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The Unseizable Landscape of the Real: The Poetry and Poetics of Philippe Jaccottet

Abstract

For Philippe Jaccottet the real is the force of life itself. It is also a rapid, fleeting perception made all the more ephemeral by the mimetic imprecision of language. The essence of the real, since it is always other than what is said about it, can never be fully represented. This alterity of the real and the fundamental lack it announces provoke poetic language. By means of a poetics of passage, of passing through, of a *travers*, Jaccottet confronts the otherness of the unseizable landscape and of the elusive language in which he dwells. In the meditative, prose poem *A Travers un verger* (1975) he traverses the mysterious space of an orchard and a text, of trembling blossoms and quivering words, in an effort to understand the opposition between the limits of language and the limitlessness of the real. Out of the experience of landscape and the language that describes it—out of the epiphany of the real that a flowering orchard sustains but that images only fail to seize—"something" is perceived: an ineffable, indescribable "something" that dwells in the *beyond* of representation.

Keywords

Philippe Jaccottet, force, perception, ephemeral, essence, real, fundamental, poetic language, *travers*, unseizable landscape, meditative, prose, poem, *A Travers un verger*, space, orchard, language, epiphany, orchard, something, ineffable, indescribable, beyond, representation

THE UNSEIZABLE LANDSCAPE OF THE REAL:
THE POETRY AND POETICS OF PHILIPPE JACCOTTET

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Le réel se creuse à l'infini, jusqu'à l'invisible.¹
—Philippe Jaccottet, *Une Transaction secrète*

Since the end of the Second World War French poets have been fascinated by the intensity and beauty of the natural world. Turning away from a symbolist and surrealist heritage that emphasized the hegemony of the Imaginary and of experiences of dream and the unconscious, they have returned to natural reality, to the elemental, earthly, material things of the world that they call *le Dehors* (*the Outside*).² They have been drawn to the simplicity as well as to the radiance of different landscapes and terrains, celebrating the expressive joy of a meadow, as does Francis Ponge, or the simple beauty of a garden, as do Jean Tortel and Pierre-Albert Jourdan, or the intense presence of a hidden, undiscovered hinterland, an *arrière-pays*, as does Yves Bonnefoy, or the elemental barrenness of the desert, as do Edmond Jabès and Lorand Gaspar.³ Fascinated by the ephemerality and transparency of the real world, by its openness to light and wind and its responsiveness to the probings of a poetic consciousness seeking to represent it through the manipulations of word and image, these poets search for what Yves Bonnefoy calls “cet absolu / Qui vibre dans le pré parmi les ombres.”⁴ To see the absolute concealed within the folds of the real, to experience the presence surging momentarily into being from a torn leaf or the cry of a distant bird, to feel the trembling, short-lived radiance of almond trees in bloom, to watch billowing clouds enshroud the sun—in other words, to perceive the flash of the real against the night of death and pain that

characterize the human condition, and at the moment it encounters a language powerless to seize it, this is the goal of a modern poetry of immanent being like that of Philippe Jaccottet.

1. The Alterity of the Real.

Jaccottet is a poet who seeks to look into “le visage insoutenable du réel” (“the unbearable face of the real”), a face all the more striking because it is unadorned, elemental, and of the utmost simplicity.⁵ The real is the force of life itself, as Jaccottet observes:

Pour nous qui vivons de plus en plus entourés de masques et de schémas intellectuels, et qui étouffons dans la prison qu'ils élèvent autour de nous, le regard du poète est le belier qui renverse ces murs et nous rend, ne serait-ce qu'un instant, le réel; et, avec le réel, une *chance de vie*. (EM, p. 301)⁶

Poetry, turned as it is toward the real in all its visible forms, is committed to capturing “a fullness, a diversity, an intensity, a depth . . . of *reality*” (EM, p. 300). The profound and essential realism of poetry is not merely an attempt to catalogue the features of the visible world; it is

une attention si profonde au visible qu'elle finit nécessairement par se heurter à ses limites; à l'illimité que le visible semble tantôt contenir, tantôt cacher, refuser ou révéler. (EM, p. 304)⁷

The real, while open to the poet's gaze, while an intense experience of the instant in all its immediacy—“nous ne sommes réels que dans la rencontre du présent: là où la proue fend l'eau” (“we are real only in the encounter with the present, there where the prow slices through the water,” S, p. 110), Jaccottet writes—can never, however, be completely possessed. Poetry offers no knowledge or mastery of the world.⁸ It is only a rapid, fleeting perception, made all the more ephemeral by the mimetic imprecision of language. The poem, Jaccottet observes, is

une manière de parler du monde qui n'explique pas le monde, car ce serait le figer et l'anéantir, mais qui le montre tout nourri de son refus de répondre. (ES, p. 153)⁹

Because the real is ultimately limitless, unseizable, and unknowable for a poet who, by his own admission, is without knowledge, living in a state of “ignorance,” of *non-savoir*, and because it is an enigmatic plenitude beyond the power of words or images to fix meanings or represent events, Jaccottet refers to the real by means of abstract or universal terms like *l'illimité* (“the limitless”), *le centre* (“the center”), *l'invisible* (“the invisible”), *l'insaisissable* (“the unseizable”), or the “insituable partout présent” (“the unlocatable that is everywhere present,” ES, p. 136). While the *illimité* is only vaguely perceptible as

le pressentiment de quelque chose d'essentiel qui n'était autre que notre rapport avec ce qui est en dehors de tout rapport, notre lien avec ce qui ne se peut lier (O, p. 95),¹⁰

the *insaisissable* is a phenomenon of absence:

ce-chant que l'on ne saisit pas, cet espace où l'on ne peut demeurer, cette clef qu'il faut toujours reperdre. Cessant d'être insaisissable, cessant d'être douteuse, cessant d'être ailleurs (faut-il dire: cessant de n'être pas?), elle s'abîme, elle n'est plus. (PA, p. 148)¹¹

