TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

A Saussurean Solution: Embodying 'Presence' in Yves Bonnefoy's Poetics

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Contemporary French poet Yves Bonnefoy has, over the course of his long career, acquired the often repeated epithet, 'poète de la présence'. This lapidary formulation is especially apt, for it summarises quite effectively his vision of poetry as the only vector for a genuine interaction with the world through a form of communion that he characterises as '*présence*'. The word itself is not insignificant. Beyond the generalities of common parlance, the term has a long and rich history that hovers between theology and philosophy. His insistence, therefore, on the use of such a connoted word calls for examination, particularly in light of the reticence he expresses regarding philosophy. Indeed, despite a rhetoric that minimises, and even repudiates philosophy in favour of poetry, Bonnefoy's work demonstrates such an intense interconnection between the two that they can easily be imagined as leaf of paper whose two inseparable sides comprise the whole.

As this paper contends, Bonnefoy's co-opting of the term 'presence' is predicated on a philosophical necessity that is linked first to his vision of poetry and its role in transmitting presence, and then to his desire to defend the very possibility of presence against, in particular, the deconstructionist challenge to it. And as this paper further argues, the originality of his approach lies in the fact that beyond redefining a poetics of presence, he resolves, at least partially, the problem of integrating presence into a literary text by his rather unusual use of some of the building blocks of structuralism.

In a large sense, his choice of the word 'presence' to encapsulate his poetics forces him to contend with the unavoidably philosophical aspect of a term that is heavily marked by its theo-ontological origins. At the same time, his various attempts at definition demonstrate – and this in spite of his reticence – that what he proposes in the shorthand term *présence* can perhaps *only* be described as a philosophical endeavour inasmuch as it clearly aims to provide meaning not only for the intellectual, but also for the moral and ethical aspects of life and experience. In addition, Bonnefoy's strong impetus to integrate and even produce *présence* in poetry can be seen as the epitome of the difficulty of making literature, and more particularly a literary form as constraining as poetry, take on a function that seems at least partially to eschew aesthetic ambitions in favour of something that resembles much more a philosophical project. This article thus discusses Bonnefoy's notion of *présence* along two axes, identifying first that which he retains for his own purposes from the more traditional definitions of presence, and addressing then the issue of how he uses the tools of structuralism to counter the philosophical impossibility of presence proposed by the deconstructionist theories of the second half of the twentieth century.

Anchoring definitions: theology and philosophy

As suggested above, a first significant point in defining Bonnefoy's '*présence*' is that it can be seen as a form of retrieval, or recycling, in the sense that it is by no means an expression that Bonnefoy created ex-nihilo to further his own expressive needs. On the contrary, it is impossible to ignore its theo-philosophical origins. The Bibliothèque Nationale's document on its 1992 Yves Bonnefoy exhibit clearly indicates the importance of this axis to his thought. Discussing his readings of Plotinus, Shestov and others, the text asks: 'Were these readings philosophical or

rather theological?' The answer is telling: 'The most important ones lay on the boundaries between the two domains.'[1]

As concerns the theological angle, a number of critics have pointed out the fact that Bonnefoy's own use of presence recapitulates some of the more 'technical' aspects of how, theologically, the term figures the incarnation of the divine.[2] Ronald Gérald Giguère, for example, suggests that

> The notion of incarnation [in Bonnefoy's poetry] can […] be linked with the Christian notion of God becoming flesh. According to Christian dogma, Christ incarnates the Father and the Verb, who are thus doubly given to the world, both by the Gospel and in the person of Christ. Could we not see poetic language as being given back to the world by Bonnefoy's poetry? At the very least, is this poetry not the attempt to give poetic language back to the world through its incarnation of reality?[3]

His comment recapitulates a goal that seems to subtend much of Bonnefoy's focus on *présence*, appearing notably in the suggestion that presence can inhabit poetry through the latter's own capacity to figure the world – that poetic language can *be* reality and allow the reader to commune with this reality. Giguère locates Bonnefoy's vision of language within Christian imagery, but it is important to stress that the theological axis to Bonnefoy's thought lies not so much in the narrative forms and symbols of Christianity – he himself explicitly says: 'I am not a Christian; I have no faith'[4] – but rather in the fact that his writing aims to address notions of transcendence and communion that are germane to a broader spiritual viewpoint. More importantly perhaps, its theological roots colour Bonnefoy's *présence* with the moral gravitas contained in the word, reinforcing his rejection of overtly aesthetic ambitions for poetry and highlighting the urgency of his need to communicate the idea itself through all the means at his disposal.

