

Presence and the Imperceptible: From Philippe Jaccottet and André Frénaud to Denise Le Dantec and Heather Dohollau

by

Michael Bishop

Parmi les signes
ne nie pas¹

To speak today of factors of presence in the literary context may trouble those raised on the various post-Mallarméan diets of formalism, semiotics and (inter)textualism. Is not all destined to 'end up as a book', that utterly 'antinatural' locus of aesthetic emotion of which Reverdy so eloquently speaks, that bizarre written anti-place of exile, loss and spectral errancy which Jabès' work so questioningly enacts? Is not the very notion of poetic presence swamped by the persistent discourses of autotelic function, polysemic performance, by the strict interiority of the literary theatre conceived beyond *hors-texte*? 'O distance soudain lucide', writes Pierre Torréilles in his 1973 *Denudare* (p.48), conscious of the gap suddenly looming between word and world, articulation and experience. And, as Michel Deguy reminds us – beyond, moreover, his long-developed poetics of *l'être-comme-*, all desire for literary, poetic 'originality' constitutes, over and above the need to say the real, a paradoxical need to '*supprimer dans mon dire à mon tour toute cette "présence"*' (*Aux heures d'affluence*, p.24).

But, of course, to discourse thus is in no way to discard presence as an experience, a mortal given, slippery though the latter may be, nor is it to displace, despite any *feeling* or *theory* of ontic evacuation, from that locus/non-locus of action-upon-the-world that is any book, the experience-now it represents, the *acte de présence*, as Bonnefoy would say, it generates. 'Ineffacer le devenu-incroyable' has become Deguy's current watchword and the (poetic) action it entails requires a presenting, a rendering present, as a present, of the propositions of our perceived infinity-within-finitude (AHDA,² *passim*). When Torréilles writes 'Je dis ce mur / Peuplé / Ruisselant d'ombre' (D, p.54), he seeks to close the gap between saying and being; his speech may not be directly transitive, acceding to an absolute having of being, if I may put it that way, yet a presence of some symbolic and psychological order is preconised. Baudelaire, in effect, well understood this, as Bonnefoy has sought to demonstrate, his elevations and sublimations always *remaining* engaged in a moving tussle with life's miasmas, with the horror and the compassion of rending presence; and Reverdy's poetics can only properly be understood, I should argue, if his aesthetics of antinature is thrust up against his ontology of self-world-word consubstantiation which reweaves aporetically presence with absence. 'Etre sans / être entre une nature prose / et l'absente

poésie', Jude Stéfan has recently put it in the throw-away, tongue-in-cheek manner of his *Libères* (p.34). The fact that raw reality seems either plunged into 'silence', in accordance with, say, Pongian poetics, or tiresomely overdetermined precisely by language, as with Michaux – such a fact only confirms that poetry's task remains concerned with what Toreilles calls an 'ici / Dans le déroulement du réel invisible' (D, p.41), a logic of constant re-approach and *rapprochement* as Deguy writes, or, as Ponge affirms, a homological, analogical-differential remaking of the world. Presence, then, whatever else we shall see it to be in the analyses to come, asserts itself as a psychological, ethical and 'ecological' intervention via the poem, via the ontic/textual 'passingness' or 'going' that, as Char argued, is already 'sufficent'. Such an intervention mirrors the real, is an equivalent *acte de présence* as it were, not in any mimetic fashion, but only inasmuch as the real and the poetic or textual emerge *and* fade together, in correspondence: if presence is beyond grasp, mortal, ephemeral, so is the poem always a place of unfinished and unfinishable business, of ever-(ex)changing transaction. Bonnefoy's 1992 *La Vie errante* confirms his adherence to a poetics of consent and devotion to the hazardous rhythms of a *présence* beyond fixable meanings, always in excess of the temptations of aesthetic 'excarnation', giving privilege, as with Marie-Claire Bancquart in *Sans lieu sinon l'attente*, to the mystery of mortality's odd incompleteness, the absences and lacunae of presence. The becomingness of the moment, 'coeur du monde' as Jacqueline Risset terms it in *Petits éléments de physique amoureuse*, allows not just for a constantly sliding exile but, paradoxically, for that emergence or birth, synonymous with 'question', as André Frénaud and Anne Teyssiéras ever remind us, but a question only available via presence, our ontic/poetical *présent-ification* (cf. Claude Simon). Interrogation, 'le pays du dire habitable', writes Teyssiéras in *Le Chemin sous la mer*, where she can articulate, again with Frénaud, the ceaseless tensions of presence as absence and absence as a void potentially, presently, fillable, where 'tous les possibles saluent' Let us look further at some of these matters, and in more focussed context.