We are never more real, more alive, and more certain of reality than in those moments when we encounter the “impossible place” (ES, p. 147), the incomprehensible, enigmatic opening that the *insaisissable* announces. The most one can say about the real, as we shall see, is that it is “something,” (“quelque chose”) always other than what one has just perceived or written about it: “Une beauté lointaine, imprenable, une lumière inconnue. Portant toujours un autre nom que celui qu'on s'apprêtait à lui donner” (“A distant, impregnable beauty, an unknown light. Continuously carrying another name than the one we were ready to give it,” ATV, p. 13). What defines the unseizability and the elusiveness of the real is its fundamental otherness. The poem is a space through which this otherness passes, a necessary space, for without it the *alterity* of the real could never be expressed. Poetry is not the reconstruction or re-presentation of reality; it does not give voice to something that has been perceived but rather to something that has *not* been perceived, and which needs the poem in order to manifest its otherness:

Je me dis que le travail consistait beaucoup moins à “bâti,r” à “forger,” à “é,riger” une oeuvre qu’à permettre à un courant de passer, qu’à enlever des obstacles, à effacer des traces; comme si, en fin de compte, le poème idéal devait se faire oublier au profit d’*autre chose* qui, toutefois, ne saurait se manifester qu’à *travers* lui. (TS, p. 322, my emphasis)¹²

The poetics of passage, of passing through, of *à travers*, are important to Jaccottet. The *insaisissable* is an enigma that the poet’s consciousness traverses without grasping or representing. It resists figuration. Through [*à travers*] the poet’s sensibility and through the space of the poem moves something real, that is to say, something instantaneous, enigmatic, and *other* which the poet tries to understand and explain, but which his images only deform or lose: “L’image cache le réel, distrait le regard, et quelquefois d’autant plus qu’elle est plus précise, plus séduisante pour l’un ou l’autre de nos sens et pour la rêverie” (PFA, p. 68).¹³ And yet this indefinite something, this “quelque chose—which may even be too precise a description, since it is “quelque chose, à peine quelque chose,” as Jaccottet writes of the orchard in *A travers un verger* (p. 11)—is the “insaisissable réel” (TS, p. 289) which alone makes language possible. For it is precisely what cannot be spoken that makes us speak. We can only talk about what we cannot say. Absence provokes and sustains discourse: “Je dévore comme nourriture souhaitable ce qui n’est peut-être qu’absence” (“I devour as desirable sustenance what is perhaps only absence,” S, p. 65). Through [*à travers*] the encounter with what is unseizable and unrepresentable we come into language. It is not being that dwells in language but the *lack* of being: that absence, that inexpressibility, that unseizability which alone constitute the real and thus inform our expression of it. As Roger Munier observes, it is precisely that which makes us speak that is ultimately effaced and abolished by our act of speaking, for the being of the real is ultimately *insaisissable*:

L’Etre n’est rien, hors les choses qui sont. On voit bien—on sent, on touche, on entend—les choses qui sont, mais on ne voit pas *qu’elles* sont. Leur être, qui fait qu’elles sont, reste caché, s’abolit au profit d’elles qui sont, de leur parution pour nous. . . . L’Etre qui fait qu’elles nous apparaissent comme étant aussitôt s’abolit, s’efface devant elles qui sont, qui seules occupent le champ de la

vision. **Je ne verrai jamais l'être de la rose, mais seulement la rose qui est. Son être n'est rien d'elle, qui est. Telle est l'absence opérante, l'insistance abimée, de l'Être. C'est elle sans doute, avant toute autre invite, qui déjà nous fait parler.**¹⁴

The appearance of a thing eclipses and effaces the being which that appearance was supposed to embody. The unseizable absence of being, resistant to any effort to speak it or give it figurative form, remains outside the limits of our words. We cannot speak it; we can only express the impossibility of its being spoken. The nature of the *insaisissable*, of that which initiates language but is not transported into expression by the language-act, reveals that the perceived plentitude of a landscape, like that of an orchard of blossoming almond trees, or of a summer meadow in flower, or of a snow-covered mountain peak enveloped in mist and clouds, is nothing, after all, but an irretrievable absence. It is a reality which, because we have no way to speak it, to figure it, to recreate or relive it, except by pointing to our very powerlessness to do so, can only be experienced as a lack. There is nothing to grasp, and yet this nothing is all there is. For without this absence, which no image can describe, the real would not be what it is: namely, the otherness that our language brings forth into being. What makes us speak, Munier observes, is the elemental absence that language discloses at the heart of reality, an absence of which we are unaware until language, through its failure to make it present, reveals it to us. Words continuously circle a place of emptiness:

Absent du monde, ce qui nous fait parler l'est par force aussi bien de ce que nous disons. Il ne se "dit" que lorsque nous parlons, mais non dans ce que nous disons. Aussitôt biffé par ce que nous disons et dès que nous disons, mis à l'écart et sans voix par le mouvement même de dire. . . . Comme on ne dit jamais que la chose qu'il signale, on ne dit aussi que sa perte, à lui. Le dire est sa perte, son écart. Il n'est dire qu'en cet écart—qu'il suscite, qu'il anime tant qu'il dure, qu'il soutient de sa perte. (Munier, p. 64).¹⁵

The real that calls on us to speak is effaced by the discourse it brings into being. The real can only be spoken by that which fails to speak it.

