

Yves Bonnefoy: The Performative and the Negative



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Abstract

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This thesis examines Bonnefoy's cultivation of the performative aspects of the poetic act in his later collections of poetry. It investigates the poet's use of the theatrical structures of poetic performance, their temporal and spatial dynamics, to deconstruct conceptual or representative modes of thought. It examines how Bonnefoy uses apostrophes to insentient phenomena and addresses to an unidentified other in his attempts to open language up to the finitude and sharing of existence. Working within language, against language, the poet cultivates what he describes as 'un savoir, tout négatif et instable qu'il soit, que je puis peut-être nommer la vérité de la parole'.¹

The first chapter of this thesis investigates how the image of the ephemeral flame becomes a model for a finite poetic performance in 'La Terre'. The second chapter scrutinises how Bonnefoy makes the signifying function of language 'passive' to the inappropriate excess of material presence in *Début et fin de la neige*. The third chapter, analysing 'La Voix lointaine', explores how Bonnefoy dramatises the experience of self-presence as the act of listening to a distant voice. The fourth chapter, investigating the relationship between finitude and form in 'L'Heure présente', analyses how the dissolution of form gives rise to a form that is always *à venir*, a dynamic, 'un possible'.

¹ Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 128.

Using the philosophical writings of Jean-Luc Nancy to cast light on this practice of poetic performance, this thesis explores how Bonnefoy sends poetic language out towards all that exceeds it: a flurry of snowflakes, a child's laughter, a dancing shadow. It explores how the poetic act becomes what Nancy describes as 'la tâche de la pensée. Tâche de l'être-au-monde'.²

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Sens du monde* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p. 43.

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Abbreviations

P	<i>Poèmes</i> (Gallimard, 1982)
DF	<i>Ce qui fut sans lumière</i> suivi de <i>Début et fin de la neige</i> (Gallimard, 1991)
PC	<i>Les Planches courbes</i> (Gallimard, 2001)
LC	<i>La Longue Chaîne de l'ancre</i> (Mercure de France, 2008)
HP	<i>L'Heure présente</i> (Mercure de France, 2011)
NR	<i>Le Nuage rouge</i> (Mercure de France, 1977)
IM	<i>L'Improbable et autres essais</i> (Gallimard, 1980)
E	<i>Entretiens sur la poésie</i> (Mercure de France, 1981)
VP	<i>La Vérité de parole</i> (Mercure de France, 1988)
TP	<i>Théâtre et poésie: Shakespeare et Yeats</i> (Mercure de France, 1998)
LD	<i>Lieux et destins de l'image</i> (Le Seuil, 1998)
BR	<i>Notre besoin de Rimbaud</i> (Le Seuil, 2009)
IN	<i>L'Inachevable, entretiens sur la poésie, 1990-2010</i> (Albin Michel, 2010)
SPV	<i>Le Siècle où la parole a été victime</i> (Mercure de France, 2010)
SSB	<i>Sous le signe de Baudelaire</i> (Gallimard, 2011)

Introduction

Yves Bonnefoy's *Dans le leurre du seuil* ends with an image of a wave: 'S'enfle / [...], Et brûle, oui, blanchisse puis déferle / [...] La vague sans limite sans réserve'.¹ One short sentence presents a series of verbs (interrupted by lengthy parentheses that have been omitted here), evoking the movement by which a wave comes into and passes out of being. The motion by which this wave swells is the motion by which it dissipates and disperses. This motion is 'sans limite sans réserve'. It continues ceaselessly. An endless burgeoning and dissolution gives rise to all existence, holding nothing in reserve. Being swells forth eternally, spending itself entirely.

