

‘Et que faut-il penser / De ces pommes jaunes?’ : An Ecocritical Look at Yves Bonnefoy’s Punctual Colour-work

Is it substance or is it an action? Is it something out there in the extra-personal world, or is it “merely” part of the human imagination? Or could it be all these things, and such questions are irrelevant, as color mocks our usual categories of understanding?

Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*

The sheer number of philosophical and critical accounts of colour that exist can be seen to attest to its slipperiness, to the fact that we are always trying to seize colour, to pin it down in some way, and that it is always evading our grasp. In *Histoire des couleurs*, Manilo Brusantin suggests that conceptual thinkers look at colour ‘d’un regard méfiant’.¹ Louis Marin writes, ‘Le discours des couleurs est un discours désespéré’.² In *What Color is the Sacred?*, Michael Taussig observes: ‘colors love to betray themselves’.³ When Michael Sheringham offers a brief history of philosophical, aesthetic, and psychoanalytic theories of colour in ‘Language, Colour, and the Enigma of Everydayness’, he explores how diverse treatises privilege different poles of the human experience. He takes us on a journey through Newton’s laws of optics and Goethe’s reflections on the subjective experience of colour, Kandinsky’s understanding of the spiritually transcendent nature of pure colour and Duhuit’s engagement with the affective properties of coloured material presence, psychoanalytic theories of colour as sublime or conflictual, before he suggests that an essential feature of colour is the way that it inspires us to theorise but nonetheless outstrips our theories, leaving us to try to reconcile or harmonise our contrasting assessments of it.⁴

¹ Manilo Brusantin, *Histoire des couleurs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), p. 24.

² Louis Marin, ‘Introduction’, in *Histoire des couleurs* by Manilo Brusatin (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), p. 10.

³ Michael Taussig, *What Color is The Sacred* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2009), p. 27.

⁴ Michael Sheringham, ‘Language, Colour, and the Enigma of Everydayness’, in *Sensual Reading: New Approaches to Reading in Relation to the Senses*, ed. by Michael Syrotinski and Ian Maclachlan (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), pp. 127-152 (pp. 129-133).

In ‘Coloursteps in Modern and Contemporary French Poetry’, Susan Harrow suggests that this slipperiness gives colour a special agency. She proposes that ‘the patient work of coming to colour in language’ makes writer and reader more aware of their interactions with the world, attuning them to the manifold ways that human consciousness fluctuates between visual and verbal, conceptual and affective, remembered and imagined aspects of experience.⁵ They become aware of ‘the shape-shifting, self-defining experience in which we participate when we appraise colour or allow ourselves to submit to colour’, catalysing new concepts and practices of selfhood.⁶ In his anthropological, historical, and literary study of colour, *What Color is the Sacred?*, Michael Taussig suggests that it is precisely colour’s capacity to reveal this kind of unstable traffic between thought and sensation, the conscious and the unconscious that has led it to be associated with the sacred.⁷ Paraphrasing the title of Michel Leiris’ famous essay, ‘Quelle couleur a pour moi la notion même de sacré ?’, Taussig proposes that colour invites a materialist and secular, but nonetheless agential and magical, thinking of the sacred. He proposes that colour has the capacity to ‘change the way we see and hence the way we are made aware of the world at large as a body like the human body’.⁸ At a time of environmental degradation and even depletion, he argues that colour can foster immersive practices of looking that reattune the viewing subject to the mysterious and unpredictable nature of material existence, recharging the real with affect and agency, and reawakening our lost sense of fascination and veneration towards it.⁹

As Harrow suggests in ‘Coloursteps in Modern and Contemporary French Poetry’, late twentieth- and early twentieth-first-century French poets engage with particular assiduity with the visual arts (writing ekphrastic poems, practicing art criticism, collaborating on *livres d’artiste*) and frequently puzzle over how colour might be ‘translated’ into a verbal medium. Of all the poets of this generation who experiment with colour (Philippe Jaccottet, Jacques Roubaud, or Béatrice Bonhomme, to name

⁵ Susan Harrow, ‘Colorsteps in Modern and Contemporary French Poetry’, *French Forum*, 37 (2012), II, pp. 35-53 (p. 49).

⁶ Harrow, p. 40.

⁷ Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, p. 9.

⁸ Taussig, p. 243.