Similarly, for Jaccottet the essence of what is real, since it is

The intensity of pure unmediated reality throws one back, *faute de mieux*, to images: “J’ai de la peine à renoncer aux images” (“I have difficulty renouncing images,” P, p. 137). The poet, whose ambivalence toward images prevents him from being completely seduced by their beauty, their eloquence, and, in contrast to the simplicity of the real, their excessiveness, recognizes, however, that they can indicate the directions things in the world take. While images can never replace things, they indeed show “how things open themselves to us and how we enter into them” (PFA, p. 17). Nevertheless, in Jaccottet’s poems the mimetic power of the image is greatly diminished. All that the image can say about the thing it describes is simply “c’est cela, et c’est toujours autre chose encore” (“it’s that, and it’s always something else as well,” PFA, p. 18). The most successful image, therefore, is the one that refers to the otherness it cannot figure, to the unknown, whether distant or proximate, that it does not know how to recognize or master. Words, asks Jaccottet in one of his poems,

devraient-ils donc faire sentir
ce qu’ils n’atteignent pas, qui leur échappe,
dont ils ne sont pas maîtres, leur envers? (ALH, p. 82)²⁰

If landscape, as Joachim Ritter observes, is “nature made esthetically present,” an untouched space, sometimes foreign, sometimes hostile, which because it is made into something “beautiful, grand, sublime . . . becomes an esthetic object,”²¹ then the image that has been opened to the otherness of the real and forced self-consciously to confront its own metaphoricity is freed from the estheticizing impulse that transforms nature into landscape. Jaccottet’s experience of the *insaisissable*, therefore, works against the esthetic presence that language and art seek to establish. By presenting the *insaisissable* as a phenomenon of radical difference, unknowable and unrepresentable except by abstract or deictic signifiers of minimal meaning, like *quelque chose*, or *cela*, or *l’illimité*, Jaccottet tries to ensure that the images he uses to describe the natural landscape will not produce an esthetic presence; his images are “lointaines, menacées, précaires, à l’intérieur d’un ensemble plus rude et plus opaque; pour éviter de les ‘monter en épingle,’ c’est-à-dire de les figer, de les dénaturer” (ATV, p. 36).²²

II. Through the Orchard of the Real.

Walking through a landscape, ever vigilant to the myriad events that transpire there, Jaccottet seeks to “saisir le langage évasif du paysage où je vivais” (“Seize the evasive language of the landscape where I have lived,” TS, p. 321). To this end, he strives to find words that will not betray what the countryside is communicating to him. But what calls out to be spoken, thus causing the poet to speak, is never carried over into the discourse he creates. The call of the real is abolished by the language that expresses it.²³ Things translated into words are easy to manipulate and to substitute one for the other, because they have lost their being-in-the-world, as Jaccottet affirms: “facile à dire! et trop facile de jongler / avec le poids des choses une fois changées en mots!” (“Easy to say! and too easy to juggle with the weight of things / once turned into words!,” ALH, p. 77).

The prose poem and the self-conscious meditation which together compose Jaccottet’s work *A travers un verger* (1975) are an effort to resuscitate the memory of a vibrant and radiant experience of landscape: first, the orchard of flowering almond trees near his home in Grignan in the Drôme, through which the poet had walked one grey April day; second, the poetic text, abandoned several times between May 1971 and January 1974, through which Jaccottet, struggling with the inadequacy of word and image, tried in a different manner to find his way.²⁴ In both instances, the poet passes through a space, either of quivering blossoms, on the one hand, or of trembling words, on the other. It is the passage *through* the orchard, *à travers le verger*—both physically and mentally, in reality and in memory, on foot and with pen in hand—that brings Jaccottet to understand the opposition between the limits of writing and the limitlessness of the real. Concerning the object of his perception, namely the trembling petals of the almond blossoms, Jaccottet has no illusions, for as he writes in one of his poems: “je passe, je m’étonne, et je ne peux en dire plus” (PN, p. 22).²⁵

Several times in *A travers un verger* Jaccottet tries to reconstruct his experience of that cloudy April day. In retrospect he knows that two things are true: first, that the splendor of the orchard filled him with wonder, and second, that unable to comprehend its engima he has failed to find the “right image” for it (pp. 23–24). Wonder and failure are mixed as they are in so many of Jaccottet’s landscapes. The problem may lie in the poet’s dependence on a memory that resonates with nostalgic longing. His landscape description is not done *sur le*

motif; from the outset it lacks immediacy. Year after year, at the beginning of each spring Jaccottet had intended, he tells us, to describe the almond trees at their fugitive moment of flowering so as to remember what he calls their “lesson” (p. 9). But always some other thing or event has distracted him. When he does finally put paper to pen, the blossoms have long dropped from the branches. It is no surprise, then, that the trees have now become “une espèce différente d’amandiers” (“a different kind of almond tree”) whose flowers seem more confused, more “insaisissable,” more akin to “un brouillard à peine blanc” (“a barely white mist,” p. 10).

Through the tentative intertwinings of word and image in the first part of *A travers un verger*, Jaccottet attempts to capture the essence of the vibrant, luminous orchard he has experienced. It is a difficult task, because the words do not always seem right; they are off-target, hesitant, misleading, wrong. Jaccottet offers a word, a thought, then qualifies and modifies it before moving on, with a sense of resigned failure, to some other subject: “Je ne veux rien affirmer, ici, en ce moment. Je risque un mot, une image, une pensée, je les retire ou les abandonne, c’est tout, puis je m’en vais” (“I do not want to affirm anything here, in this moment. I venture a word, an image, a thought, I withdraw or abandon them, that’s all; then I leave,” pp. 17–18). An example of this poetics of rectification is evident in Jaccottet’s continual effort to capture the trembling whiteness of the almond blossoms. He struggles to evoke the delicate, shimmering multiplicity of their petals in the most tentative, halting, and questioning manner, and with the lightest possible touch, as if too rich a vocabulary, too intricate a syntax, too “poetic” or “painterly” a description would make the perception disappear. The flowering of the trees, Jaccottet writes, is “above all of a white less pure and less dazzling than that of a single flower, seen from close up” (p. 10). It is “un brouillard à peine blanc, en suspension au-dessus de la terre encore terrestre” (“a barely white mist hanging over the dull earth,” p. 10). It is a “bourdonnement blanc” (“white buzzing”). Not only is the landscape in a state of blurred suspension, so is the language describing it. Even the adjective “white” is called into question:

“Blanc” est déjà trop dire, qui évoque une surface nette, renvoyant un éclat blanc. Là, c’était sans aucun éclat (et pas transparent pour autant). Timide, gris, terne? Pas davantage. Quelque chose de multiple, cela oui, un essaim, de multiplié: des

milliers de petites choses, ou présences, ou taches, ou ailes, légères—en suspens, de nouveau, comme à chaque printemps—; une sorte d'ébullition fraîche; un brouillard, s'il existait un brouillard sans humidité, sans mélancolie, où l'on ne risque pas de se perdre; quelque chose, à peine quelque chose. . . .