Dans le leurre du seuil, published in 1975, presents one long poem, divided into seven sections. As one reads the final stanzas of this poem, one has little doubt that Bonnefoy envisages the poem itself – a book that spans over eighty pages – as a wave. He envisages poetry as a gesture, a dynamic that burgeons and dissipates. *Dans le leurre du seuil* is the first volume of poetry in which Bonnefoy enacts this vision of the poetic act 'sans réserve'. It is the first volume in which he fully accepts the force of utterance, granting movement primacy and allowing the structures of language to burgeon and dissolve. Bonnefoy's subsequent collections, what is described as his 'later poetry', *Ce qui fut sans lumière* published in 1987, *Début et fin de la neige* published in 1991,² *Les Planches courbes* published in 2001,³ *La Longue Chaîne de l'ancre* published in 2008,⁴ and *L'Heure présente* published in 2011,⁵ can all be seen to emulate this motion.

¹ Yves Bonnefoy, *Poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), pp. 331-2.

² Yves Bonnefoy, *Ce qui fut sans lumière suivi de Début et fin de la neige* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

³ Yves Bonnefoy, *Les Planches courbes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

⁴ Yves Bonnefoy, *La Longue Chaîne de l'ancre* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2008).

⁵ Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Heure présente* (Paris : Mercure de France, 2011).

This thesis examines how, in these later collections of poetry, Bonnefoy cultivates the performative nature of the poetic act. It explores how the poet uses the theatrical structures of poetic performance – their temporal and spatial dynamics – to deconstruct conceptual or representative modes of thought and to open language up to the finitude of existence. It explores how the poet works within language, against language, cultivating what he describes as ‘[un] savoir, tout négatif et instable qu’il soit, que je puis peut-être nommer la vérité de la parole’ (IM, 128). Examining apostrophes to insentient phenomena or addresses to an unidentified other, the use of dialogic structures and even a choral performance, this thesis investigates how Bonnefoy embraces the present moment of performance as a moment of existential risk. It analyses how Bonnefoy dramatises the gesture by which the self, reaching out to the other, opens itself up to the contingency of shared, finite existence and affirms a reality that is always *à venir*.

This thesis analyses what I describe as Bonnefoy’s ‘later poetry’: *Dans le leurre du seuil*, published in 1975, and the collections that succeed it. The majority of existing criticism tends to focus upon Bonnefoy’s ‘early poetry’: *Du mouvement et de l’immobilité du Douve* (1953), *Hier régnant désert* (1958), *Pierre écrite* (1965), and *Dans le leurre du seuil* (1975). These four volumes – praised by critics and then canonised by Gallimard with the publication of all four together under the title *Poèmes* in 1982 – tend to be regarded as the ‘main body’ of Bonnefoy’s poetry. This thesis, however, attempts to draw our attention away from the ‘early poetry’ and towards Bonnefoy’s ‘later works’. It suggests that we might conceive of the evolution of Bonnefoy’s poetic practice in different terms. Examining a performative impulse that is fully realised for the first time in *Dans le leurre du seuil* in 1975, it scrutinises how Bonnefoy explores the finite and dynamic nature of poetic act in his later collections of poetry: *Ce qui fut sans lumière* (1987), *Début et fin de*

la neige (1991), *Les Planches courbes* (2001), *La Longue Chaîne de l'ancre* (2008), and *L'Heure présente* (2011).

This is not to suggest that a performative impulse is absent from Bonnefoy's early poetry. On the contrary, performative or theatrical devices are used in *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*, *Hier régnant désert*, and *Pierre écrite*. *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*, in particular, contains apostrophes, dialogues, and addresses to an unidentified other. This thesis suggests, however, that this performative practice is not fully assumed or realised until the publication of *Dans le leurre du seuil* in 1975. In the early collections, Bonnefoy has a strong tendency to represent his engagement with finitude or the dynamism of existence figuratively. The poet represents the deconstruction of conceptual thought and the acceptance of the finite nature of being using an *imagery* of a theatrical performance, or ritual sacrifice, or questing, or 'l'ordalie'. The poet uses *images* of death and resurrection – the Phoenix, the stag, Douve, the orangery – to represent the salutary force of finitude. And so, whilst the early collections of poetry clearly anticipate the performative dynamics of the later poems, this thesis chooses to focus on the later poems in which Bonnefoy *enacts* these dynamics, using the full resources of the poem's temporal and spatial performance, its structures of address or reference, its rhythms and sound effects.