Philippe Jaccottet, *Cahier de Verdure* (1990), Jacques Dupin, *Echancré* (1991), Yves Bonnefoy, *Début et fin de la neige* (1991), André Frénaud, *Nul ne s'égare* (1986), Denise Le Dantec, *Les Fileuses d'étope* (1985), Martine Broda, *Passage* (1986), Janine Mitaud, *Poèmes cruels* (1988), and Heather Dohollau, *Pages aquarellées* (1988): these eight books will provide the shifting centres of my remaining reflection that, plural, multifarious, unstable, I shall seek only finally to render synthetic, globally conclusive, though consciously – indeed, hopefully – lacunary. My aims are, thus, not intrinsically ambitious, but fascinated by a larger pertinence that, already, in 1957, Albert Béguin explored in his deft and sensitive *Poésie de la présence: De Chrétien de Troyes à Pierre Emmanuel*, and that, since, Mary Ann Caws,

Mechthild Cranston, Edward Kaplan and many others, have dwelt upon in different ways in the context of Char and other contemporaries not named here.

With *Cahier de verdure*, Jaccottet renews, rethinks and above all re-feels his tense poetics of struggle and vision. To be sure, 'ignorance', distress, separation pursue their long-standing imbricated discourse. But the systemic deconstructions and abyssal plunges of many earlier volumes give way not even to rhythmized oscillation between pain and aeration, hellishness and serenity, but, more sweepingly, more decisively, to a poetics of the oneness of 'horror' and 'joy', their improbable foldedness one within the other, their *com-pli-cation* which is also a *sim-pli-fication*. Negative and positive polarities do not disappear, but they are subsumed in a reciprocally mirrored pertinence which makes of *présence* a ground, a *terre*, beyond appearance or strict sensoriness, of fused perception and imperceptibility, givenness and quasi-mystical *étrangeté* or ontic, telluric otherness. Thus is it that the familiar, the insignificant – the cherry-tree of 'Le Cerisier' – assumes 'un sens différent, ou un sens tout court' (CV, p.14), becomes 'a distant celebration', though one so near, so remote, as to cause the 'event' – for that is what it is, simple, fundamental, present – to be held in characteristic question: 'S'est-il rien passé?' (CV, p.16), presence slipping into the absence it may be deemed to be only for Jaccottet to catch himself in time to recall the very essence of his renewed, and felt, poetics: 'Mais qui vous a jamais rien promis? Du moins, plus que ces leures si beaux qu'ils vous enlèvent le sommeil? Trop beaux pourtant, continue-t-il presque maniaquement à penser, pour n'être que des leures' (CV, p.17). Presence as an unnameable, indecipherable lived sign; but presence, too, as what Jaccottet himself calls *blason* (CV, p.23): emblematicness, pointingness. A *présence* 'tranquil [and] undeniable, [there, simply]' (cf.CV, p.26), yet caught up in a sense – not a theory, though perhaps a belief – of *présence-comme*: 'Des églantiers', he says in 'Couleurs des soirs d'hiver', 'qui montent en guirlandes blanches ou roses dans les cyprès comme une ascension d'anges sur des stèles' (CV, p.65). Presence in the sheer intensity of itself, yet, as Jaccottet puts it in 'Apparition des fleurs', 'giving out onto something else' (cf.CV, p.71), 'l'invisible, ou le dérobé', as he calls it (CV, p.74), something unesoteric, for mediated by '*sénéçon*, *berce*, *chicorée*/groundsel, cow-parsnip, chicory' (cf.CV, p.69), 'Keys to this world, and the other?' (cf.CV, p.72). Experience of the inherent otherness of self, phenomenon, event. 'L'étrangeté la plus grande, sans trace d'étrangeté' (CV, p.74).