Still, Bonnefoy's explicit denial of a Christian frame of reference recalls the fact that presence also has philosophical roots, and suggests that his ambivalence regarding theology gives added value to the significance of this second substratum. Indeed, in his own writing, philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche, or Plotinus, among many others, continually appear as references or counterpoints to his thought. This orientation clearly colours his work, with David Jasper, for instance, suggesting that Bonnefoy's philosophical grounding shifts 'through Husserl and Heidegger towards an ethics of reading the 'other' in a hidden narrative whose possibility is 'conditional on the unconditional responsibility of *being-for-the-other*.'[5] As with the theological connection, the philosophical origins of 'presence' strengthen his disavowal of the aesthetic claims of poetry. Along those lines, Jean Starobinski clearly expresses Bonnefoy's position when he says that the writerly need expressed by Bonnefoy resembles an 'ethical, or rather, ontological necessity far more than an esthetic need.'[6]

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[1] Yves-Alain Favre (dir. Colloquium), *Yves Bonnefoy: Poésie, Art et Pensée*, (actes du colloque du Centre de Recherches sur la Poésie Contemporaine, Pau : Publications de l'Université de Pau, 1983) 54 (henceforth abbreviated *Poésie, Art, Pensée*).

[2] See, for example, Richard Vernier, David Jasper, John Naughton, *et al*.

[3] Ronald Gérald Giguère, *Le Concept de la Réalité dans la Poésie d'Yves Bonnefoy* (Paris: Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1985) 21.

[4] Yves Bonnefoy, *Entretiens sur la poésie: 1972-1990*, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1990) 45-6.

[5] David Jasper, '*La Même Voix, Toujours*: Yves Bonnefoy and Translation,' in *Translating Religious Texts: Transgression and Interpretation* [ed. David Jasper], New York : St Martin's Press, (1993) 111.

[6] Yves Bonnefoy, *Poèmes,* (Paris: Mercure de France [collection Gallimard « Folio »], 1978) 18.

These philosophical currents are plainly discernible in Bonnefoy's writing, and have given rise to a substantial body of critical texts.[7] It can be argued however that the need for the *specific* term 'presence' is perhaps motivated by a philosophical stance that is rooted in a form of opposition tempered by pragmatic utility that is linked to the challenge to the very notion of presence that Derrida brings to bear on Western metaphysics through his development of what has come to be known as deconstructionism.

The deconstructionist challenge

As concerns deconstruction, a number of critics have noted parallels between Bonnefoy's position and that of Derrida. Alex Argyros, for example, suggests that for Derrida and Bonnefoy alike, 'Presence is the possibility of integrity, of propriety (the proper, property – a 'vrai lieu' – etc.) and access which allows for the erection of truth as a normative principle.'[8] Indeed, it is patent that texts such as Bonnefoy's 'La Présence et l'Image,'[9] indicate a strongly held *prise de position* that correlates both with his thorough familiarity with the positions of deconstruction, but also with the great reserve he feels regarding its capacity to accurately express our relationship to the world and to language. Along those lines, his thumbnail sketch of the deconstructionist vision of the interaction between writer, text, and reader is clearly marked by his reticence. In deconstructionism, he writes,

> It is not the author who is; it is his language, which is said to be neither false nor true, and signifies nothing more than itself. But they also add that this language is infinite; its forms and effects are dispersed throughout the book and can never be wholly summed up. Because of this, and more clearly so than in the past, the act of reading is said to hold a creative function – as long, of course, as the reader pays attention to the textual depths and gathers as many of them as possible within the network of his analysis. Reading has become a responsibility, a contribution; it is equal to writing and even an end in itself since the reader cannot consider himself as more real, more present to himself than the writer.[10]