⁹ Taussig, p. 19.

but a few), Yves Bonnefoy is one of the figures who interrogates its ‘capacities’ most rigorously and most consistently, and who perhaps has the most fervent belief in its agential force, its capacity to jolt new forms of human sensibility into existence. When he experiments with colour in his poetic writings, it most often appears in isolation. In his essays on painting, he often singles out a lone coloured detail that inspires reflection and transforms his understanding of the entire work. This article investigates the punctual dashes of colour that are dotted throughout his collection of poetry *Début et fin de la neige*, published in 1991, and that manifest themselves with particular force throughout because they are continually thrown into relief by a white backdrop of snow.¹⁰

Etymologically, ‘punctual’ comes from the Latin ‘*punctualis*’ meaning ‘of or relating to a point in space’.¹¹ This meaning is still prevalent in the French use of the word ‘ponctuel’.¹² In many of the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, Bonnefoy is fascinated by a local and specific coloured presence that springs forth from a physical landscape or domestic setting, capturing his attention. What immediately intrigues him is the way that these spots of colour seem to speak to the imagination, as if they were signs, as if they encode a Christian language of colour heraldry, ‘bleu du manteau de la Vierge, émeraude de l’alchimie, rouge dont Delacroix ensanglantait l’Idéal’, as he writes in *Le Nuage rouge* (1977), a collection of essays on poetry and the visual arts.¹³ The poet puzzles over the way that the lone flash of colour punctuates or pierces the landscape, as if rising up, its apparent purity – ‘la note très pure dans la gamme’ (NR, 131) – inspiring thoughts of transcendence and the absolute. And yet, if the isolated dash of colour inspires the linguistic imagination, what fascinates the poet is precisely the way that, even as it excites us, it reveals itself to be beyond our grasp. This is the secondary sense of ‘punctual’ as I use it here: something that pierces or disrupts. This is the quality that Barthes attributes to the *punctum* of a photograph in *La Chambre claire* (1980). The *punctum* is a small but combusive presence that

¹⁰ Yves Bonnefoy, *Ce qui fut sans lumière, suivi de Début et fin de la neige* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 118. All subsequent references will use the abbreviation CQ.

¹¹ ‘Punctual’ in *The Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 1 November 2015].

¹² ‘Ponctuel’, in *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* <<http://www.cnrtl.fr>> [accessed 1 November 2015].

¹³ Yves Bonnefoy, *Le Nuage rouge: Essais sur la poétique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1977), p. 129. All subsequent references will use the abbreviation NR.

transfixes us. It overturns the conceptual schema that we try to impose on the world and transforms how we view the entire scene before us.¹⁴

The agency that Barthes ascribes to this small point resembles the powers that Taussig attributes to colour in *What Color is the Sacred?*. Barthes stresses that the *punctum* draws the viewer's body into the act of looking, that it pierces and penetrates the viewer, opening her up, but that it is also an expansive presence.¹⁵ In a similar manner, Taussig suggests that colour fosters more haptic and participatory modes of seeing that subvert the traditional metaphysical opposition between the viewer and the viewed, reality and its image. He argues that 'color dissolves the visual modality so as to become more creaturely and close, so close in fact that the image – or what was the image – becomes something which can absorb the onlooker'.¹⁶ If colour has the capacity to reenchant our conception of the material world, he proposes that it is because 'it encourages us to take up a world-centred and not a self-centred approach to viewing, [...] to exchange standing above the fray, the God position, for some other position that is not quite a position at all but something more like swimming'.¹⁷ This article investigates how Bonnefoy's punctual dashes of colour in *Début et fin de la neige* draw the reader into their flux, challenging her to adopt a more immersive practice of looking, and to conceive of her own subjectivity in more interactive or 'ambient' terms.

Whilst critics have explored the outward-looking, situated and materialist nature of the gaze in Bonnefoy's poetry, there have been no explicitly ecocritical appraisals of his work to date.¹⁸ This is perhaps due to the prevalent understanding of Bonnefoy's

¹⁴ Barthes defines the *punctum* as a small and contingent detail that arrests our attention, disturbing and subverting the photograph's stable conceptual arrangement (the *studium*), piercing right to the heart of the viewer, and puncturing the entire work. (Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, III, 1974-1980*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 1995), pp. 1124-1126; pp. 1137-1148).

¹⁵ 'Si fulgurant qu'il soit, le *punctum* a, plus ou moins virtuellement, une force d'expansion', Barthes writes. 'Tout en restant un « détail » : il emplit toute la photographie'. Barthes also describes how he then recognises the image 'de tout mon corps' (Barthes, p. 1138).

¹⁶ Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, p. 19

¹⁷ Taussig, p. 14.