Dupin's *Echancré* continues to relate the pained, desperate and derisory visceral experience of writing's *acte de présence*, shot through as it is for Dupin, as in a *moire*, with the improbable but crucial intermittent illumination of its desiring urgency. The closing section 'Une écharde' – a splinter that pierces and hurts, but that penetrates to the core of our being's opaqueness – speaks of 'cette nuit, la quelconque nuit merveilleuse hors de nous, comme une pièce de soie déroulée, décriée, haïe – et

transfigurée ...' (E, p.111): thus is it that, characteristically, Dupin sharply points, like a shard himself, to, into, the this-ness, the drippingly ephemeral quiddity, the ordinariness and the wondrousness, the hatedness and the transfiguredness of the shimmering obscurity of presence, a presence at once felt, interior, mental; exterior, reflected; ever unique, ever becoming. 'Ecrire à l'écart le rien qui sait, qui comprend tout', he continues, 'être mort pour ça, pour écrire, avec le souffle qui me traverse et qui vient d'ailleurs, l'inutile et le nécessaire, ce qui vient d'ailleurs, ce qui va plus loin ...' (E,112). If, for him, presence is absence – ignorance, terror, absurdity: non-knowing, non-ease, non-sense – absence, *equally*, as this passage typically shows (the same could be said for Reverdy, for Char, for Valéry even), implies a sense of what knowledge, 'transcendence', the meaning of meaning, of traversal and trace, is, or are. And certainly, in Dupin, if writing is, as Richard Stamelman has eloquently shown in *Lost Beyond Telling*, ineluctably a discourse of loss, absence and death, a powerful consciousness remains of the irreplaceableness of hieratic visceral living – already a 'spirituality' – 'toujours frotté à la boue du sacre, aux ronces de la folie' (E, p.113). Ignorance and a feeling of meaninglessness may lead to scorn, *contumace*, fierce deconstruction, but they spark, too, desire, a sense of some reserve of possibility, dogged, persistent self-immersion in the fire, the flaming energy Dupin seeks to render legible (cf.E, p.117), an intuition of, and a Bonnefidian will for, something, rather than, though perhaps also mysteriously equivalent to, nothingness. 'L'épreuve du vide vivant ... ce pourrait être la simplicité qui me manque le jour' (E, p.120): the void filling its own lack; absence distilling a presence, a being *en avant*, a self-working, a *présentification*, Simon might have called it.

Début et fin de la neige has no agenda of aesthetic retrenchment, of polysemic symphonicalness. It testifies to a lived and questioned intensity of simple yet profound experience, in an on-going contestation that refuses to dislodge what Bonnefoy varyingly calls 'confidence', 'consent', the 'task of hope'. As such, *Début et fin de la neige* is the poem as mere way, as wayfaring – 'faire du chemin avec ...', Char has said –; it is not end, nor structure, but movement of thought, of emotion, *prae-esse*, for seizing is far less wise than joyous traversal: 'Comprendre ne comptait plus, rire davantage' (DFN, p.23). The book's poetics, however, from the outset marks itself as founded upon experience at once – it is the same experience – in and 'hors du monde' (DFN, p.13). The now-ness, the ever-originatingness, the ever-pristine welling up of being constantly impresses itself upon Bonnefoy and is staggering in its implications for the logic of presence. If the latter's exquisiteness remains bound up with its ephemerality, yet does it 'open at last upon the garden / That is more than the world' (cf.DFN, p.19). In the experience of presence, whether visceral or written, imaginary, 'c'est la transparence qui vaut', he argues with Aristotle (DFN, p.23), this opening of doors upon event, moment, traversed experience. Thus is it that 'mystery' may be