Though Bonnefoy's description remains neutral on several points, his opposition to some of the more easily recognisable elements of the deconstructionist position – the challenge to the centrality of the author; the auto-referentiality of language; the absence of truth, of self-presence – is unmistakably marked by his own use of the conditional 'serait' ('are said to be'), or the apposition 'ajoute-t-on,' ('they add') both of which allow him to take distance from these emblematic deconstructionist themes. For if it is clear that he can accept certain aspects of the re-evaluation of authority – and even embrace them, writing in 'L'Analogie Suprême,' 'Yes, beneficial has been the challenge the reign of the author and of his utterance, in the name of the rights of language and of desire, those very things whose paths are impersonal'[11] – it is equally clear that his is a voice of opposition, for he continues with: 'But this challenge cannot be maintained: the role of our inherent free will to decide that meaning exists must be recognized,

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[7] See, among others, Steven Winspur's 'The Poetic Significance of the Thing-in-Itself' or, more generally, the 'Problèmes métaphysiques' section of the 1983 University of Pau colloquium on Bonnefoy, and the more fully developed 'philosophie' section of the 2006 'Colloque de Cérisy.' Similarly, the 2007 *Poétique et Ontologie* colloquium devoted to Bonnefoy clearly grapples specifically with this aspect of his work.

[8] Alex Argyros, 'The Topography of Presence: Bonnefoy and the Spatialization of Poetry,' *Orbis Litterarum*, 41, (1986) 247.

[9] Bonnefoy's 1981 'Leçon Inaugurale' (Acceptance Speech) delivered after being elected to the Collège de France.

[10] Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 224.

[11] Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 176.

and the author must reaffirm himself, if not through the eddies of writing, at least by his relation to his own work, to which he must assign meaning.[12] Such statements make it difficult to exclude the idea that Bonnefoy's strong adhesion to the notion of presence might also be anchored in a form of resistance. For despite their undoubted merit in forcing reflection on matters that had seemed thereto to have escaped critical analysis, the ideas proposed by Derrida have also met with general incomprehension and even fierce opposition. Thus it might be argued that inasmuch as Derrida's thought is generally considered to be opposed to very possibility of a stable and unvarying presence, the intransigency of this position might have contributed to Bonnefoy's desire to 'salvage' (a transposition of the 'sauver' he so frequently uses) the notion itself from the violence brought to it by the deconstructionist model.

Poetry and 'l'acte poétique'

These are the outlines of the various definitions of presence and how they might have impacted Bonnefoy's own '*présence*'. Before continuing, however, it is important to stress the primacy that poetry and the poetic act have for him because it is in the light of his feeling for poetry that some of his positions, and more particularly his intransigent attitude toward philosophy, become more comprehensible. Bonnefoy has clearly said that he feels himself to be first and foremost a poet; his mission is to render unto poetry the ancient transformative power it once held. For him, as his essay 'Sur la fonction du poème'[13] suggests, poetry has a purpose, indeed, an ontological *being* that sets it apart from other literary forms. Critic Jacques Plessen indicates that this Bonnefoyian 'fonction' refers more to the semantic potential that lies in poetry than to a technical investigation into the details of how poetry works, or even an attempt to arrive at a definition of poetry. Plessen indicates that 'in his reflection on poetry, Bonnefoy starts from the question […] "What can poetry do?" and not from "What is poetry, or how does it function?"'[14][15] This comment is entirely congruent with the position Bonnefoy holds: for him, poetry has a power that transcends the formal limitations of the words agglomerated on a page; poetry is, in fact, almost a belief. In a sense, his position is akin to Pascal's leap of faith, stating that beyond rational understanding there exists a world which is no less real and true for not being immediately perceptible: 'tout ce qui est incompréhensible ne laisse pas d'être.'[16] According to Bonnefoy, the salient fact is that poetry has power. And what it can *do* is give the reader access to the *présence* that forms the cornerstone of his poetics.

