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## Review Article

### Presence and Image: The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy

*The Act and the Place of Poetry. Selected Essays.* Edited by John T. Naughton. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989. Pp. 172. \$26.95.

The significance and profundity of the work of Yves Bonnefoy in the realm of contemporary French letters can hardly be overstated in an age frantic with the hydraheaded pursuits of form and structure, system and concept, dizzy with the flashing myriad *prestiges* of a rattling nothingness whose endless niceties we tirelessly construct and deconstruct. In the wake of the many writings Bonnefoy has offered us since the publication in 1953 of *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*—poetry, essays and books on art and literature, translations of Shakespeare, etc.—have come numerous assessments and analyses, by critics and poets, philosophers and linguists, that have served to demonstrate the centrality and brilliance of a *démarche* finally crowned, in 1981, by his nomination to the Chair of Comparative Studies in Poetic Function at the Collège de France, upon the death of Roland Barthes. Thus, after the powerful and seminal critical work of writers such as Jean-Pierre Richard, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Emmanuel Clancier, Philippe Jaccottet and others, came the penetrating study of John Jackson (*Yves Bonnefoy*, Seghers, 1976), the special issues of *L'Arc* (1976) and *World Literature Today* (1979), the *Colloque de Cerisy* in 1983 (published with *SUD* in 1985), and a flurry of major analyses by Jérôme Thélot (*La Poétique d'Yves Bonnefoy*, Droz, 1983), Mary Ann Caws (*Yves Bonnefoy*, Twayne, 1984), John Naughton (*The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy*, Chicago, 1984), Richard Vernier (*Yves Bonnefoy ou les mots comme le ciel*, Narr, 1985), Gérard Gasarian (*Yves Bonnefoy*,

*la poésie, la présence*, Champ Vallon, 1986). More recently have appeared the studies of Daniel Leuwers (*Yves Bonnefoy*, Rodopi, 1988) and Michèle Finck (*Yves Bonnefoy: le simple et le sens*, Corti, 1989). Not surprisingly Bonnefoy's work has become the object of substantial translation: one may note, in particular, *Of the Movement and Immobility of Douve* by Galway Kinnel (U of Ohio P, 1957), *Written Stone* by Susanna Lang (U of Massachusetts P, 1976), *Poems 1959-1975* by Richard Pevear (Random House, 1984) and John Naughton's *The Act and the Place of Poetry. Selected Essays* (U of Chicago P, 1989).

What is it that Bonnefoy has to say that provokes such diligent attention and such prolific response? Is his poetry so profoundly original; are his thoughts so truly compelling, so essential to our contemporary sensibility? To answer these questions we must, paradoxically, immediately plunge into the heart of much that is central to Bonnefoy's own art, as well as his conception of all creative gestures. His writing is at once aggressive, dry-eyed, deconstructive, recalcitrant, and recuperative, loving, healing, synthetic. His piercing analyses are thus always compassionate, his iconoclastic tendencies constantly held in rein by a will for integration, comprehension and unity. His poetry, in this regard, whilst never flatly didactic, is always deeply ethical. It craves meaning, purpose and ontic worth—for its author, for itself, for all those that peruse it. Moreover, whilst implicitly rejecting much literature that surrounds it and from which it diverges, read in the light of Bonnefoy's own critical and philosophical writings, its line of development, far from being satirical, parodic, antagonistic, opts for assent and embrace, openness and vulnerability. If, furthermore, his analytical essays are specific in their delineations and often focus upon given writers and artists—Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Desbordes-Valmore, Valéry, Jouve, and Des Forêts; Balthus, Ubac, Mondrian, Rubens, Bellini, Garache, and Giacometti, etc., etc.—his poetry is finely diffused, its sentiments and thoughts retain an availability, a *disponibilité*, whose profoundly assenting voice opens, mirror-image of its message, upon the world in its teeming totality, imperfect and bleeding, confused and somehow stunningly simple. Iconoclasm and distinction thus give way to love and sensed unity—in all places, in all forms. His work at heart, and increasingly, thus reaches out vigorously and insistently towards a consciousness, half-buried here, swarming with life there, wherein what he deems the tensely vying forces of image and *présence* may fuse their energies and their visions.