mediated (cf.DFN, p.25); ontic depth, emotional fervour be more fully acceded to; the 'consent of light' or the dreamed word of redemption become real from metaphoric. 'Hopkins Forest' thus conveys both (and simultaneously) a sensual, rawly inalienable presence and 'sa partie qui quitte le visible pour l'invisible' (DFN, p.37). The penetration of presence – which is always inevitably a penetration of self, penetrating – is equally always an experience of otherness, the unthought, the unfelt. An experience of revision, self-revision, that, in writing, yields neither 'having' nor 'being' (cf.DFN, p.42), yet alerts us to the equations of all-ness and nothingness (cf.DFN, p.39). The 'snow', and the 'honey', as Bonnefoy writes, of the experience of what is; a treading of lived thought, rather than abstracted theory: 'La neige piétinée est la seule rose' (DFN, p.50).

Let me quote a short but tellingly pertinent poem from André Frénaud's *Nul ne s'égaré*, 'Là-près':

LÀ-PRÈS

A la limite,
 aux confins des deux,
 – ou ce serait en plein?
 à travers quoi, à la recherche?
 ... Tournesols noirs, frontières brouillées.
 La brume a noyé
 l'imperceptible
 évidence, éperdue.

(NN, p.41)

A poem of nearness, *près-ence* (Frénaud also adds the place of composition, Les Riceys, and the date, 19 septembre 1984), and a poem of distance, there-ness (as the writing of time and place implies equally). A poem, hence, of division, dialectic, joining or near-hyphenation (with or without synthesis: 'at the limits of both, / – or would it be in their midst?'); a poem of presence-as-separation-as-joinedness, plunged into questioning, uncertainty, yet also search, traversal: the poem as, and of, traversal, seeking, movement through separates, cancelling yet preserving separates. 'Là-près' is the poem, too, of the urgent record of the seeming specificity of phenomena, real, there, ever there, despite the blackening of temporality, the fuzziness of spatiality; caught up, too, in a deeper psychological gestalt beyond form, 'frontiers', testimony to a deeper 'evidence' (:*ex-videre*, out of seeing; but also: *é-vidé-ence*: emerging from the void), – an 'evidence' drowned out, even though imperceptible, but, because *deemed* imperceptible, necessarily *intuited* as 'there – nearby'. Plunged into loss and bewilderment, but plunged *Nul ne s'égaré* is certainly, as Frénaud's 'Note en postface' confirms, a book and a poem (NN, p.35) of ironic tensional consciousness swarming with the simultaneity of notions of implacable mortal drift, existential

unstrayingness, and of unspeakable intricacies at work in the focussing and dispersal of 'la quête unificatrice' (NN, p.36). Presence knotted into an imperceptible that is its other name and that ever calls madly, absent sign of some '*universelle dissonance instigatrice*' (NN, p.134).

'O les spasmes de l'automne', writes Denise Le Dantec in her moving and discreetly powerful *Les Fileuses d'étope* with its stark, lived, nervously taut allegories of ontic struggle, search and release – 'O les spasmes de l'automne / Sur les crosses des fougères // Explosif l'oiseau des mers arrache les graines sous les neiges / Et cherche le pain dans la pierre de faim' (FE, np). Presence for Le Dantec is a marriage of exile and flashing ecstasy, lack and magic, confoundedness and writing's effort to relate to it via its 'fugaces et irrécusables éclats', already manifestly suffused with this same logic. As, 'from afar / [we] watch // The earth incarnating', as she says, such incarnation is of a fused 'visible et invisible / Dans la douceur d'ordures de notre terre'. The very 'shadow within the shadow' that haunts her perception of being, gives rise to a symbolism of 'Black Angel[icism]' that yet cannot quite obliterate the 'Angel [that] quietens my wound and bears me up'. The beautiful closing poem, 'Passent les grands charrois ...', of which I have spoken elsewhere, is perhaps most remarkable for the very thing upon which it relies for its articulation: *that* which accounts, barely explicably, imperceptibly, occultedly, for Le Dantec's embrace of taoist drift, multitudinous paradox, a sundry unity of being, for which 'les yeux ne servent plus // A peine si on décele la Vierge dans le Loup': a radically present, if stuttering, but finally released assumption of Bonnefoy's 'tâche de l'espérance'.