   This focus on function leads to that minimising of the aesthetic value of poetry which is one of the more notable characteristics of Bonnefoy's poetics. His position is marked by his adamant opposition to those who would see in poetry nothing more than the mere '*effet de présence*.'[17]

> There are critics who believe that certain words have been placed within a text to produce an *effect* via some form of writing strategy, and that this effect is what the author wants the reader to feel. But myself I believe that poetry begins when that plane of consciousness

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[12] Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 176.
[13] 'On the Function of the Poem'
[14] Jacques Plessen, 'Yves Bonnefoy, Lecteur de Rimbaud' Poésie, Art et Penséé, 13.
[15] Note: Except for one, all translations from the French used in this paper are my own.
[16] Trotter's translation is the following: 'Not all that is incomprehensible ceases to exist,' but I feel that an expansion is necessary to really give the meaning of Pascalian phrase:'those things that are incomprehensible do not cease to exist [just because we don't understand them].'
[17] Yves Bonnefoy, *Le nuage rouge: essais sur la poétique,* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1992) 270.

where we can perceive or delimit or desire to produce 'effects' dissipates. Words do not exist in a poem to produce an effect.[18]

As his statement makes clear, his focus is not on style, but elsewhere, at a level is unquestionably linked to the connection between writing and presence: poetic words are not meant to simulate presence by means of an aesthetic conjuring trick; they are meant to truly provide it. It is the strength of this conviction that confers to Bonnefoy's poetics its overtly moral bent. Bernard Falciola, for instance, says of Bonnefoy's poetry that 'one finds in it a concern that could be described at least equally as moral as aesthetic.'[19] Falciola is not alone in this assessment; indeed many critics have pointed to this moral dimension, especially insofar as it conditions in large part what one might describe as the 'tone' of Bonnefoy's own statements regarding his poetry. It also has an impact on the clear scission he makes between the ambitions of poetry and those of philosophy, and his commensurate repudiation of any 'philosophical explanation' for his work.

Inseparable bodies: présence and philosophy

And yet, Bonnefoy is unable to create a hermetic separation between the two domains. Indeed, when he addresses the notion of a schism separating poetry from philosophy, the surface of his discourse seems to express a resolute rejection of the very notion of 'philosophising' as when he writes:

> I refuse to use any philosophical means whatsoever to address the problem of that which can be perceived. Affirming is my only concern. […] I cannot, I have no desire to construct the dialectics of the world, embedding the perceivable within Being with the meticulous patience of metaphysics: my intent is only to name. Behold the perceivable world. Speech, that sixth and highest sense, must go forth to meet it and decipher its signs. The only pleasure I take is in this task alone, in the quest for the secret that Kierkegaard had lost.[20]

It would be difficult to imagine a clearer repudiation of philosophy. Nevertheless despite his disavowal of a philosophical approach to the problem of expressing 'le sensible,' Bonnefoy builds the whole structure of his utterance around an explicitly philosophical lexicon. Indeed, the ambivalence contained in the explicit desire to reject philosophy, and the specifically 'philosophical' framework within which that rejection takes place, is not without significance, for the resistance expressed here in terms of an opposition between a notion of philosophy and the acts of 'affirming' and 'naming,' points to the real tension lying at the core of Bonnefoy's writing, namely the uneasy cohabitation created by his overt rejection of conceptual systems, and his simultaneous need for those same systems in order to efficiently convey an intellectually coherent thought process. This need is of course linked to the importance he attributes to the task of transmitting presence, for the semantics of the word 'affirming' itself calls up the idea of a conviction one seeks to impart.

Indeed, the problem of 'affirming' rather than 'philosophising' is linked in large part to the *telos* of expressing presence through writing. And as Bonnefoy himself is painfully aware, presence is an experiential quality of interaction that, almost by definition, cannot be mediated

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[18] Bonnefoy, Nuage, 351.
[19] Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 30.
[20] Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable et autres essais (suivi de Un Rêve fait à Mantoue)*, (Paris: Gallimard « Folio » 1980) 23.

by language: 'What can words retain or say,' he writes, 'when presence gives itself in the universe of the instant?'[21] Insurmountably, however, Bonnefoy is forced to use language to express this presence, and this is perhaps where the originality of his thought is most evident. For the notion embedded in the text cited above of *speech* as a sixth sense also resonates for those who, like Bonnefoy, are familiar with the very specific vocabulary of structuralism. Indeed, his definition of '*la parole*' as the highest of the human senses relies on the nomenclature used by structuralist thinkers. Simultaneously, however, Bonnefoy's statement extracts the act of speaking from the structure of language where structural linguistics situates it, and places it in a wholly personal configuration that associates it with the physical senses.