¹⁸ Michèle Finck describes his poetry as 'la voie ver la masse et la matière' (Michèle Finck, *Yves Bonnefoy: Le Simple et le sens* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, pp. 408-9) and

central notion of 'la présence'. Bonnefoy defines presence as 'cette intimité du moi et de l'autre qui recrée l'horizon de la présence du tout, arbres, pierres, montagnes – cette immanence où veut et peut dissoudre l'œuvre qui fût personnelle'.¹⁹ Critics have often interpreted this experience of intimacy with the physical world as a union that reconciles the conceptual oppositions that divide existence. Finck describes it as 'la fusion du moi et du réel'²⁰ and Ronald Gérard Giguère as 'l'expérience d'unité de la conscience et des choses'.²¹ In other words, matter comes to consciousness and consciousness to a fuller state of material awareness. Yet, in Bonnefoy's writings on colour is it the contingency of the act of the relation – the gaze – that triggers an experience of 'la présence'. Deconstructing traditional conceptions of the separateness and distinctness of subject and object, revealing both entities to be essentially interactive forces, colour provokes a form of 'radical intimacy' with the material world.²² It makes the subject aware of its immersion in a realm of endlessly ungrounded and interactive material forces, what an ecocritic such as Timothy Morton describes as its submersion in 'a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite edge or centre'.²³

Bonnefoy's punctual dashes of colour reveal the deconstructive force of 'la présence', allowing us to discern its ecocritical implications. They throw human subjectivity into crisis, making the poet acutely aware of the relativity of his act of perception, plunging him into a processual material universe in which he cannot preserve its distinction or affirm its inherent worth. 'La présence' begins with a salutary experience of disorientation. It is this crisis, Bonnefoy argues, that allows humanity to

Patrick Née argues that it articulates 'la présence comme un lieu de l'être, ou un être-au-lieu' (Patrick Née, *La Poétique du lieu dans l'œuvre d'Yves Bonnefoy, ou Moïse sauvé* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), p. 289).

¹⁹ Yves Bonnefoy, *Entretiens sur la poésie (1972-1990)* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1990), p. 58.

²⁰ Michèle Finck, *Yves Bonnefoy*, p. 242

²¹ Ronald Gérard Giguère, *Le concept de la réalité dans la poésie d'Yves Bonnefoy* (Paris: Nizet, 1985), p. 65.

²² My understanding of presence here is thus more in line with John E. Jackson's definition: 'La présence, dirons-nous, est le mode par lequel l'être et la subjectivité, situés dans le même lieu, entrent dans une relation d'ouverture créatrice' (John E. Jackson, *La Question du moi, Un aspect de la modernité poétique européenne* (Neuchâtel : À la baconnière, 1978), p. 301).

²³ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 8-10.

develop a newly dynamic and relational thinking of human subjectivity and of the agency of its material environment. ‘Home is the strangest place’, Morton writes.²⁴ And he proposes that all ecological or ambient writing starts with a process of defamiliarisation.²⁵ Bonnefoy insists that it is only when the poet disrupts the force of all that has been domesticated and fixed by language, stabilised or instrumentalised to the point that we barely notice that it is there any more, that he can feel ‘la présence’: the energy of the continual processes of exchange that animate the world; the dynamic force of our own interconnectedness; our warm but uncanny sense of inclusion in ‘le tout’ or ‘l’un’ of a material universe.

Bonnefoy’s essays on this kind of punctual colour-practice in the visual arts offer a invaluable framework for understanding these isolated yellow or red forms. Two essays from *Le Nuage Rouge* are particularly illuminating: ‘Quelques notes sur Mondrian’, an essay devoted to Piet Mondrian’s *The Red Cloud*, a pre- or proto-abstract landscape painting that is punctuated by an unusual flaming red cloud, painted in 1907 or 1908 (NR, 127-136); and ‘Dans la couleur de Garache’, an essay on Garache’s late-twentieth-century paintings of nude female figures, executed entirely in red oil paint and set against a stark white background (NR, 331-36). What is particularly striking about Bonnefoy’s readings of both these painters’ works is the way the isolated coloured form provokes a state of crisis. In the essay on Mondrian, the poet perceives the cloud as a sign of the absolute, only to discern the transient and processual nature of its red hues, and to struggle to come to terms with the shifting nature of his own perspective. In the essay on Garache, Bonnefoy perceives the painter’s isolated red forms as the vision of an existence that has been drained of any kind of familiar or stable value. Both essays are concerned with the way that the punctual dash of colour makes us aware of the radical contingency of the act of seeing. Both explore how an isolated coloured form becomes an expansive presence, less an object than an ambience or an atmosphere that envelops us.

‘Quelques notes sur Mondrian’ presents, as its title suggests, a long process of questioning. Bonnefoy describes his repeated attempts to read or to understand the

²⁴ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 177.