One of the key motifs in Bonnefoy's later collections of poetry is the fugitive flash of light. So many of Bonnefoy's later poems dramatise a moment in which an apparently transcendental form glimmers for an instant and then dissolves. The poet cries out excitedly and then experiences a profound sense of lack, a profound sense of the 'non-significance' of existence as this light dissolves and disperses. In this moment, the poet commits himself to the present moment of utterance. He commits himself to the moment in

which form simultaneously burgeons and dissolves. 'Et je suis prêt quant à moi', the poet announces in 'L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie' in 1959,

dans le devenir poétique, dans la parole en tant qu'invention ou retour, et pour aller sur la voie qui se découvre la seule, à affirmer follement cet *ici* et ce *maintenant* qui sont déjà, c'est vrai, un là-bas et un autrefois, qui ne sont plus, qu'on nous a volés, mais qui, éternellement dans leur finitude temporelle, universellement dans leur infirmité spatiale, sont le seul bien concevable, le seul lieu qui mérite le nom de lieu. (IM, 125-6)

Bonnefoy commits his poetry to the present moment that is always already slipping away. He commits his poetry to the endless movement of existence, to an endless experience of loss or consumption, an experience of negativity, and as he does so, he affirms the primacy of the poetic act. He writes in the same essay, 'Les mots peuvent être avant tout notre acte' (IM, 127). In the present moment, the poetic act asserts its fleeting and mobile physical reality. It is an address to the other, a burst of utterance. The poet, as he speaks, enters into a relation with the other and with the world. This act is at once real and improvised. In a world without foundation or absolute, without anything to legitimise utterance, it is a contingent and finite performance.

Bonnefoy's practice of poetic performance grows out of a profoundly paradoxical understanding of existence: an understanding of the coterminous nature of presence and absence, finitude and infinitude, representation and presentation, reality and illusion. This dynamic thinking of existence has much in common with certain strands of twentieth-century deconstructive thought. Critics have tended to disassociate Bonnefoy's work from the philosophical developments that flanked the poet's own career. In *À la souche obscure des rêves*, John E. Jackson insists that deconstruction is a '[m]ouvement qui heurte de front l'horizon de l'œuvre de Bonnefoy'.⁶ Jackson argues that, dedicated to 'la présence', 'le réel' and 'l'immédiat', privileging 'la voix' over 'la langue', Bonnefoy's poetry has little

⁶ John E. Jackson, *À la souche obscure des rêves* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1993), p. 60.

in common with a body of thought that attempts ‘une « déconstruction » de la présence’.⁷

In *Une pensée en mouvement* in 2008, Arnaud Buchs reveals the limitations of Jackson’s argument, drawing a fruitful comparison between Bonnefoy’s essays and Derrida’s writings. Buchs writes,

il faut commencer par ce paradoxe, par cette unité multiple. Habitée par plusieurs courants, traversée par des tensions qui la travaillent et repoussent toujours plus ses limites, cette œuvre semble plongée dans une mouvance qui la met constamment « à l’œuvre » ; l’œuvre se fait et se défait, elle cherche toujours à dé-limiter ses propres limites.⁸

Buchs recognises the importance of the paradoxical and dynamic nature of Bonnefoy’s thought. However, Buchs too hesitates over questions of ontology and presence. Almost echoing the ideas expressed by Jackson, Buchs writes that ‘plus qu’à une *déconstruction* ontologique, Bonnefoy en appelle littéralement à une *reconstruction* de l’ontologie.’⁹ He observes that, whilst Bonnefoy ‘vise à rétablir cette métaphysique de l’être en tant que présence’, Derrida ‘voulait justement la dépasser en la déconstruisant’.¹⁰