Mourning, nostalgia, desire, loss, consolation, dying: such are the residual fragments scattered amongst the blanks and ellipses of Martine Broda's *Passage*. 'Le bleu ruiné', she haltingly writes, 'qui vibre / dans les fleurs // pour consoler l'ange perdu / dont je porte le deuil // il faut qu'une enfance agonise // quand la pluie souffrance interminable bat / le visage intérieur qu'elle supplie // il faut qu'une enfance agonise' (P, np). *Passage* as the poem of passing, of a movement at once of death and of continuity, of the irretrievable and of the emergence of being within the eclipse of being, *passage* as the visceral and textual sign of ellipsis ('TON PASSAGE est ellipse', Broda tells us). Ellipsis: 'lack', for the Greeks, 'being (.) left to one side', gap, absence; but ellipsis as (because passing, passingness,) *pré-sence*, *prae-esse*, the becoming, the going-forth and the drift forward of our being-as-experience, of broken presence as partiality, metonymy, requiring revision, re-vision, because it is itself revision. Presence, thus, too, as the endless becoming, *être-en-avant*, of our *esse-ence*, of the lived intrinsic logic of the relationship between our parts, fragments, passing ephemeræ, and our emerging wholeness of which each dying-living, absent-present element is a cracked mirror, a failing but surging emblem. Broda's mourning is also a 'weaving of the song of angels'. Perhaps we can understand why Bonnefoy admires

her work, as, too, Dohollau's, for it is the place of the difficult emergence of loss as non-loss, the place of the half-glimpsing, through the hurt discourse of self, of self's and all otherness.

'La vie est un long meurtre', Janine Mitaud more than soberly announces towards the beginning of her *Poèmes cruels* (PC, np). The entire collection, however, despite its intense documentation of bloodiness, pain, ecological violence, spiritual 'hibernation' and deception – the entire collection is predicated upon that same, seemingly inexplicable, unjustifiable, yet fundamental impulse improbably – I think of Bonnefoy again, in using this word – driving the work of a Hugo, but also a Baudelaire, a Rimbaud, a Lautréamont: the imperceptible from which flower innocence, compassion, love. 'Cette part de mon être / Dans les désastres effondrés / Ne périt ne pourrit et je dus l'assumer': an assumption of what Mitaud terms 'the invisible blood [of soul]', an assumption comparable to the act of will in Bonnefoy, to the recognition of the 'necessity, yet', of self-risk in Jaccottet. (And indeed, what is the meaning of, even, frustration or derision, if not that 'troddenness of existence' of which *Début et fin de la neige* speaks, but doubly trodden, nearly crushed, forgetting the imperceptible logic of all treadableness?) The questioning of presence, in Mitaud, thus traverses harsh and austere terrain, but achieves a sense of openness, option, ever feasible recuperation, a gentler though hard-won and never truly accomplished knowledge of our condition. To assume presence, in Mitaud, is to write at the intersection of a difficult alertness and an intuition of ontic, psychic meaning on a cosmic scale. The latter meaning, however, radiates from 'ce mystère ce signe diapré d'amour', from some imperceptible that is yet, as she says, a 'foetus [within] despair'.

'We are the hieroglyphs of depth / In depth itself', Heather Dohollau writes, a few years before the publication of *Pages aquarellées*, in her pointedly titled *Matière de lumière*. Her exquisitely perceptive and unpretentious work articulates the interlacements of the ephemeral and the eternal; the interchange, the perhaps symbolic equivalence, of matter and mind; the specificity of our sojourn and yet the psychic climate that informs, even creates, it; the urgency and the mystery of presence, along with both the occulted, imperceptible meaning of such urgency, and the glory of *that* – that unnameable, that energy – which *is* phenomena, *is* presence, *and* raises and buoys the latter up. Beyond any logic of absolute origin or end, Dohollau's 'belief' – for *all* is but belief – lies in the sacredness of being's streamingness, its meaning-ness (if I may put it that way) beyond banal delimitation. 'Oiseau qui passe / Détachant dans le jour / La présence pure' (PA, np): minimal, anonymous, an invitation to 'fidelity', as she writes, an emergence-dispersal through what Dohollau terms the 'invisible gates' of being – of 'everything, nothing', Bonnefoy might say (DFN, p.39) –, allowing the circulation of the imperceptible within the range of perception. 'Ici et là-bas' – one thinks of Frénaud's 'Là-près', but there is a crucial affective shift – 'ici et là-bas se