It was in the 1950s that Bonnefoy's essential resistance to the prevailing ideologies first emerged with clarity in two sensitively combative essays: "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne" and "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie." If *L'Improbable* (1959) and *Un rêve fait à Mantoue* (1967), *L'Arrière-pays* (1972) and *Le Nuage rouge* (1977), *Entretiens sur la poésie* (1981) and *La Présence et l'image* (1983) and, most recently, *Récits en rêve* (1987) and *La Vérité de parole* (1988), have gone a long way in refining, exemplifying and deepening the sense of these early essays, the latter have lost nothing of their original pertinence and centrality. Briefly, the fundamental tenets of Bonnefoy's initially limned poetics centre firstly upon a refusal of the shimmering glories of the conceptual and ideal, in order, secondly, to reorient attention—and, indeed, our very being—towards the ephemerality, the imperfection, but also the hope and infinite profundity, of what he calls *présence*—and those *actes de présence* that are poems, paintings, sculptures and so on. Such a position defines itself in contradistinction to an aesthetics of closure, textual or pictural privilege and transcendence. It shuns the disincarnations of the creative heterocosm, the false immortality of aesthetic pseudo-absolutes, the purity, perfection and hygiene of that creative *angélisme*, so admirably and futilely pursued and exemplified by the French symbolists from Baudelaire to Mallarmé and Valéry, yet lurking in the shadows for all writers, all creative artists—and for those that worship them. Such a poetics—that of Mallarmé, for example—undergoes, at least in part, a serious perversion of the ontological relationships of language with being. The proud, dissociated mirages of the elaborated textual space offer us the multifarious structures of its absence or (self-/world-) evacuation. Its mediation—Mallarmé admits himself—is one of failure rather than accession. Its original hope founders on the very process of (self-) annihilation it had fostered. Rather than attaining to transparency, knowledge, exchange, it operates a critical, self-abolishing withdrawal into an "act of pure form," now thought autonomous, transcendent, now purely textual, "scriptive"—the iridescent shiftings of pure *Sa*, as Barthes would have it, emptied of *Se*, the windows upon the world tightly closed, sense and being rendered pitifully, but oh so beautifully!, parenthetical.

Bonnefoy's gestures of inquiry are always simple, but deeply pertinent. He asks us, as writers and readers, to reflect upon what we want from writing, and why. Can it truly be that we seek self-burial, a distancing of the written from the world, a dainty, sequined aestheticism or its hard-nosed counterpart, a dry, rattling formalism? All of

this Bonnefoy tends summarily to evoke with the terms *image* or *imaginaire*, urging us to recognize, within ourselves, the contrary pulls of *présence* and a will to be, for being, that, for the poet, can only be satisfied by an act of considerably delicate, but sure, equilibrium. Such a reversal of optic demands an acceptance of the staggering incontrovertibility of presence and its streaming, bloodied lessons: death, *passage*, imperfection; and yet it immediately fires the need for love and compassion, for hope, for the “penetration” of knowledge and being available only via the stunning illuminations of the ephemeral, shot through as Bonnefoy sees it with infinity—“the brief pool” of presence, that is, and of those *actes de présence* that open onto presence: our most deeply compelling creative mediations: “words like the sky, / Infinite / Yet here, wholly, suddenly, in the brief pool.”<sup>1</sup>

*La Présence et l'image*, which is the text of Bonnefoy’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, builds upon much of this and endeavors to orient us towards a vision, not of compromise, but of reconciliation, newly perceived fusion. For this to be achieved, the writer—and reader—certainly must avoid the dizzying lure of the dream’s abyss, remain suspicious of the blinding power of language (and its swirling ideologies), resist the prestige of the created, the snare of its hubris. Writing, for Bonnefoy, may be, crucially, self-inscription, but, far from permitting (any more than self-effacement) the indulgences of what Michel Deguy calls the “self-story,”<sup>2</sup> it constitutes, rather, a profound effort of consubstantiation, of being with self, with the world, others, and the “Other.” “Whatever driftings beset the sign, whatever the blatancy of nothingness, saying *I* remains for poets reality as such and a precise task, one that recentres words, once one has crossed the boundaries of dream, upon that relationship with others which is the origin of being.”<sup>3</sup> The latter, Bonnefoy argues, assumes its reality, its factualness, from the urgency of the *feeling* clinging to the creative act, and from our will for being, our desire for meaning. Our task—the poet’s, the reader’s—thus demands a continuous, streaming re-establishment of openness, of osmosis, and a constant reflection upon those forces of (self-) closure that always press in around us. From such openness and reflection, only, come knowledge; and writing/reading can only be viewed sanely as an *acte de connaissance*—Claudel would have said *co-naissance*, a term which, stripped of its claudelian tendentiousness, Bonnefoy would surely be able to welcome. This persistent critical meditation at the heart of writing, Bonnefoy maintains—and Mallarmé’s case, or perhaps Reverdy’s, would offer excellent evidence of this—can often be sensed