This thesis seeks to refute the idea that Bonnefoy’s poetry – in spite of its tireless self-criticism or deconstruction – eventually concedes to the closure of metaphysics or ontology. It analyses how the poetic performance attempts to come to terms with the profoundly paradoxical nature of ‘la présence’, its coterminous presence and absence. It analyses how Bonnefoy does not restore any kind of ontology but, rather, allows us to conceive of ontology as a performance. We begin to gauge the full deconstructive force of Bonnefoy’s poetic act, this thesis suggests, when we compare Bonnefoy’s poetry to the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy uses terms such as ‘la présence’, ‘l’être’, ‘l’ontologie’, ‘le réel’, ‘l’immédiat’, ‘la vérité’, and ‘l’incarnation’ – terms that Derrida would place

⁷ Jackson, *À la souche obscure des rêves*, p. 61.

⁸ Arnaud Buchs, *Une pensée en mouvement. Trois essais sur Yves Bonnefoy* (Paris: Galilée, 2008), p. 9.

⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁰ Ibid.

under erasure – and, in doing so, he transforms these terms. He insists upon a deconstructive thinking of ‘la présence’, or ‘l’immédiat’, or ‘le réel’. Bonnefoy’s poems use these very words and, insisting upon the infinite finitude and the endless movement of any poetic act, transform their traditional meanings in a very similar way.

There has recently been a tendency to regard Bonnefoy’s poetry, and the poetry of Jacques Dupin and André du Bouchet, his collaborators on the journal *L’Éphémère* (1966-1972), as a movement back towards a traditional and even old-fashioned set of poetic values. Bonnefoy, Dupin, and du Bouchet are all poets who assert the primacy of being over language. They embrace Rimbaud’s call towards ‘la réalité rugueuse à éteindre’.¹¹ Ontological, realist, materialist, and ethical, their poetry is committed to an experience of being, an encounter with the physical world or an encounter between self and other, that exceeds the representations of language. It is thus no surprise that the poets of *L’Éphémère* were, as Petterson writes, pitted against the *avant-garde* of their time, the ‘poets of the signifier, the contributors to the journal *Tel Quel* (1960-82)’.¹² In this period, poets such as Michel Deguy, Denis Roche, and Marcelin Pleynet embrace a world composed of signs; these poets conceive of the poem – and indeed all existence – as an endless series of figurations with no other centre than language itself.

The philosophical leanings of the poets of *L’Éphémère* and the radical nature of their conception of being have thus been somewhat under-valued in accounts of the development of late twentieth-century French poetry. If Bonnefoy, Dupin, and du Bouchet insist upon what Stamelman describes as ‘the preponderance of being over language, art,

¹¹ Arthur Rimbaud, ‘Adieu’, *Une saison en enfer, Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2009), p 116.

¹² James Petterson, *Postwar Figures of L’Éphémère: Yves Bonnefoy, Louis-René des Forêts, Jacques Dupin, André du Bouchet* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), p. 15.

and other forms of representation',¹³ it is because they conceive of being as an endlessly fleeting and unmasterable excess. Seeking to approach this excess, these poets embrace a negative or deconstructive form of poetic creation. Dupin cultivates a violent and disjointed syntax, deconstructing traditional poetic aspirations towards 'la voyance' or 'la clairvoyance' and cultivating a kind of 'blind' proximity to the material world.¹⁴ Du Bouchet explores the emptiness and openness of the white space of the page, suggesting, with each inscription, the contingency and ephemerality of any human trajectory. Philippe Jaccottet, similarly – while not a member of *L'Éphémère*, but a poet who has much in common with Bonnefoy, Dupin, and du Bouchet – cultivates a condition of nescience or ignorance in order to approach 'l'insaisissable' or 'l'illimité' of existence.¹⁵ Accepting 'the failure of artistic representation to express or contain being', as Stamelman writes,¹⁶ each of these poets works within language *against* language. Each engages in a process of deconstruction or deconstruction in the hope of bringing language close to that which exceeds the structures of signification.