²⁵ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p. 54.

enigmatic red cloud that punctuates a deliquescent green and blue landscape. At first, its red form excites the poet's linguistic imagination and he perceives it as 'un signe'. He notes that this reading flattens everything else in the painting, and lifts the cloud up 'du rien du monde' (NR, 130). The background is perceived to be 'sans signe de vie', 'vierge, de même que cette mer qui un jour portera ses premières barques' (NR, 128). The cloud is interpreted as 'une lettre d'un alphabet inconnu, mais avec quelque chose de respirant sinon même de sexuel, masse pourpre qui a jeté sa semence' (NR, 128). Bonnefoy subtly demonstrates how an essentialist or appropriative linguistic gaze divides the world, separating the transcendent from the immanent, the meaningful from the meaningless, and pursuing the object of its attention with an intensely logocentric, phallogentric, and colonial desire. And yet, no sooner does this vision reach its climax, than the poet's attitude changes. He starts to discern the processual nature of this cloud's red tones. He senses the ephemeral nature of this red light and feels that it is already dissipating 'dans [...] des irisations de la couleur moins surprenantes déjà' (NR, 130). The cloud is suddenly perceived with melancholy detachment as a wistful and self-conscious projection, a dream of the absolute in a world of material process.

Bonnefoy charts the vagaries of the linguistic imagination as it plays through the volatile red tones of Mondrian's red cloud. He reflects on Mondrian's desire for the absolute and the finite material processes that thwart this desire. Making reference to Freud, he compares the exterior forces that exceed the painter's control to the interior unconscious ones that continually divert his intentions. He suggests that Mondrian's red cloud shows a gaze that is aware of the 'mille transgressions de notre vouloir, mille recourbements de nos décisions' that constitute 'une grande force *englobante* qui dégage sa voie dans nos démarches les plus diverses, dont celles aussi bien que l'on croyait les plus libres' [my emphasis] (NR, 134). Here is the prescient vision of a young painter, Bonnefoy suggests, who knows himself to be immersed, physically and psychically, in a world of dynamic and illimitable forces. The final paragraphs of the essay suggest that the red cloud is a manifestation of these various 'force[s] englobante[s]', that it offers a contingent glimpse of a larger ungraspable process. The red cloud is, he writes, 'un regard sur une totalité dont le sens, aussi obscur nous demeure-t-il, nous semble désormais le réel ultime' (NR, 135). It is a vision of 'notre univers comme tel qui, de l'intérieur, se révèle à la fois la diversité des êtres et l'unité

qui les lie – à la fois le rien et la plénitude, à la fois la ténèbre et une lumière’ (NR, 135). This vision ‘de l’intérieur’ is partial and provisional. It does not stand outside the play of shadow and light, presence and absence. These forces play right through it. It is a radically contingent gaze, but one that is in intimate contact with the very forces that exceed it.

Bonnefoy’s essay on Garache’s isolated red figures, ‘Dans la couleur de Garache’ (1974), begins with a similarly immersive vision of material process. Unlike ‘Quelques notes sur Mondrian’, however, Bonnefoy suggests that it is a deliberately nightmarish vision, comparable to the apocalyptic vision of Babylonian astrologers, or to Mallarmé’s intuition of ‘le néant’. The poet argues that Garache uses the colour red in isolation to deconstruct ‘le réseau de représentations, de valeurs qu’atténue d’ordinaire notre sentiment de vertige devant le vide du monde’ (NR, 333). He suggests that the red female nudes that are set alone against empty white backgrounds explore a fatalistically materialist vision of the human body, showing it ‘cruellement par le dehors, par la matérialité [...] dans la brutale raréfaction de nos raisons d’exister’ (NR, 332). Bonnefoy also argues, however, that the destruction and the ‘raréfaction’ that Garache presents are a painful necessity; that the painter is bravely trying to understand what remains for the human subject to affirm once it recognises the processual nature of material reality. He concludes that Garache affirms ‘la résistance de quelques gestes’, thinking human subjectivity in gestural terms. He proposes that his red figures are icons, ‘Des icônes, disais-je: mais en ce sens prospectif’ (NR, 338). He suggests that they embody value, a value that is no longer absolute but contingent, inherently dynamic and searching. He argues that they reach outwards, seeking some kind of contact or communication, speaking to us but remaining ‘puissances indéchiffrées aujourd’hui encore’ (NR, 338).

Bonnefoy suggests that both Mondrian’s and Garache’s punctual colour-work is profoundly deconstructive; that it refuses to allow the viewing subject to hold itself apart from its vision of material process; that it immerses her in its flux and asks her to conceive of herself – her own being and identity – as being part of this flux. In ‘Quelques notes sur Mondrian’, as the poet contends with the cloud’s shifting red tones, the subject’s exposure to the other is revealed to be ‘la grande force englobante’ that shapes any existence or any work of art. In ‘Dans la couleur de

Garache', colour reveals the relentlessly processual nature of material existence, within which we find ourselves, trying, in the absence of absolute values, to improvise meaningful but contingent forms of relation. The title '*Dans la couleur de Garache*' [my emphasis] expresses this situation eloquently. As Bonnefoy wrestles with these painters' arresting but volatile coloured forms, he explores what kind of experience of identity or meaning remains for the gaze that is immersed or embedded in a dynamic physical world.