This unusual strategy is linked to the difficulty of finding a solid 'technical' foundation for the specificity of poetic language and its capacity to formally integrate the notion of presence. Indeed, to return briefly to the word '*sensible*' ('obtainable through the senses') evoked in Bonnefoy's statement, the term itself is an earlier avatar of the more familiar '*présence*'. In a 1972 interview, he explains why he eschewed '*le sensible*':

> It is a word ('*le sensible*') which I no longer use because it could be interpreted as meaning 'concrete,' 'limited to sensory perception,' when for me it is not linked to the appearance, to the texture of the world, but on the contrary, to that which slips out of perception even if in exchange it confers on perception its intensity and seriousness of purpose.[22]

This comment allows us to glean a notion of what *présence* is *not*, that is, one understands that it is not only the natural quality of the world – its 'texture' – but rather something which simultaneously lies beyond perception, and acts on this very perception to give it an impact stronger that a mere physical experience of the world.

And yet, the question remains of how such a project might be accomplished. Bonnefoy's comments about deconstructionists demonstrate his familiarity with contemporary literary problems and their implications on his own work. However, I would argue from a more technical perspective that if what Bonnefoy takes from deconstructionism are important and useful ways to re-evaluate the relationship between writer, writing and meaning, in reality, many of the fundamental building blocks of this re-evaluation of language are the result not so much of deconstructionist investigations into language and meaning as the work of Saussurean structural linguistics. Indeed, based on the way Bonnefoy positions his belief in the potential for language to integrate *présence*, coupled with the terminology he uses, the impact on his thought of structuralist linguistic analyses is undeniable. And while it is doubtless true that structuralism has been largely discredited by more contemporary linguistic theories, particularly on the American continent, it remains a vibrant source of mental imagery and reference, perhaps even more so for a writer of Bonnefoy's generation.

A structural lexicon

What has particularly interested me is that Bonnefoy goes beyond a simple re-inscription into his own work of structuralist vocabulary – most notably the signifier/signified tandem that composes Saussure's conception of the sign, and the crucial '*langue, langage, parole*' (speech capacity, language, utterance) triad. Rather, Bonnefoy's approach toward structuralism seems simultaneously to involve a rather specific resistance to its underlying principles, coupled with a

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[21] Bonnefoy, Improbable, 126.
[22] Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 58.

significant recategorization of the Saussurean vocabulary, which he then seamlessly incorporates into his own work. This re-categorization has also been noted by Bruno Gelas, who writes that:

> Bonnefoy would doubtless not disclaim [the framework of linguistic thinking] especially insofar it is structured around the idea of whether words are the place and the object of an exchange between those who speak. But he displaces the terms: that which he names 'langue/parole' has no real relation with the Saussurean opposition between 'virtual vs. realized' […] (the question then being that of understanding why he nevertheless continues to use this conceptual pair).[23]

Gelas' point is well-taken, and his question certainly pertinent. The answer, I would suggest, lies in Bonnefoy's need to rationalise the possibility for *présence* within the poetic text. In point of fact, what is fascinating is not only the fact that Bonnefoy uses terms that are such clear codes of a structuralist outlook, but that he integrates them so totally into his own position that he seems to completely forget their 'adopted' origin. For example, in an oral reaction to a paper read at a conference on his work, Bonnefoy responds by saying that he agrees with the analysis, but that he must 'transcribe it into *my own personal language, which uses the categories of 'presence,' 'language,' and 'utterance.'*'[24] This 'personal language,' needless to say, reproduces terms taken from the Saussurean sources.

And yet, of Saussure's tripartate structure for language (*langage*, *langue* and *parole*), not all elements have equal importance in Bonnefoy's mental landscape. Indeed, Bonnefoy focuses almost exclusively on *langue* and *parole*, which are vital to his thought. In the Saussurean model, these two terms are symbiotically linked, though conceptualised in an oppositional relation. *Langue* (language) is an abstraction, a collective notion that is a sort of mental storehouse containing the rules and structures needed to produce communication, but *parole* refers to a concrete activity that is strictly individual. Saussure refers to it as the 'execution' of language, writing: 'execution is never carried out by the collectivity. Execution is always individual, and the individual is always its master: I shall call the executive side *speaking* [*parole*].'[25]