Many of Bonnefoy's poems begins with a meditation on the nature of language and the ideals to which it gives rise. Language, Bonnefoy insists, reduces finite material existence to a series of abstractions, to a series of intemporal and static concepts. In the seminal early essay 'Les Tombeaux de Ravenne', Bonnefoy writes: 'Parce qu'on meurt dans ce monde et pour nier le destin l'homme a bâti de concepts cette demeure logique, où les seuls principes qui vaillent sont de permanence et d'identité. Demeure faite de mots, mais éternelle' (IM, 14). Bonnefoy continues, 'l'idéalisme est vainqueur dans toute pensée

¹³ Richard Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling, Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 183.

¹⁴ Dupin cultivates what Jean-Pierre Richard describes as 'un savoir concret et négatif, négatif pour toucher le concret, pour se situer au plus près, au plus ras d'une humilité de l'être' (Jean-Pierre Richard, *Onze études sur la poésie moderne* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 350).

¹⁵ Philippe Jaccottet, *Éléments d'un songe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 136.

¹⁶ Richard Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling*, p. 192.

qui s'organise. Mieux vaut refaire le monde, y est-il dit obscurément, que d'y vivre dans le danger' (IM 14-15). The poetic performance often begins with a meditation on this form of idealism, presenting an image of a closed and eternal garden, 'un soleil enfant' coming over the horizon, or a voice that calls us back towards an origin. No sooner does the poet glimpse this ideal, however, than he sees it dissolve and disperse. As this form falls away, the poet laments the impermanence of experience, the muteness and the impenetrability of matter, and the failure of language. He is suddenly struck – like Mallarmé during *la crise de Tournon* – by 'le caractère à jamais subjectif et incohérent de la signification, « vaine forme » produite par le hasard'.¹⁷ The poet is overtaken by a sense of the 'non-significance' of existence and by a sense of his own nothingness. This experience – a Mallarméan intuition of 'le néant' – is, Bonnefoy writes, 'une façon d'accepter de ne pas être qui risque d'entraîner dans son gouffre l'idée même de l'humanité'.¹⁸

Almost all Bonnefoy's poems dramatise this moment of existential risk: a moment in which conceptual ideals dissolve and the groundlessness of human existence is exposed. The light that has sustained the human project for centuries now seems threatened with extinction and, although Bonnefoy understands this threat, he insists that the poet must 'constater le néant, et désormais s'y tenir'.¹⁹ This experience of nothingness is, Bonnefoy insists, 'une lucidité qu'on peut dire inaugurale, un horizon sans la conscience duquel rien jamais ne pourra prétendre à quelque vérité que ce soit' (SPV, 204). Meditating in 'L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie' upon Baudelaire's commitment to finitude, Bonnefoy asks us to embrace the nothingness of finite existence, the obliteration of every stable form:

¹⁷ Yves Bonnefoy, *Lieux et destins de l'image* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1998), p. 243.

¹⁸ Yves Bonnefoy, *Sous le signe de Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), p. 307.

Bonnefoy presents a dream and then a nightmare, an idealistic and a nihilistic vision of existence, and he suggests that one vision gives rise to the other. Both are the result of a conceptual or metaphysical understanding of existence.

¹⁹ Yves Bonnefoy, *Le Siècle où la parole a été victime* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2010), p. 204.

le premier mouvement de cette science incertaine, [c'est] connaître cette mort, cet anonymat, cette finitude qui les habitent, les ruinent... Faisons une nouvelle fois, je le propose, le pas baudelairien de l'amour des choses mortelles. Retrouvons-nous sur le seuil qu'il a cru fermé, devant les plus désolantes preuves de la nuit. Ici tout avenir et tout projet se dissipent. Le néant consume l'objet, nous sommes pris dans le vent de cette flamme sans ombre. Et nulle foi ne nous soutient plus, nulle formule, nul mythe, le plus intense regard s'achève désespéré. Restons pourtant devant cet horizon sans figure, vidé de soi. Tenons, si je puis dire, le pas gagné. Car il est vrai que déjà un changement se produit. L'astre morne de ce qui est, l'élémentaire Janus, tournant avec lenteur – mais dans l'instant – sur lui-même, nous découvre son autre face. Un possible apparaît sur la ruine de tout possible. (IM, 123-4)