These two essays cast light on the isolated dashes of colour that erupt upon relatively blank landscapes in the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*. The collection documents the poet's surprise at his discovery of 'this fifth element', snow, when he spent a winter living and working in Massachusetts, America. Many of the poems describe the process of defamiliarisation that occurs when snow falls, interrupting the tonal play of colour in a landscape, and repainting everything white. The first poem depicts three snowfalls and, with each, the isolation of individual colours. With the first, patches of ochre and green remain beneath the trees. With the second, there is still a light stippling of dark pine needles. With the third, there is only the spectacle of sheer white. From one line to the next, the reader is left to contend with colour in all its indeterminacy, with minimal assistance from the poet. This is, of course, exactly the point. Bonnefoy wants us to have to wrestle with colour, to try – and to fail – to pin it down, and to think about what this process reveals about the act of seeing and our relationship with the physical world. In any of the poems, the dash of colour is presented within the context of an open question. The brief poem 'Les Pommes' begins:

Et que faut-il penser
De ces pommes jaunes?
Hier, elles étonnaient, d'attendre ainsi, nues
Après la chute des feuilles.²⁶

Bonnefoy uses the question form to suggest the strange way that this isolated yellow presence – hanging on bare branches against a backdrop of white – arouses and unsettles thought. In the short poem 'De rerum natura' too, Bonnefoy compares falling snowflakes to Lucretius' falling particles and he relates both these aleatory

²⁶ Yves Bonnefoy, *Ce qui fut sans lumière, suivi de Début et fin de la neige* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 118. All subsequent references will use the abbreviation CQ.

dynamics to the actions by which words come together in poetry or images surface in the mind. The poem ends with the question:

D'où viennent ces deux ombres
Qui vont riant,
Et l'une emmitouflée
D'une laine rouge? (CQ, 122)

The final image of red wool resonates enigmatically. It suggests the contingency of thought, its inability to ground itself or to establish its provenance, its immersion in dynamic processes that it does not control. But the open question and the final resonant image of 'laine rouge' seem to accept rather than resist this indeterminacy. Bonnefoy suggests that colour's uncertain resonance offers us an important means of coming to terms exploring the contingent interventions that human thought can make in an atomistic material world.

One of the longer poems in *Début et fin de la neige*, 'Hopkins Forest', is dotted with a series of punctual dashes of colour. These visions trigger a process of transformation that is similar to the one that the viewer undergoes in the essays on Mondrian and Garache. 'Hopkins Forest' contains five sequences of varied lengths. It is written in free verse but interspersed with regular decasyllables and alexandrines. The poem describes a dream and then a memory and, as the poet aligns three diverse anecdotes, the motif that connects them all is the image of falling snowflakes. In the opening sequences of the poem, the emphasis is continually placed on visual description, on the mapping of space and the description of colour. The poet describes a dream in which he goes out to the well to draw water and sees the night sky turn an intense black. The constellations, the familiar forms that humanity used to orient itself and to record its own mythology, disappear. The sky is startlingly, unrelievedly, black: 'Le noir le plus intense y régnait seul' (CQ, 133). But in the left-hand corner of the sky, entangled in terrestrial folds of vegetation, an enigmatic red cluster of stars appears: 'Il y avait un amas d'étoiles rougeoyantes / Comme un brasier, d'où montait même une fumée' (CQ, 133). We puzzle over how to read this image. We realise that we are indeed tempted to read it, as if it were a sign. It makes us think of Mondrian's red cloud. Smoking or smouldering in a way that is perhaps foreboding, it also makes us think of Garache's paintings, the reds that cause Bonnefoy to 'rêver à des attractions

plus obscurément matérielles, appels d'étoiles lointaines, fatalités comme en percevaient dans le ciel les astrologues pessimistes de l'antique Babylonie' (NR, 332).

The second sequence of the poem offers a mirror vision of the first, skilfully repeating and inverting its images. Having walked out and looked up towards the sky, the poet now returns home and looks down at a book. The blackness of the sky gives way to whiteness of the page, and all that was richly painted before is now sparsely drawn. The poet looks at the text on the page and it suddenly refuses to yield any meaning:

Page après page,
Ce n'étaient que des signes indéchiffrables,
Des agrégats de formes d'aucun sens
Bien que vaguement récurrentes. (CQ, 133)

Words are perceived from the outside, as mere graphics, hieroglyphs with no discernible sense. The poet traces these recurrent patterns, unable to unlock their meanings. If the red stars were indeed a portent of destruction, this seems to be the catastrophe that they foretold. We are confronted with a world of dead surfaces, of hollow graphic forms, from which all sense has drained. Language no longer grants any purchase on reality and the page looms below, 'une blancheur d'abîme'. In a telling simile, Bonnefoy suggests that it is as if 'l'esprit', the human mind or spirit, is falling there: 'Comme si ce qu'on nomme l'esprit tombait là, sans bruit, / Comme une neige' (CQ, 133). Without noise, without resistance, 'l'esprit' falls like snow. The poet succumbs to this motion, to this very Mallarmean vision of human powerlessness in the face of 'le néant'. It is hard to tell whether the sequence ends on an image of heroic or pointless persistence. It simply concludes with the poignantly understated formulation: 'Je tournai cependant les pages' (CQ, 133).