Essaim, écume, neige: les vieilles images reviennent, elles sont pour le moment les moins disparates. Rien de mieux. (pp. 10–11)²⁶

The passage moves notationally from subject to subject, affirming a perception and then qualifying it in an effort to make it more precise, more exact. Parenthetical expressions, questions, sentence fragments, dashes, qualifying prepositions or adverbs (*sans, à peine*), marks of ellipsis, all work to undo the tendency of words to say too much. But in the movement toward greater precision and exactness, the image of the landscape becomes more indistinct and unfocused. Mentally walking in circles around the almond trees, trying poetically to seize the luminous simplicity of what in another time and another language might have been called the “epiphany of the real,” Jaccottet wends his way from image to image, passing from noun to noun—“quelque chose,” “essaim,” “présences,” “taches,” “ailes,” “ébullition,” “brouillard,” “écume,” “neige”—with little or no further elaboration. When all is said and done, the best description of the shimmering orchard is the most vague, the most tentative, the most imprecise and immediate, the one that, like a breeze lightly touching the almond blossoms, says in the most tentative and quivering way that they are “quelque chose’ *à peine* quelque chose . . .” (“something, *barely* something,” p. 11, my emphasis).

This description is only a first attempt. A few paragraphs later Jaccottet returns to his experience of the orchard. This time, however, adding a new image to the representation that forces the other elements of the landscape to rearrange themselves, he creates a different descriptive configuration:

Peut-être était-ce tout de même assez pareil à de la neige, à un nuage de neige en suspens, arrêté un instant dans sa chute, au-dessus du sol—à cause de ce blanc pas éclatant et encore un peu froid, frileux, et de la multiplicité des fleurs. Un murmure de neige? (p. 12)²⁷

With haiku-like intensity subsequent paragraphs briefly evoke other images which are then quickly abandoned. The almond trees first resemble a flock of birds preparing to fly away; then, a hovering presence that has been momentarily immobilized; finally, a nebula, a milky cloud, of stars (pp. 13–14). And behind this chain of images lies the poet's awareness that the landscape of the real he is trying vainly to represent—through a poetic discourse whose errancy and tentativeness are mimetic of the fragile nature of reality—is too light, too airy, too immaterial to be seized:

Sans poids, presque sans forme, et surprenant, émerveillant chaque fois. Passé presque inaperçu. Quelque chose qui se poserait là, précaire, une brève rumeur. (p. 13)²⁸

The orchard is an enigma; it is a *cela*, a *quelque chose*, a *rien*, so ephemeral that it defies memory and representation. Only these neutral pronouns, these signifiers of minimal and laconic assertion spoken in an instant as it were, can possibly express the flash of the real as it bursts forth from the orchard.²⁹ The whiteness of the almond petals seems to emerge from nothingness itself (p. 15) and to be sustained by the insubstantiality of the air. The orchard exists on the threshold of nonbeing, that space of absence, lack, and unseizability into which the landscape event recedes after its brief appearance and without which the orchard would not be what it is. Through (*à travers*) its very disappearance into the realm of the *insaisissable*, the orchard comes to express itself. The real is precisely that which it cannot say it is and which is therefore articulated by the expressiveness of this non-saying. It is the surging light of being which the shutter of language is too slow to capture, but whose presence is contained in the trace it leaves behind. The impossible task Jaccottet has set for himself is the translation into words of a perception that has occurred in the blink of an eye (ATV, p. 18). In his chance encounter with the radiance of the real, as it explodes in the snowy cloud of the almond trees, the poet experiences “ce qui scintille et va s'éteindre” (“what sparkles and grows dim,” P, p. 65), a plenitude that in an instant will be transformed into emptiness, a presence that is only real because it is an absence.

The beginning of the second part of *A travers un verger* with its indictment of images—“Méfie-toi des images. Méfie-toi des fleurs.

Légères comme les paroles” (“Beware of images. Beware of flowers. Light as words,” p. 23)—calls into question the landscape description of the work’s first part. In the realm of discourse and in the domain of memory everything is by necessity mediated; everything is either image or word. Nothing exists without the assistance of intermediaries, without a poetics of the *à travers*:

Qu’ils disent légereté ou qu’ils disent douleur, les mots ne sont jamais que des mots. Faciles. A de certains moments, devant certaines réalités, ils m’irritent, ou ils me font horreur; et moi *à travers* eux, qui continue à m’en servir: cette façon d’être assis à une table, le dos tourné aux autres et au monde, et de n’être plus capable, à la fin, que de cela. . . . (p. 28, my emphasis)³⁰

Words turn the poet away from the real, the particular, the immediate, from “l’intimement vécu” (“the intimately lived,” S, p. 156). They drive him into another world distant from the real one; here, he is forced to work not with sensual or immediate forms of expression but with “une poussière ou une suie de mots” (“the dust or soot of words,” ATV, p. 46), crumbling traces or blackened residues of absent things:

Comme on est vite entraîné, en écrivant, en rêvant, en “pensant,” loin des choses, loin du réel! Comme se dissout vite un saveur qui est la seule chose essentielle! (ATV, p. 46)³¹

III. The Face in the Orchard.

Throughout *A travers un verger*, and in particular in the second part, Jaccottet’s vision of the real is consistently ambivalent. He oscillates between one pole and another, lamenting, for example, the loss of the real that words provoke but then cautiously asserting that certain “true” words can protect us, can help us to live (p. 31), can articulate “a very weak residue of hope” (p. 29). He criticizes the facticity of images, but then lets his text proliferate with several highly imaginative metaphors: images that show the impact of death on writing (it is like a stick pushed into an anthill); images that represent the role of words (they resemble crisscrossing ferries, tugboats, and barges, whose intersecting paths create “a network”); images that represent the nature of life (it is like a work of music in which the dissonances outnumber the harmonies). At one point, Jaccottet admits that there is indeed a place for images in writing as long as they are articulated with the same precarity, finitude, and mortality that

menace the real in which they participate. But the most striking and repeated image of *A travers un verger*—the one that perhaps best explains Jaccottet’s ambivalence and vacillation—is an affirmation of the fundamental duality of being:

