personal experience, by disentangling the over-determined understanding of it, by muting the aspects of a particular destiny, open their richness to what everyone has lived or felt—they sketch out the face and the hands that are everyman's.

I imagine that future Bonnefoy studies will need to focus more on how specific poems function and less on statements made by Bonnefoy himself about his concept of poetry and about his intentions. The issue of presence, once decoded and placed within the body of intertexts that constitutes and sustains it, does however remain, it seems to me, the area where what readers have felt with particular intensity must come into play. Let me evoke Buber once again. Seeking in the postscript to the second edition of *I and Thou*, written

in 1957, to explain the emergence of spirit that “has not yet entered the world but is ready to do so, and becomes present to us,” Buber says that this he “cannot point out” but only “indicate indirectly” through “certain events in man’s life which can scarcely be described,” but which experience spirit “as meeting.” These efforts at explanation may, however, prove futile, he tells us, and when all else fails, “there is nothing for me but to appeal, my reader, to the witness of your own mysteries—buried, perhaps, but still attainable” (p. 127).

NOTES

1. *Entretiens sur la poésie* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1981), p. 130. Hereafter I will be referring to this text in the body of my paper as *E*. To facilitate matters, I will refer to Bonnefoy’s major works in the following way: *L’Improbable et autres essais* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1980) is *I*; *Le Nuage rouge: Essais sur la poétique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1977) is *NR*; *Rome 1630: L’Horizon du premier Baroque* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970) is *R*; *Poèmes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1978) is *P*.
2. The essay “Shakespeare et le poète français” was first published in the French review *Preuves*, 100 (June 1959), 42–48. An English translation of the piece appeared in *Encounter*, 105 (June 1962), 38–43.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 324–25.
4. Yves Bonnefoy, *Gilbert Lely* (Paris: Thierry Bouchard, 1979), p. 8.
5. Steven Winspur, “Yves Bonnefoy’s Three Strikes Against the Sign,” *Romanic Review*, 77, No. 2 (March, 1986), 160.
6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 109.
7. Yves Bonnefoy, *La Présence et l’Image* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983), p. 12.
8. John T. Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 18, 164–66.
9. See, for instance, Jacques Gadeau, “La Question de l’autrui dans *Du Mouvement et de l’immobilité de Douve*” and Didier Coste, “La Deuxième Personne comme personne du lyrique chez Yves Bonnefoy,” in *Poétique et Poésie d’Yves Bonnefoy*, Cahiers de l’Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, No. 18 (Pau, 1983), pp. 3–9, 11–22, resp. For an exhaustive and compelling discussion of the general question of

alterity in Bonnefoy's work, see Richard Stamelman, " 'Le Cri qui perce la musique': Le Surgissement de l'altérité dans l'oeuvre d'Yves Bonnefoy," *Sud*, 15 (1985), 171–210.

10. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Collier Books, 1987), p. 98.

11. *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy*, pp. 107–108 and in my essay "L'Idée de l'Incarnation dans la poésie d'Yves Bonnefoy," *Sud*, 15 (1985), 68–80.

12. Yves Bonnefoy, "Paul de Man," in *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, *Yale French Studies*, 69 (1985), 18.