even when the aesthetics of hygiene, closure, esotericism and angelicism burn with powerful and persuasive brilliance: a kind of "subplot" emerges, undermining (self-)abolition, pure aestheticism and the formalistic aspirations of the ideal; the placid surface of autonomous textual logic is roughened and holed by a self-reflexivity that re-establishes the essential tensions of the act of writing and reminds us that the created object, whilst perhaps striving towards some goal, can never be more than a means, a locus of traversal, never the goal itself, nor even The Way. Reverdy himself knew this only too well, despite his tireless efforts to reveal the extent to which the poem, or a given painting—of Braque, of Picasso, of Matisse, of Léger, and of other painters he knew well<sup>4</sup>—could move towards the elaboration of an inner, separate, derealized, but other, newly real world, where the true being of the poet or artist only could be found: ultimately, he recognized, not only was such being not to be located within structure, relationship, form or words, but also, whatever ontological "accomplishment" took place, the latter crumbled, if not to dust then to mere potentiality, upon the completion of the creative act: being was always to be begun again, freshly inscribed in an endless rehearsal of that impossible intimacy of ontic desire and material means. For Bonnefoy, no doubt, the promise of the written orients us more surely, more immediately, more transparently, towards that hope that is bound up with the surging, and dying pulsations of teeming *présence*. Oddly enough, this hope is mediated by the very instinct Bonnefoy feels we need to surrender to in reading, that which would bid us remain within "the intense" rather than analyse it, that which would have us traverse the shimmering edifice of symbols constructed, but not to fall to our knees in worship of the idol; rather to know that mediation is fierily at work, and that it points, without pointing, to somewhere, and something, else. The conclusion, moreover, of *La Présence et l'image* seeks to stress the possibility of imminent resolution of the conflict between the ontological necessity of poetry and the largely *néantisant*, reductive and eliminatory inclination of *la critique nouvelle*: "To my way of thinking, poetry and new criticism are not likely to contradict each other for long. They could soon become one single way of being." In a sense, as Bonnefoy has maintained elsewhere, nothing changes, everything depends upon perspective. But, that a shift in critical perspective is required, there is no doubt. "On the level of those exalted representations, those transfigurations, those fevers that make up our literatures and that oriental wisdom would call our chimera, what would be required is the ability that such wisdom seems to have—but beneath

nothing more than leaves, though our place be history—to accept and refuse at the same time, to render relative what appears absolute, then to reinfuse dignity and plenitude into this non-being. . . .”

Of these and so many other issues central to Bonnefoy's thinking, John Naughton's 1984 study, *The Poetic of Yves Bonnefoy*, offers unquestionably the most thorough and the most elegant exploration to date. His treatment of the philosophical, aesthetic and historical dimensions of Bonnefoy's frequently subtle and yet rigorous probings is always firm, penetrating and yet somehow delicately personal; and his analyses of the poems, whether short or extended, are sensitive at once to the particularities of the “fragment” and to the broader context within which they unfold and in relation to which they necessarily structure themselves, both formally and semantically. Of especial felicity are the pages devoted to *Pierre écrite* (1965) and *Dans le leurre du seuil* (1975), the two major volumes of poetry following *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (1953). Here Naughton achieves not only a fine equilibrium between the analytic and the synthetic, the stylistic/formal/structural depth of the poems and the swirling yet finely intuited metaphoricity that roots everything in ontology and *présence*, but his comparative-contrastive asides and his multi-dimensional cultural discourse result in a criticism that is richly revealing and ever-open, though never didactic or loosely conjured. It is thus particularly apt that Naughton be the instigator and principal translator of the thirteen essays that constitute the 1989 volume, *The Act and the Place of Poetry*. This book is long overdue and will be widely welcomed by critics of poetry and theorists alike. Here, for the first time, and complementing the poetry translations of Kinnel, Lang and Pevear, are many of the major broadly pertinent critical writings of Bonnefoy, from ‘Readiness, Ripeness: *Hamlet, Lear*,’ ‘Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*’ and ‘Madame Rimbaud’ to ‘The Act and the Place of Poetry,’ ‘French Poetry and the Principle of Identity’ and ‘Image and Presence.’ (If it is regrettable that Bonnefoy's writings on Nerval, Desbordes-Valmore, Jouve, Celan and indeed other major writers remain unavailable, such translation may well follow these largely less centred though eminently intense essays. Already Richard Stamelman plans translations of some of the many remarkable studies Bonnefoy has devoted to artists from the Renaissance all the way to those contemporaries treated in his very recent *Sur un sculpteur et des peintres*.) Naughton's prefatory essay, like that of Joseph Frank, offers sensitive and pertinent guidance to readers of *The Act and the Place of*

*Poetry*, which is essential reading for those who write, read and think about the poetic act.

## NOTES

1. Yves Bonnefoy, *Dans le leurre du seuil* (Mercure de France, 1975).
2. Cf. Michel Deguy, *Jumelages / Made in USA* (Seuil, 1978).
3. *La Présence et l'image* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983), 49. My translations.
4. See, for example, Pierre Reverdy's *Note éternelle du présent* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), *Nord-Sud, Self Defence et autres écrits sur l'art et la poésie* (Flammarion, 1975).