Facing an experience of death and finitude that consumes everything, every belief, formula, or myth, Bonnefoy asks us to 'tenir le pas gagné' (a formulation that he borrows from Rimbaud), and to discern 'son autre face'. The finite moment is, Bonnefoy suggests, 'l'élémentaire Janus'. It is a *limen* between destruction and creation, ending and beginning. The moment of dissolution is the moment of inaugural lucidity. The negativity of existence is the very possibility of existence. Out of the flux, out of the dissolution of all form, comes *une forme à venir*, a burgeoning, a force of becoming: 'Un possible apparaît sur la ruine de tout possible'.

As the poet perceives 'le néant', he also perceives 'un possible'. The poet's affirmation of negativity is thus never a simple affirmation of a nihilistic vision of existence. As Ian James writes, meditating upon twentieth-century philosophy's failure to master a foundation,

the affirmation of the impossibility of mastering a ground or foundation [...] is less a nihilistic staring into an abyss and more an encounter with an instance of freedom and decision (that is, the recognition that our being is not predetermined by an essence or ground), a decision in which the existence of others and a shared relation to being is at stake.²⁰

²⁰ Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 155-6.

Accepting the negativity of existence, Bonnefoy accepts that being resurges endlessly as ‘an instance of freedom and decision’. In the present moment, we have the freedom and the responsibility to affirm a certain relation to others and to the world. In the essay ‘La Parole poétique’, Bonnefoy suggests in a similar manner that, having accepted the experience of nothingness, humanity must ‘Croire en l’être que nous instituons en parlant, déduire de l’expérience de la présence celle de la valeur absolue de l’autre être humain dans notre horizon de finitude’ (SPV, 205). In the endlessly passing moment, being is nothing more than the *clinamen* between self and other. This finite sharing, ‘l’expérience de la présence’, allows us to perceive the immeasurable value of the other. Opening ourselves up to this sharing, Bonnefoy suggests, we must believe in the experience of being that we create through speaking. In a world without foundation or absolute, without anything to legitimise utterance, Bonnefoy insists – like Rimbaud before him – that poetry can be ‘une action pratique’ (IM, 119). Poetry can accomplish, as Bonnefoy writes of Rimbaud’s poetry, ‘la transmutation du dénuement en un bien’ (IM, 119).

The transition that Bonnefoy presents in almost all his poems, from the dissolution of a metaphysical ideal to the evolution of a contingent and finite poetic performance, is a meditation upon the changing nature of the relationship between ‘la parole’ and ‘l’être’.²¹ It is a meditation – and this is foregrounded in poems such as ‘L’Heure présente’ – upon the history of modernity. Bonnefoy dramatises the movement away from a transcendental perspective, a logic of representation by which language takes being as its ‘subject matter’, and explores the evolution towards a consciously finite poetic performance, a performance that unfurls in the present moment, within the physical world. This performance unfurls alongside beings and presences that it knows to be inappropriable and unsignifiable. It

²¹ In ‘La Ressource des mots’, an essay published in 2009, Bonnefoy defines poetry as a meditation upon the relationship between ‘l’être’ and ‘la parole’. He observes ‘le désintérêt que la critique contemporaine marque souvent, à grand tort, pour la relation de l’être et de la parole : autrement dit pour la poésie, dont la motivation, je l’ai déjà dit, est si rarement comprise’ (SPV, 333).

unfolds within a world that does not *have* a sense but *is itself* structured as sense. This sense is an unmasterable excess, ‘an ungraspable horizon of meaningfulness’.²² The poetic performance – dramatising the coming into being of utterance, staging an act of communication or a *rapprochement* between the self and a material presence – can hope only to open itself up to this sense. It can hope only to open itself up to the sharing of sense and to touch upon ‘le réel’.