The importance for Bonnefoy of this third element of the Saussurean triangle cannot be overestimated inasmuch as the term '*parole*' points to the essential contribution of the individual speaking being which he emphatically claims for us when he comments, for example: 'In fact, *parole* is much vaster than language, and it carries that which language does not, that is, hope placed in the future, a displacement toward other states within the relation of the subject speaking to himself and to others.'[26] Even more importantly, Bonnefoy's statement also indicates the capacity of parole to break out of the bonds of the linguistic system and provide the theoretical opening of language to *présence* inasmuch as it is always an act determined in a specific moment by an individual speaker. Succinctly, thus, one might say that for Bonnefoy, '*parole*' is the wedge driven into the heart of all linguistic representation, forcing an opening at the place where language tends naturally to seal itself – and us – off from life.

But concretely, how can *parole*, the ordinary utterance of any person, become *présence*? John Naughton sheds some light on the matter when he accurately pinpoints the origin of *présence* as being extra-linguistic. He writes: 'it is important to stress […] that when Bonnefoy speaks of

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[23] Bruno Gelas, 'Notes pour l'Étude des Figures et des Fonctions de la Voix dans Trois Recueils d'Yves Bonnefoy,' Poésie, Art et Pensée, 388.
[24] Bonnefoy, Poésie, Art et Pensée 132, my emphasis.
[25] Ferdinand de Saussure, W. Baskin (trans.). *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959) 13.
[26] Bonnefoy, Poésie, Art et Pensée, 402.

presence, he is evoking what first of all occurs outside the world of language. Poetry does not begin as words, it begins as a relation.'[27] Naughton's position is difficult to contradict, particularly since it concurs with much of what Bonnefoy has himself indicated over the course of his writing. And yet, this view of the situation has its own shortcomings: in a sense it simply begs the issue, insofar as the problem that faces Bonnefoy is not so much acknowledging the inner conviction that 'any element of creation, however simple and 'impoverished,' may become a presence, may become the lamp that beckons toward unity,'[28] but rather the very concrete problem of how to convey not only this conviction, but even more importantly, *présence* itself through language.

Bonnefoy's solution to the problem is simultaneously abstract and practical in the sense that he relies on concrete elements derived from linguistics to provide a theoretical perspective that criticizes the deconstructionist rejection of language's capacity to fully express presence. Indeed, in response to the famous Hegelian observation that language can apprehend neither the 'here' nor the 'now' as objective entities, but can only grasp them as movements indicating absence, Bonnefoy acknowledges the impact that Hegel's observation had on his own thinking: 'It was precisely those pages from the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, those pages on the here-and-now, that were one of the fundamental shocks of my poetic thinking.'[29] The response he brings to bear indicates, however, his visceral opposition to Hegel, as Christian Berg indicates when he argues that in Bonnefoy's position 'the Hegelian mechanism is reversed because rather than binding consciousness to knowledge, sensate experience – the keystone of Bonnefoy's poetics – ejects it, expropriates it, and dooms it to absence and death.'[30]

Berg's point is well-taken, for Bonnefoy's opposition to conceptual knowledge has been clearly established in critical literature, and subtends indeed his attempt to extract the notion of '*présence*' from its inherently philosophical framework. His earlier texts in particular, equate presence with reality, setting it in direct opposition with the idea of 'concept.' His position is most clearly evoked in an early essay where he writes, 'nothing is less real than the concept,'[31] leading us in the same essay through a litany of real things which can impinge on us, but which cannot be conceptually expressed:

> the least concept is a master of evasion […] Is there a concept for a footstep in the night, for a cry, for a rock tumbling in the underbrush? For the impression felt in an empty house? Of course not, the concept retains of reality only those things that allow us repose.[32]

In large part, then, it is his definition of presence as an anti-conceptual experience, an act bound by time and place – the 'here' and 'now' that Hegel cannot account for – that allows Bonnefoy

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[27] John Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 46.

[28] Naughton, 47.

29 Bonnefoy, Poésie, Art, Pensée 45. Hegel writes in paragraph 97 of the first section of the 'Consciousness' chapter: 'It is as a universal too that we utter what the sensuous [content] is. What we say is: 'This', i.e. the universal 'This'; or 'it is' i.e, Being in general. Of course, we do not envisage the universal This, or Being in general, but we utter the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we mean to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves refute what we directly mean to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, the sensuous being that we mean' (Miller translation, 60).