A punctual dash of colour at the beginning of 'Hopkins Forest', 'un amas d'étoiles rougeoyantes', throws the poet into crisis. Colour swells and grows subversive; material processes assert a threatening autonomy, and the poet feels the familiar values with which he normally invests existence slipping away. The act of reading becomes impossible. The poet perceives the essential arbitrariness of language, the interchangeable and expendable nature of all its forms. The white surface of the page – once a closed and sovereign space, a place of mastery – now seems to be a limitless void, an empty space through which the poet can only fall, like snow. This image

echoes the image of Lucretius' endlessly falling particles in 'De rerum natura'. It presents a vision of an unrelievedly material existence in which we are all, like snowflakes or atoms, subject to the same processes of material entropy.

In the fourth sequence of the poem, the poet reflects on the image of falling snow as he walks in 'Hopkins Forest', Massachusetts, one autumn. He considers the earlier vision of snow as an anarchic or entropic material process that obliterates human attempts to construe meaning. As he watches the forest gradually fill with snow, he starts to see its dynamics in a different light. He suspects that the expectation generated by language, our desire to read the world as if it were a set of absolute signs and our inability to do so, is perhaps what causes us to perceive a world of contingent material processes as sterile or meaningless: our desire to see these snowflakes as 'signes' contradictorily produces a vision of '[un] monde dévasté' (CQ, 134). As the poet considers this possibility, he is startled by the apparition of a punctual spot of colour on the horizon. As snow levels the entire landscape, one coloured wooden board remains uncovered:

La masse blanche du froid tombait par rafales
Sur la couleur, mais un toit au loin, une planche
Peinte, restée debout contre une grille,
C'était encore la couleur. (CQ, 134)

This board is a simple but curious presence. It remains stubbornly upright, refusing to be flattened, continuing to show its colour as everything else is painted white. Its particular colour is never specified, as if to suggest its indeterminate or effusive nature. The sequence ends with a remarkable simile that compares this risen or unabolished form to the scene of *Noli me tangere*. Bonnefoy suggests that it is 'mystérieuse': 'Comme un qui sortirait du sépulcre et, riant : / « Non, ne me touche pas », dirait-il au monde' (CQ, 135).

Bonnefoy makes an allusion not simply to the biblical scene of *Noli me tangere* but also to the long tradition of epiphanic religious paintings depicting it. The coloured board is compared to the risen Christ, who appears even as He is on the point of leaving, and whose body is tangible and yet intangible, alive and yet dead, mortal and yet immortal. Inexplicably escaping the downfall of snow, colour continues to show itself. It rises up, as if to suggest that it has a unique worth, as if to suggest that it

cannot be abolished. It appears to be a sign but the message that it communicates is a refusal: ‘« Non, ne me touche pas »’. The board will not be touched, by the snow, or by the poet. The epiphany it offers is a revelation of its intangibility or unavailability, its mystery. It reveals that there is no possible explanation for what is happening here. Or, rather, there are many possible explanations and, to each of them, the board says ‘« Non, ne me touche pas »’. Bonnefoy presents colour as the medium that make us feel this tantalising mixture of invitation and refusal. He suggests that, in precisely the moment it excites and exceeds the linguistic imagination, it reveals its epiphanic force.

The final stanza of the poem describes how the memory of this punctual dash of colour stays with the poet. Bonnefoy presents it as an essentially liminal intuition, one that makes him aware of and encourages him to keep probing the limits of sensory experience:

Je dois vraiment beaucoup à Hopkins Forest,
Je la garde à mon horizon, dans sa partie
Qui quitte le visible pour l’invisible
Par le tressaillement du bleu des lointains. (CQ, 135)

Keeping this memory ‘à mon horizon’, the poet preserves it on the periphery of his vision. He feels it drift into the distance, ‘[p]ar le tressaillement du bleu des lointains’, the visible slipping towards the invisible in a quivering line of blue. Bonnefoy suggests the liminality of sensory experience or memory using this remarkable image of trembling colour. He describes his own contingency, his own exposure to the imperceptible or the unknown, but now the dynamism and unpredictability of his situation does not trigger the same sense of crisis. On the contrary, he keeps returning to this liminal experience; he keeps probing colour and even sound. He pursues its ‘tressaillement’ as he strains to hear ‘à travers les bruits’. He pursues it too as he peels back layers of dead leaves on the forest floor, ‘pousant du pied les feuilles mortes / D’autres années’ (CQ, 135).