J’ai toujours eu dans l’esprit, sans bien m’en rendre compte, une sorte de balance. Sur un plateau il y avait la douleur, la mort, sur l’autre la beauté de la vie. Le premier portait toujours un poids beaucoup plus lourd, le second, presque rien que d’impondérable. Mais il m’arrivait de croire que l’impondérable pût l’emporter, par moments. Je vois à présent que la plupart des pages que j’ai écrites sont sous le signe de cette pesée, de cette oscillation. (pp. 25–26)³²

Ideally, Jaccottet would like to bring the two scales together, even fuse them, if such a synthesis of the forces of beauty and death were possible. He seeks a vision of the real that will simultaneously sing the world’s beauty and mourn its loss. Death and beauty constitute the real; but they are beyond the limits of figurative language. The poetic work, the prose text, even the description of the orchard, are insipid and irritating because they enclose themselves in an hermetically sealed world of artificial light, while outside, in the world of the real, sickness and time “work to extract screams, to flay” (p. 35). Death undoes writing, melts the glue of sentences, rips the page into shreds:

C’est comme si un corps réel, ignoblement maltraité par les années, rien que par les années . . . , déchirait la page où sans peine, sans risque, les mots voudraient continuer à s’écrire; et tout à coup, comme sous le bâton dans la fourmilière, ils se troublent, ils se débandent—et il n’est pas sûr qu’ils recommencent ailleurs leur travail peut-être vain. (p. 28)³³

Confronted with the nothingness of death, speech is meaningless, as Jaccottet eloquently affirms in his long poem “Parler.” Speaking involves no risk. One can use words at will without being physically touched by them. The word “blood,” for example leaves no stain on the page. Death and pain are therefore radical experiences of inexpressible otherness:

C’est autre chose, et pire, ce qui fait un être
se recroqueviller sur lui-même, reculer

tout au fond de la chambre, appeler à l'aide
n'importe qui, n'importe comment:
c'est ce qui n'a ni forme, ni visage, ni aucun nom,
ce qu'on ne peut apprivoiser dans les images
heureuses, ni soumettre aux lois des mots,
ce qui déchire la page
comme cela déchire la peau,
ce qui empêche de parler en autre langue que de bête.
(ALH, p. 44)³⁴

Jaccottet's recognition that, as Yves Bonnefoy has written, "*ce qui est transcende toute fiction*,"³⁵ leads to a vision of the real that is always double and that, like light, involves both brightness and shadow. The poet discovers that within the radiant orchard lies a somber reflection:

A travers l'heureux brouillard des amandiers, il n'est plus tout à fait sûr que ce soit la lumière que je vois s'épanouir, mais un vieux visage angoissé qu'il m'arrive de surprendre sous le mien, dans le miroir, avec étonnement. . . . (pp. 26–27)³⁶

Jaccottet's descriptions of the sublime beauty of a landscape always contain intimations of mortality that acknowledge the imminent disappearance of the precarious scene or of the aging observer who witnesses it. The poet forces himself to see both sides of the real and to make his words vibrate with the mortal rhythms of existence, as he does at the end of *A travers un verger*:

Voici ce que j'ai vu tel jour d'avril, comme j'errais sans savoir, comme ma vie s'écoulait lentement de moi sans que j'y pense; on aurait dit qu'un nuage de neige flottait au-dessus du sol sous le ciel gris—et si moi, à cet instant précis de ma vie, je n'avais à me plaindre d'aucune douleur précise, je sais que je ne perds rien pour attendre, que j'arriverai un jour dans les régions où l'on n'a plus aucune force pour lutter, alors même que cela contre quoi il faudrait lutter gagne en force d'heure en heure; moi, future loque, avant de basculer dans la terreur ou l'abrutissement, j'aurai écrit que mes yeux ont vu *quelque chose* qui, un instant, les a niés. (pp. 48–49, my emphasis)³⁷

Once again, the most that can be said about the landscape, the most that can be learned from one's uncertain experience of it, is that "something"—it is not clear exactly what—has been perceived. But this is a "something" (a "quelque chose") that cannot be stated or described. Only the fact that something was there and that it was experienced can be attested to. For the gaze of the poet is negated by whatever it has seen. The word "something" is the sign and trace of what was annulled in an instant, in an unrepresentable flash of light and being. The undeniable reality of the real—be it the radiance of beauty or the darkness of death—is that as the *insaisissable* it dwells in the "beyond" of representation.³⁸

Surrounded by the flowering almond trees, the poet, torn between visions of beauty and intimations of death, between the brilliant orchard and the anguished face he sees within its light, feels both at home and in exile; this is a place of security and vulnerability. And yet, he cannot help being drawn to the warm, enveloping intimacy that dreams, reveries and other such illusions create to hide the horror of death or soften its brutal reality. He harbors an old belief in the power of magic to transport him into the Unknown:

Une fois de plus, il doit s'agir du désir profond, craintif, de passer sans peine un seuil, d'être emporté dans la mort comme par une magicienne. Un tourbillon de neige, qui aveugle, mais qui serait aussi une multiplicité de caresses, un étoilement de bouches fraîches, tout autour de vous—et dans cette enveloppe, grâce à ce sortilège, on est ravi dans l'inconnu, on aborde à une Terre promise. (pp. 24–25)³⁹

Even though he acknowledges that this is a "deeply interior rêverie" and struggles against its seductive power, aware that he must break it apart "comme on déchire une page, rageusement" ("as one angrily tears up a page," p. 25), nevertheless the attraction is great. He knows that "there is no magic that lasts when the body is attacked" (p. 32); and yet, this magic has the power to transport him effortlessly into another world. It appeals to a hidden desire for transcendence, so deeply entrenched in him that even the awareness that it is an illusion, a mirage, can not fully suppress its spell:

J'ai toujours su que cette métamorphose n'avait rien de "réel,"

que ce n'était qu'un jeu ou, si on veut, un mensonge de la lumière. J'ai compris aussi depuis longtemps que, si ce jeu me touchait, c'est qu'il correspond à un désir caché, qu'il le figure hors de moi, qu'il le mime devant moi: celui de l'effacement magique de tout obstacle. (pp. 33–34)⁴⁰

The knowledge that the desire for a magical transcendence is impossible does not prevent this desire from often appearing in *A travers un verger*, although it is always enveloped by the poet's self-critical consciousness. It is interesting how Jaccottet may bow before the supreme power of death and yet in the same breath wish fervently that "something" unknown, or absolute, or other—"something" beyond language and thought—appear suddenly in the here and now of temporal being and, in a burst of light, give him an experience of *l'insaisissable*. The moving and eloquent final paragraph of *A travers un verger* tries to resolve the ambivalence that the dialectical relationship of beauty and death and of joy and horror has posed for the poet, who vacillates hopelessly between the poles of the real. It proposes a way out of the orchard (and of Jaccottet's struggle to write about the orchard) so that the poet, now able to pass through this radiant space, which magic or unconscious desire has transformed into a place of light and immateriality but which the opaque shadow of death has marked with the image of a tormented face, can declare in word as well as deed, in writing as well as in life, that he has moved "à travers un verger":

Peut-être y a-t-il une espèce d'issue. Car ce qui m'a arrêté dans mon élan—quand j'allais franchir le verger comme un réfugié la frontière qui le sauve—est si dur, si massif, si opaque, cela échappe si définitivement à la compréhension, à l'acceptation que, ou bien il faut lui concéder la victoire absolue, après quoi il ne sera plus possible de survivre qu'hébété, ou bien il faut imaginer *quelque chose* d'aussi totalement inimaginable et improbable qui fasse sauter ce mur, *quelque chose* dont ces vues seraient des éclats épars, venus comme d'un autre espace, étrangers à l'espace, en tous cas différents du monde extérieur non moins que du monde intérieur à la rencontre desquels ils surgissent—sans qu'on puisse jamais les saisir, ni s'en assurer la possession. (p. 50, my emphasis)⁴¹

IV. Conclusion.

The landscape of the real is unpossessible. What one carries away from the sight of a river meandering through a valley, of mountains bathed in the red light of a setting sun, of birds gliding on invisible currents of air, and of almond trees amurmur with bees and shimmering in the heat of their blossoms is no more than an imprecise image blurred by the feelings, desires, and longings it has stirred. The landscape, as Jaccottet observes, is only given to us on loan. We do not inhabit it, but like nomads wander errantly and in error (ATV, p. 46). Our transactions with the natural world are informed by loss and absence, experiences of deprivation that are the pretext for writing; for we only speak that which cannot be spoken, we only imagine that which no image can fully convey, we only experience that which no word can completely express.

What emerges from language is the unrepresentable radiance of an absence. Poetry points continuously to the promised land it cannot enter, to the threshold it cannot cross, to the landscape that is always distant. But there is always *something* that poetry points to, even if that something, that “quelque chose,” be an absence or a lack that cannot be rescued from nothingness. The orchard of the real, where beauty and death, light and shadow, joy and horror coexist, may ultimately be the place of *l'insaisissable*; but a spark, a glimmer, an echo, a trace, a “presque rien” (S, p. 57) remain. Perhaps we can now understand why Jaccottet gives so much meaning to the insignificant, unremarkable, minimal words—the adverbs, conjunctions, impersonal pronouns—he uses. The distinction between being and nothingness, memory and oblivion, presence and absence, and therefore the only hope we can possibly find in this precarious and uncertain world, may lie at the very edge of an adverb, for, as Jaccottet writes: “l’image du verger, à peine la retenir” (“the image of the orchard, one barely retains it,” ATV, p. 47, my emphasis).

NOTES

1. "The real opens itself infinitely, unto invisibility." (All translations from the French are my own.)
2. In a recent interview Yves Bonnefoy states that one of the major tendencies of contemporary French poetry since the 1950s has been to focus "incisive attention on natural reality, or on what I would call the earthly [*le terrestre*]: paths, distant mountain peaks, bare stones, but also gardens; this is nature as our life encounters it and as it recovers or loses itself in it. This kind of poetry is new to us, because since the end of the Middle Ages our great poets have only been witnesses to the city: think of Villon, Du Bellay, Racine, Hugo (for whom nature is a jail of suffering souls), Baudelaire, Surrealism." ("La Poésie, c'est ce qui nous délivre du rêve," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, No. 1192 [11-17 septembre 1987], p. 61.)
3. See, for instance, Francis Ponge, *La Fabrique du Pré* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1971); Jean Tortel, "Critique d'un jardin," in his *Relations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968); Pierre-Albert Jourdan, *Les Sandales de paille* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1987); Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Arrière-pays* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1972); Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des questions* and *Le Livre des ressemblances*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1963-73, 1976-80); Lorand Gaspar, *Sol absolu* [1972] in *Sol absolu et autres textes*, Coll. Poésie (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).
4. "This absolute / that in the meadow trembles among the shadows," *Ce qui fut sans lumière* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1987), p. 66.
5. *Une Transaction secrète. Lectures de poésie* [A Secret Transaction. Readings on Poetry] (Paris: Gallimard 1987), p. 306, hereafter cited in the text as *TS*. Other works by Jaccottet will be referred to according to the following abbreviations; unless otherwise stated, these works were published in Paris by Gallimard:
ALH: *A la lumière d'hiver* [In Winter Light], précédé de *Leçons* [Lessons] et de *Chants d'en bas* [Songs from Below] (1977).
ATV: *A travers un verger* [Through an Orchard] (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975) [rpt. Paris: Gallimard, 1984].
EM: *L'Entretien des muses. Chroniques de poésie* [The Support of the Muses. Reports on Poetry] (1968).
ES: *Eléments d'un songe* [Elements of a Dream] (1961).
O: *L'Obscurité* [Darkness] (1961).
P: *Poésie 1946-1967* [Poetry 1946-1967], Coll. Poésie (1971).
PA: *La Promenade sous les arbres* [The Walk Beneath the Trees] (Lausanne: Mermod, 1957).
PFA: *Paysages avec figures absentes* [Landscapes with Absent Figures] (1970).