[30] Christian Berg, 'Le Chemin Interdit par la Déesse,' Poésie, Art, Pensée, 170.

[31] Bonnefoy, Improbable 19.

[32] Bonnefoy, Improbable 15.

both to reject the philosophical dimension of presence and to seek a means to justify its possibility in language.

Concretely, thus, Bonnefoy's refusal of the Hegelian model is materialised in his projection of the capacities of poetry. In response to the well-known association Hegel makes in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* between 'now' and 'night' ('To the question: "What is Now?", let us answer, e.g. "Now is Night"'[33]), Bonnefoy equates poet Gérard de Nerval with Hegel, writing: 'Yes, "now" is night is also what the author of *Aurélia* [Nerval] tells us, along with "here" is night also. The access to unity is barred by monsters, which are our illusions.'[34] Bonnefoy suggests that even if Hegel's association might have been randomly chosen, the semantic weight of the word 'night' translates a certain anguish to which there is a possible response. Thus Bonnefoy continues: 'But we have to move forward among these shadows. And if now is night, nothing says that tomorrow, by the grace of a few poems, a bit of daylight will not appear,'[35] thus making it clear that his rejection of the Hegelian model is contained in poetry. His project is unquestionably ambitious, but it is precisely, I would suggest, the Saussurean framework that allows him to find a means to oppose the Hegelian limitations on language. For if language itself is the problem for Hegel's approach to expressing the deictic *hic et nunc*, Bonnefoy's reversal of the Hegelian model uses the tools provided by Saussure to suggest a means to resolve the problem of indicating deixis through language.

In fine, the perception Saussure and Bonnefoy have of linguistic terms appears as though each of them perceived the same image through opposite sides of a single lens. For if the high value Bonnefoy gives to *parole* does indeed derive from the characteristics that Saussure imputes to it, Bonnefoy's approach demonstrates that he is inverting the structure and values that Saussure presents. The latter dismisses *parole* as an inadequate object of study. He defines 'the instances of *parole*' as 'self-willed, short-lived, variable, contingent,' and concludes that because of these characteristics, 'the study of *parole* must by no means interfere with the study of *langue*, which is the sole object of linguistics.'[36] For Bonnefoy, in contrast, it is the very contingency, variability and ephemeral quality of *parole* that allows it to faithfully reproduce the nature of reality. He describes the quality of this reality to be eminently anchored in the passing of time, in irreversible choices made, in our necessary reaction to the vicissitudes of the unforeseen:

> It is what determines […] our real existence, within lived experience, and which consists in the passing of time that we are subject to, the limits, the unforeseen simultaneities, the way chance takes our acts away from us, etc. It is everything that we could call our bodily existence, with all that that idea implies in terms of quick decisions, irrevocable choices, obstinacy – and in terms of reflection also, attentively or compassionately, on these aspects of reality.[37]

All of these undeniable aspects of the reality experienced by individuals in their embodied, 'incarnated' selves, are, for Bonnefoy, encapsulated in the use of *parole*. And it is precisely this double capacity of *parole* to be the expression of the individual speaking being, while being the

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[33] Hegel, Georg Friedrich Willem. *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, G.W.F. Hegel, trans A.V. Miller, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998 60.

[34] Yves Bonnefoy, *La vérité de parole : et autres essais*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) 60.

[35] Bonnefoy, Vérité de parole, 60.

[36] Saussure, General Linguistics, 27.

[37] Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 62.

accurate reflection of reality that allows it – potentially – to become a harbour for *présence*. As he writes 'The difficulty of poetry is that language is a *system*, while its utterance is *presence*.'[38]

The limitations of poetry

And yet, Bonnefoy's careful intellectual construction, using the building blocks of structuralism to rationalise the possibility for presence to inhabit language seems also to fail him. A first level of concern addresses what might be seen as the latent anxiety that poetry might not provide sufficient access to presence. This concern is one that is certainly not limited to Bonnefoy, but constitutes one of the leitmotivs of contemporary poetics. Stephen Winspur reports Roland Barthes's assessment of modern poetry as an 'objective poetry,' concerned with recapturing an 'infrasignification, a presemiological state of language' and trying to reach 'the transcendent quality of things'.[39] Given the desire to attain a 'presemiological' object located beyond language, Winspur asks the very valid question, 'how does the poem's linguistic structure create the appearance of being its exact opposite – an ideal, or Kantian, object uncontaminated by language?'[40] In other words, how can a poem, which perforce must deal with language, erase that same language to reveal the referent of the word, that is, the thing itself?