As he does so, he feels the forest floor suddenly open: ‘ce sol s’ouvre / À l’infini’ (CQ, 135). One line of poetry falls through into the next in an enjambment and the ground below the poet’s feet – this finite substance, this foundation or base – opens onto infinity. In the empty space below, he sees leaves falling there, ‘Sans hâte, ou

bien remontent, le haut, le bas, / N'étant plus, ni le bruit' (CQ, 135). It is as if the poet can see their decomposing particles falling through the earth. And yet, as one short clause after another accumulates, as monosyllables and negative constructions proliferate and all conceptual oppositions dissolve, the poet perceives the infinite nature of this motion. He does not feel himself to be falling impotently through space as he did in the second stanza of the poem. There is no longer any conception of up or down, nothing except 'le léger / Chuchotement des flocons' (CQ, 135). All stable material forms dissolve into a swirl of dancing particles and the image of snow recurs once again. Whispering lightly, its mobile forms seem to speak some infinitely delicate and inaudible language. This whispering or rustling mass surges at the end of the poem as these particles 'Se multiplient, se rapprochent, se nouent' (CQ, 135). In this instance, the poet sees the world differently. He feels himself immersed in this swirl of particles: '- Et je revois alors tout l'autre ciel, / J'entre pour un instant dans la grande neige' (CQ, 135).

Bonnefoy uses a traditional image of transcendental or metaphysical revelation, a vision of 'l'autre ciel'. Yet the vision that he presents does not lead upwards or outwards, towards some exterior reality, but inwards, back towards the earth. The *other sky* becomes the interior infinite that the poet glimpses in the trembling line of the horizon or in the decomposing humus, the illimitable motion by which the material slips towards the immaterial, being towards nothingness. The poet deconstructs the metaphysical conception of the transcendental, asking us to envisage this concept instead in dynamic and materialist terms as the very opening of being. In a rather similar way to which Celan or Heidegger think divinity as the withdrawal or 'passing' of the gods, he rethinks the transcendental as the void or the depths out of which existence is continually emerging and retreating.²⁷ It becomes what Jean-Luc Nancy would describe as a 'trans-immanence'.²⁸ The poet senses it running through

²⁷ See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Calcul du poète', in *Demande: Littérature et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 2015), pp. 111-143.

²⁸ In *Le Sens du monde*, Nancy writes: 'Dès que l'apparence d'un dehors du monde est dissipée, le hors-lieu du sens s'ouvre *dans* le monde – pour autant qu'il y ait encore du sens à parler d'un « dedans » –, il appartient à sa structure, il y creuse ce qu'il faudra savoir nommer mieux que la « transcendance » de son « immanence » - sa *transimmanence*, ou plus simplement et plus fortement, son existence et son exposition' (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Sens du monde* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p. 91).

the world and through himself. Immersed in its flux, the poet feels himself dissolve into an aggregate of particles. His being is not diminished, however, but becomes buoyant. He becomes part of a vast swell of energy and he sees, as he did in the final paragraphs of the essay on Mondrian, 'l'univers comme tel, de l'intérieur'. He sees being and nothingness, summer and winter, the earth and the sky, one within the other, one alongside the other. He accepts that he is part of this squall of interactive forces.

The punctual dash of colour that invites and yet resists the viewer in the final stanzas of 'Hopkins Forest' offers an important corrective to the essentialist and appropriative impulses of the linguistic imagination and to the 'will to power' of the supposedly autonomous subject. Bonnefoy explores how even the smallest point of colour can become a volatile and changeable presence, its energy infiltrating an entire scene, behaving more like weather, like snow or heat, than a material object. As Taussig reminds us, etymologically, 'colour' comes from the Latin 'calor'.²⁹ 'To equate *calor* with *color*', Taussig writes, 'detaches us from a purely visual approach to vision and makes color the cutting edge of such a shift. Color vision becomes less a retinal and more a total bodily activity to the fairytale extent that in looking at something, we may even pass into the image'.³⁰ The dash of colour becomes an atmospheric presence that draws the whole body into the act of perception, making us feel the myriad ways in which colour enters us and in which we enter into colour. This bodily exchange deconstructs not only the dualities of self and world, but also of image and world. Taussig writes that colour becomes 'more a presence than a sign'³¹ and the image too is perceived as a force, an active and absorbing ambience.