- PN: *Pensées sous les nuages* [Thoughts Beneath the Clouds] (1983).
- S: *La Semaïson. Carnets 1954–1979* [Seedtime. Notebooks 1954–1979] (1984).
6. "For us who live surrounded more and more by masks and intellectual schemes and who stifle in the prison that such things erect, the poet's gaze is a battering ram that topples these ramparts, giving us the real, if only for an instant; and with the real a *chance at life*."
 7. "An attentiveness to the visible that is so deep that it necessarily runs up against its limits, against the unlimited that the visible seems sometimes to contain or to hide, to refuse or to reveal."
 8. "Jamais un livre de poèmes," Jaccottet writes, "n'aura été pour moi objet de connaissance pure: plutôt une porte ouverte, ou entrouverte, quelquefois trop vite refermée, sur *plus de réalité*" ("A book of poems will never be for me an object of pure knowledge; rather an open, or half-opened, door—sometimes all too quickly closed—onto *more reality*," EM, p. 7).
 9. "A way of speaking about the world that does not explain the world, for this would be to immobilize and destroy it, but that reveals it as fully sustained by its own refusal to respond."
 10. "The presentiment of something essential that is other than our relation to that which is beyond all relation—our link to that which cannot be linked."
 11. "This song that we cannot possess, this space in which we cannot dwell, this key that we must continuously lose. Ceasing to be unseizable, ceasing to be doubtful, ceasing to be elsewhere (should one even say: ceasing to not be?), it is engulfed; it no longer exists."
 12. "I told myself that the effort consisted less in 'building,' in 'forging,' in 'erecting' a work than in allowing a current to pass, in removing obstacles, in effacing traces; as if, after all, the ideal poem must consign itself to oblivion on behalf of *another thing* that could only come into existence *through* it."
 13. "The image hides the real, distracts our gaze, all the more sometimes if it is more precise and alluring to one or other of our senses and to our daydreams."
 14. "Being is nothing outside of the things that exist. Indeed, we see—we feel, we touch, we hear—things that exist, but we do not see *that* they exist. Their being, which makes them be, remains hidden, abolishing itself on behalf of their existence, their appearance for us. . . . Being, which makes these things appear to us as being, immediately disappears and vanishes in face of these things that are, that alone occupy the field of vision. I will never see the being of the rose, but only the rose that is. Its being has nothing to do with it, with what it is. Such is the enabling absence, the overwhelming insistence, of Being. It is an absence, undoubtedly, that prior to any other invitation already makes us speak" ("Ce qui nous fait parler," NRF, 416 [1er septembre 1987], 60–61; hereafter cited in the text).

15. "Absent from the world, what makes us speak is absent as well by dint of what we say. It 'expresses' itself only when we speak, but not in what we say. It is immediately erased by what we say and as soon as we say it, banished and silenced by the very movement of speaking. . . . Since we express only the thing it designates, we express only its loss. Speaking is its loss, its deviation. It is speaking only insofar as it is deviation, which it brings into being, which it enlivens for as long as it lasts, which it sustains by its loss."

16. "It is the Completely-Other that one wishes to seize. How to explain that one searches for it and does not find it, but that one continues to search? The unlimited is the *breath* that gives us life."

17. Rilke, whose writings Jaccottet has translated and whose fascination with the beauty of the orchard and the suggestiveness of its name in French inspired a series of short poems entitled "Verger" (1926), also sees landscape as a place of otherness:

Men only began to understand Nature when they no longer understood it; when they felt that it was the Other, indifferent towards men, without senses by which to apprehend us. ("Concerning Landscape," in *Selected Works I: Prose*, trans. G. Craig Houston [London: The Hogarth Press, 1954], p. 4)

Similarly, Yves Bonnefoy associates the beginning of landscape painting with the moment when nature, no longer perceived as the seamless incarnation of God's eternal and ubiquitous presence, reveals unsettling signs of ephemerality, strangeness, and difference: "Landscape begins in art with the first sufferings of metaphysical consciousness, which is suddenly troubled by the shade that moves beneath things" ("Le Peintre dont l'ombre est le voyageur," in his *Récits en rêve* [Paris: Mercure de France, 1987] p. 216).

18. "Beware of images. Beware of flowers. Light as words. Can we ever know if they lie, or mislead, or guide? I, who from far away return to them, who depend only on them, or nearly so, I am wary of them."

19. "I would have wished to speak without images, simply / to open the door . . . / I have too much fear / for that, too much uncertainty or, sometimes, pity: / we do not, like the birds, live long / in the clear presence of the sky, / and once returned to earth, / we see in them only images / or dreams."

20. "Should they give the sensation / of what they cannot reach, of what escapes them, / of what they cannot master, of their other side?"

21. "Le Paysage," *Argile*, 16 (été 1978), p. 36. For a more general discussion of the poetics of landscape representation, see my "Landscape and Loss in Yves Bonnefoy and Philippe Jaccottet," *French Forum*, 5 (January 1980), pp. 30–47.

22. "Distant, threatened, precarious, placed within a whole that is made coarse and opaque so as not to 'show them off,' not to immobilize and distort them."

23. "L'appel non dit," Munier writes, "qui par force manque au dire, est ce manque

justement qui creuse l'écriture, en accuse l'insuffisance" ("the unspoken call, which by definition is absent from speech, is precisely the lack that excavates writing, that points to its insufficiency," p. 65).

24. *A travers un verger* has not yet received the full critical attention it deserves. However, for an excellent discussion of one aspect of the work, see Marie-Claire Dumas, "'Ne Te Retourne Pas': Sur le paragraphe liminaire de la seconde partie d'*A travers un verger*," in *La Poésie de Philippe Jaccottet*, ed. Marie-Claire Dumas (Paris: Champion, 1986), pp. 73–82.