touchent / Sous le voile du visible / Paume contre paume', presence beyond appearance, beyond matter, beyond voice, yet trailing them along; presence as the depth of (our, my, your) experience of all that is, of a being barely glimpsed, constantly displaced, displacing. 'Nous sommes où nous sommes si peu' ...

*

Are there conclusions to be reached in the fused matter of presence and imperceptibility? Probably not, in my book, as, I should argue, in any of those evoked here today. I shall offer five linked observations, however. Firstly, presence's simultaneous intuitability, traversability, and its recalcitrance, its very fugaciousness, its equally inherent imperceptibility, tend at once to invite and elude conclusion or closure. Secondly, the inimitability of presence's trace, its uniqueness, its non-conceptualisable quality does, despite all, manifest itself as perceivable vestige, affective, psychic, rather than strictly sensory. Thirdly, the value, the intensity, the pertinence or meaning of presence's trace are unmistakable, yet involve a value, a sense, not reducible, not systematisable, not banally decipherable from their endlessly supple symbolism. Indeed, fourthly, such traces not only front upon, but merge totally, precisely, with an *imperceptible*, at once in temporal and spatial terms, but, more importantly, in ethical, psychological and spiritual terms. Fifthly, presence is an experience beyond need of justification, but needing our consent rather than our judgement; urging our belief (which does not disallow inquiry, interrogation, a full range of emotion and response) rather than dismissal, cynicism; requiring our confidence in the exquisite emergence/passage of what is in all its mystery, in the joyous and painful urgency of its intrinsic, if blinding, purpose, textualised, poeticised, or not, ... But presence flees even if it equally invites such groupings: it will, precisely, not be shut up, for its logic is an ontic flow eternally bootstrapping itself through us and all that is, 'imperceptible/évidence, éperdue', 'there-nearby', but knowing no divisions.

Notes

1. Esther Tellermann. *Première apparition avec épaisseur*, p.40.
2. For all abbreviations, see the Works Consulted below.

Works Consulted

Marie-Claire Bancquart. *Sans lieu sinon l'attente*, Paris, Obsidiane, 1991.

Yves Bonnefoy. *Début et fin de la neige*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1991. (DFN)

Yves Bonnefoy. *La Vie errante*, Paris, Maeght, 1992.

Martine Broda. *Passage*, 1986. (P)

Michel Deguy. *Aux heures d'affluence*, Paris, Seuil, 1993. (AHDA)

Heather Dohollau. *Matière de lumière*, Romillé, Folle Avoine, 1985.

Heather Dohollau. *Pages aquarellées*, Romillé, Folle Avoine, 1988. (PA)

Jacques Dupin. *Echancré*, Paris, P.O.L., 1991. (E)

André Frénaud. *Nul ne s'égare*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986. (NN)

Philippe Jaccottet. *Cahier de verdure*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990. (CV)

Denise Le Dantec. *Les Fileuses d'étoupe*, Romillé, Folle Avoine, 1985. (FE)

Janine Mitaud. *Poèmes cruels*, Mortemart, Rougerie, 1988. (PC)

Jacqueline Risset. *Petits éléments de physique amoureuse*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991.

Jude Stéfan. *A la Vieille Parque, précédé de Libères*, Paris, Gallimard, Coll. Poésie, 1993.

Esther Tellermand. *Première apparition avec épaisseur*, Paris, Flammarion, 1986.

Anne Teyssiéras. *Le Chemin sous la mer*, Mortemart, Rougerie, 1992.

Pierre Torreilles. *Denudare*, Paris, Gallimard, Coll. Poésie, 1993. (D)