This problem is particularly acute for Bonnefoy, for as Arnaud Buchs points out, this same criticism can be addressed to the notion of presence itself, especially in the adamant opposition Bonnefoy makes between it and conceptual systems. Buch writes:

> The concept must be cast aside in order to access what Bonnefoy calls presence – also written Presence, thus showing the problem more clearly – which is said to be the apprehension of the object such as it is outside of language. Already we see the first paradox of a poetics conceived as the pure reflectivity of language, as the criticism of language by language, the denunciation of the concept by the concept (for indeed, what are the One, Presence, the Image and the other broad terms of Bonnefoy's poetics if not concepts?); poetry seems not to have the means to escape from this circle. It is, on the contrary, a headlong flight towards ever more language whereas what it wants is a return to something resembling a pre-linguistic apprehension of reality.[41]

Thus Bonnefoy's tenacious faith in the capacities of poetic language to provide readers with an experience of presence stumbles, in the end, on the duality of presence itself and the difficulties that accompany its transmission, thus demonstrating the true difficulty of making a purely literary text bear the burden of conveying position that is eminently philosophical.

Conclusion: the essay as a potential solution

As I have argued more completely elsewhere,[42] in the end, and in spite of his stated conviction that poetic language can render presence, this presence cannot be served by poetry alone. This fact is borne out by the body of Bonnefoy's writing and his overwhelming reliance on the essay to convey his *ars poetica*. Indeed, much of the impetus driving the writing and structuring of his essays resides in a need to provide a more manageable and perhaps more stable access to the

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[38] Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 67, emphasis Bonnefoy.
[39] Barthes, *Mythologies,* as quoted Steven Winspur, 'The Poetic Significance of the Thing-in-Itself,' *SubStance*, no 41, (1983) 41.
[40] Winspur, 42.
[41] Arnaud Buchs, *Yves Bonnefoy à l'horizon du surréalisme*, (Paris, Galilée, 2005) 11-12.
[42] 'Fragmentation and Unity: Language and its becoming in the Essays of Yves Bonnefoy.'

notion of *présence* and this is linked not only to the conceptual nature of presence, but also to the socio-cultural role of poetry in the contemporary literary landscape and the fact that it has remained, or has even *become* the most intransitive of genres because of its perceived obscurity and potential inability to communicate to a broad readership.

Bonnefoy's reliance on the essay to complement his poetry can thus be seen as an attempt to inflect the reader's capacity to recognise and embrace the true experience of *présence* within the poetic text. Indeed, if Bonnefoy's firm commitment to the notion allows him to posit the capacity of poetic language to convey it, far less certain is the idea that readers not conditioned to recognise it will adequately perceive *présence* in a text. In some way, then, the reader must be taught to 'see' it. Perhaps the essay, which allows for a description of presence that cannot be given in poetry, is the most efficient means of doing so. A second, even more pragmatic consideration that parallels this potential 'training' of the reader is the inescapable fact that we live in a society with diminishing numbers of readers of poetry. As a consequence, poetry alone may not touch significant numbers of readers, and may thus not allow enough readers to come into contact with the notion of *présence* which is Bonnefoy's primary objective. The purpose of his essays is thus potentially two-fold, first, at a lesser level, they inform readers of the larger capacity of language contained in poetry, and secondly, they prime the readers and encourage them to turn to poetry in order to seek what Bonnefoy calls the 'salvation' that can be found there.

But in the end, if literature, in the form of poetry, is the ardently desired *telos* of this position, the limitations of purely literary writing are manifest: though poetry *may* contain presence, that simple possibility is not enough to encompass its full philosophical complexity through poetic language alone. Bonnefoy anxiety transpires in the poem 'Le Haut du Monde:'

> Est-il vrai que les mots soient sans promesse
> Eclair immense en vain,
> Coffre qui étincelle mais plein de cendres?[43]

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[43] Is it true that words are promiseless
An immense flash of lightening in vain
A dazzling coffer but filled with ashes?