25. "I pass, I am filled with wonder, and I can say no more." It is interesting how many contemporary French poets have been attracted by the shimmering beauty of almond trees in bloom during the first days of spring. Jaccottet describes their blossoming in his notebook entries for 1960, 1966, and 1967 (S, pp. 31–32, 95, 124). Pierre-Albert Jourdan compares flowering almond trees to falling snow, a cathedral, a constellation of stars, a winged fire, an "explosion of Life," and the movements of the absolute (*Les Sandales de Paille* [Paris: Mercure de France, 1987], pp. 161, 162–63, 163, 267, 336). For Yves Bonnefoy, the almond tree, whose flowers last only an instant but contain "the imperishable part of life," is an image of the copresence of life and death, of light and darkness (*Dans le leurre du seuil* [1975] in *Poèmes* [Paris: Mercure de France, 1978], pp. 268–69, 272–73).

26. "'White' is already saying too much; it suggests a clean surface giving off a white radiance. But things, there, are without any radiance (and not at all transparent). Reserved, grey, dull? Nothing more. Something multiple, myriad, yes, a swarm: thousands of small things, or presences, or spots, or wings, weightless—in suspension once again, as is the case every springtime—a kind of fresh effervescence; a fog, if there ever existed a fog without moisture, without melancholy, in which we do not risk getting lost; something, barely something. . . ."

"Swarm, froth, snow: old images return, being for the moment the least incongruous. Nothing better."

27. "Perhaps, it was somewhat like snow, a cloud of snow in suspension above the earth, immobilized an instant in its fall—all because of this whiteness, undazzling and still a little cold or chilly, and of the myriads of blossoms. A murmur of snow?"

28. "Weightless, almost formless, and each time surprising, wondrous. Passing almost unnoticed. Something that settles there, tentatively, an ephemeral din."

29. According to Jaccottet, a word like *cela* signifies "la chose poursuivie toujours et qui ne peut être dite" ("The thing we continuously pursue and that cannot be spoken," PFA, p. 153, n. 1).

30. "Whether they express levity or pain, words are only words. Easy. At certain moments, confronting certain realities, they annoy or disgust me; and I, *through* them, who continue to use them: this way of sitting at a table, keeping one's back turned to others and the world, and in the end to be only capable of that. . . ."

31. "By writing, dreaming, 'thinking' how quickly we are drawn far away from things,

from the real! How quickly dissipates their savor, which is the only essential thing!"

32. "I have always had in mind, without being fully aware of it, the image of a scale. On one pan were pain and death, on the other the beauty of life. The former always held a much heavier weight; on the latter rested almost nothing but lightness itself. But I came to believe that lightness may at times triumph. I see now that most of the pages I have written are under the sign of this balancing, of this oscillation."

33. "It's as if a real body, disgracefully mistreated by the years and only by the years . . . tore up the page where words, without difficulty or danger, wished to continue being written; and suddenly, as when a stick is pushed into an anthill, they become confused and are routed—and it is not certain that they can begin their perhaps futile work somewhere else."

34. "It is something else, and worse, that makes a human being / shrivel up unto himself, cringe / in the corner of the bedroom, call to anyone, / in anyway, for help: / it is what has neither form, nor face, nor any name, / what we cannot tame through felicitous images, / nor submit to the laws of words, / what tears the page / as it rips the flesh, / what prevents speaking in any other language but that of the animal."

35. "*What is* transcends all fiction." "Hommage à Jorge Luis Borges," *Le Débat* (1987), p. 182 (rpt. in Yves Bonnefoy, *La Vérité de parole* [Paris: Mercure de France, 1988], pp. 305–17). Bonnefoy goes on to explain that

Ecrire nie la réalité qu'ont les êtres là devant nous, en leur instant et leur lieu, nous détruisons cet absolu même que nous devrions respecter, aimer—cette seule réalité qui soit fondement pour l'amour. En bref, la fiction trahit la présence. ("Writing negates the reality human beings have in their time and place, as they stand before us; we destroy even this absolute that we should respect, love—the only reality that is the foundation of love. In sum, fiction betrays presence," p. 183).

36. "Through the blissful mist of the almond trees it is no longer entirely certain that it is the light I see appear, but an old, anguished face that, with amazement, I happen to surprise under my own in the mirror. . . ."

37. "This is what I saw on such a day in April, as I unconsciously wandered and as my life slowly ebbed from me without my giving it a thought; one would have said that a cloud of snow floated above the earth under the grey sky—and if, at this exact moment of my life, I had no particular pain about which to complain, I also knew that there was nothing to be lost in waiting, that I would arrive one day at the place where one no longer has the strength to struggle and where even that with which one must struggle gains force by the hour; I, future pile of rags, before sinking into terror and exhaustion, will write that my eyes have seen *something* that in an instant has negated them."

38. For a discussion of the "beyond" of representation and of a poetry striving to free

itself from the image and from the desire for mimesis, see my "The Crack in the Mirror: The Subversion of Image and Representation in the Poetry of Yves Bonnefoy," *French Forum*, 13 (January 1988), pp. 69–81.

39. "Once again it must be a question of the profound and apprehensive desire to cross effortlessly over a threshold, to be carried away unto death as if by a sorceress. A whirlwind of snow that blinds, but is also a multitude of caresses, the filling of the night-sky with cool mouths, completely surrounding you—and in this mantle, through this spell, one is carried off into the unknown; one arrives at a Promised Land."

40. "I always knew that there was nothing 'real' about this metamorphosis, that it was only a game, or, if you like, an illusion of light. I have also understood for a long time that, if this game affected me, it is because it corresponds to a hidden desire, which it represents outside of me, which it acts out before me: the desire for the magical obliteration of every obstacle."

41. "Perhaps there is some kind of resolution. Because what stopped my momentum, as I was going to cross the orchard like a refugee the frontier that saves him, is so hard, so massive, so opaque, and it so definitively escapes comprehension and acceptance, that either we must concede it absolute victory—after which we can only survive in a state of bewilderment—or we must imagine *something* so totally unimaginable and improbable that it would bring down this wall, *something* of which these vistas would be scattered flashes that—coming from another space, foreign to space, in any event, different from the exterior world no less than from the interior world, out of whose encounter they arise—we could never possibly grasp or possess."