Certainly, at the end of 'Hopkins Forest', air, the empty medium that normally serves to separate and juxtapose forms, grows thick. Matter too grows more spacious. The world feels at once more intimate and more immense as all that was ignored a second before, thought to be inert or empty, is suddenly charged and resonant. Using images of the very big and the very small, a galactic imagery of nebulous universe or a Lucretian imagery of swirling particles, Bonnefoy makes us feel the visible and

²⁹ Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, p. 6.

³⁰ Taussig, p. 6.

³¹ Taussig, p. 6.

invisible forces that conduct and contain us. The snow that was previously envisioned as a blank background, throwing a single coloured plank into relief, now foregrounds itself in an all-consuming swirl of dancing particles. In Mondrian's painting too, a featureless background, all that seemed 'plane' and 'sans signe de vie' at first, comes to life in the end as greens and blues, fringed with whites and blacks, 'vibrent à l'infini' (NR, 136). In the article 'Queer Ecology', Morton suggests that this phenomenon is typical of environmental or 'ambient' art. 'The background becomes the foreground', he writes, 'dissolving the distance necessary for cool aesthetic contemplation rather than ecstatic sensation'.³²

And as the air becomes more palpable, human subjectivity too becomes more porous and mutable. Memory, imagination, or physical sense are envisioned as a mobile horizon, a trembling line of blue. As the poet probes this boundary, interrogating colour, sound, and matter, he feels substance opening onto nothingness. All that was thought to be exterior to existence, to lie beyond it, is seen to be active within it. The poet feels material existence arising from and retreating into the void. The strangest and obscurest of forces – nothingness – reveals itself to be the most intimate. And the poet feels himself to be a threshold across which material and immaterial, visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious forces play. This is the uncanny experience of 'intimité' that Bonnefoy experiences as he intuits 'la présence'. He realises that the most human quality of all is contingency itself. 'D'où viennent ces deux ombres / Qui vont riant', he asks in 'De rerum natura', 'Et l'une emmitouflée / D'une laine rouge?' (CQ, 122). And so, in the final stanzas of the poem – as in the final paragraphs of 'Quelques notes sur Mondrian' – he sees from within the cloud, the swirl of particles, the snowstorm. He sees 'le tout' or 'l'un', 'cette force englobante' that has no clear edges or boundaries. He perceives 'une totalité dont le sens, aussi obscur nous demeure-t-il, nous semble désormais le réel ultime' (NR, 135).

The immersive gaze that Bonnefoy dramatises here can be seen to foster an ecological practice of thinking, what Morton describes in *The Ecological Thought* as 'a practice of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings';³³ a thinking that submerges the human subject in 'a vast, sprawling mesh of

³² Timothy Morton, 'Queer Ecology', PMLA 125 (2010), II p. 280.

³³ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p. 7.

interconnection without a definite edge or centre',³⁴ reminding it of its 'radical coexistence'³⁵ or 'unbearable intimacy'³⁶ with exterior forces. It resembles the way in which an agential materialist such as Karen Barad thinks the 'intra-active' nature of all material phenomena, 'the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies', without presuming the 'prior existence of independent entities or relata'.³⁷ In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton suggests that the process of becoming aware of such entanglements makes our circumambient world feel deeply uncanny, 'strangely familiar and familiarly strange'.³⁸ Taussig suggests that it awakens contradictory feelings, 'a combustible mix of attraction and revulsion' in *What Color is the Sacred?*. Bonnefoy's analysis of Mondrian's red cloud too depicts his desire and his disarray. The poet senses with panic that the traditional value systems that have elevated him above the material world, endowing his life with a unique sense, are dissolving into an indiscriminately processual material existence. But he also realises that this process of deconstruction can expose him to the radically other forces that animate both his innermost being and his circumambient world.

In a world in which all conception of transcendent value dissolves, Bonnefoy uses colour to cultivate a thinking of value in contingent and dynamic terms. Herein resides the ecocritical force of his writings. Much like Taussig's thinking of a secular and material 'sacred' in *What Colour is the Sacred?*, Bonnefoy's punctual dashes of colour insist that the sacred persists in a world of material process and that it is as 'combustible' as ever, as unsettling and enchanting. His obstinately dynamic spots of colour confront us with the nothingness that pervades existence, the movement that dissolves all forms. They provoke and excite us, draw us in and cast us out, refuse to allow us to fix or ground any form of value, and – capriciously, kindly, magnanimously – demonstrate that value is nothing other than the process of interaction by which existence perpetuates itself. They thus invite us to affirm the meaning of our own existence in these terms. The punctual dash of colour is thus an

³⁴ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p. 8.

³⁵ Morton, p. 10.

³⁶ Morton, p. 50.

³⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 139.

³⁸ Morton, p. 50.

open question, a challenge to think, and a challenge to thought, an invitation to participate. In a dynamic and a contingent world, it rises up, presenting itself as ‘un icône’, ‘un geste prospectif’.