In this respect, Bonnefoy’s practice of poetic performance has much in common with the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. Like Bonnefoy, Nancy is committed to ‘la *finitude absolue*’. His philosophy is a meditation upon the infinite finitude of existence, the endless grounding and ungrounding of being in the passing moment.²³ Sharing Bonnefoy’s preoccupation with the eternally melting or shifting *limen*, Nancy presents ‘une pensée de la limite comme cela sur quoi, infiniment finie, l’existence s’enlève, et à quoi elle s’expose’.²⁴ Nancy affirms, within the context of this ever-shifting reality, the sense of the concreteness and corporeity of existence, the sense of human coexistence and the primacy of the ‘nous’. He affirms a sense that precedes any process of signification and always already presents itself in our shared, daily interactions. In ‘La Nécessité du sens’, the only essay that he has written on Bonnefoy’s poetry, Nancy suggests that he and Bonnefoy conceive of ‘le sens’ as ‘une nécessité’.²⁵ Both the poet and philosopher experience sense as a lack (the lack or need of a single definable or appropriable sense) and as an ineluctability (the inescapability or necessity of sense). Existence does not have a sense but

²² This is a formulation that James uses to describe Nancy’s conception of ‘le sens’ (Ian James, *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p. 53).

²³ Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, (Paris: Galilée, 1990), p. 48.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

²⁵ This essay, presented at a conference that was attended by Bonnefoy, is the only direct exchange that is on record between Bonnefoy and Nancy. In this essay, Nancy affirms that he read Bonnefoy’s poetry in his youth and insists that it exerted a profound influence upon his generation (Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘La nécessité du sens’, *Yves Bonnefoy. Poésie, peinture, musique*, ed. Michèle Finck (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1995).

comes to us endlessly – touches us endlessly – as sense. As Nancy writes, ‘il n’y a pas de sens établi, pas d’établissement, d’institution, de fondation du sens, mais une venue, de la venue, des venues de sens’.²⁶

One might at first be surprised to see a practice of poetic performance, a practice that aims to move beyond the structures of conceptual thought and to embrace the contingency of the present moment, compared to a body of philosophy. But Nancy’s philosophy elaborates an anti-conceptual mode of thought. Nancy presents, as James writes, ‘a thought of being which is always in excess of thought’; ‘a paradoxical ontology insofar as being (envisaged as being-with) always escapes the conceptual or figural grasp of ontological disclosure.’²⁷ The philosopher attempts to open language up to a reality or sense that exceeds its grasp. Philosophy, like poetry, is envisaged as a performance. Nancy writes in *La Communauté desœuvrée*, ‘le théâtre, ici, ne vaut plus en tant que scène de la représentation : il vaut comme le bord extrême de cette scène, comme la ligne de partage où les uns sont exposés aux autres’.²⁸ In *Le Sens du monde*, he writes,

Le rideau est tombé sur la scène métaphysique, sur la métaphysique comme scène de la (re)présentation [...] ce qui se *joue* désormais autrement, et sur un théâtre du monde [...] c’est à nouveau l’envoi d’une affirmation de l’excès absolu du sens. [...] L’affirmation nue, dénudée, d’autant plus aiguë et exigeante, du sens du monde en tant que monde. Fin de la philosophie, tâche de la pensée. Tâche de l’être-au-monde’.²⁹

‘[S]ur un théâtre du monde’, the philosopher or the poet assumes the task of being with or being exposed to the other. He assumes the task of being towards the world. He enters into this relation and opens himself up to this moment of exposure. As Nancy writes, ‘L’art n’a

²⁶ Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 49.

²⁷ James, *The New French Philosophy*, p. 47.

²⁸ Nancy, *La Communauté desœuvrée* (Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1983), p. 164.

²⁹ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde* (Paris : Galilée, 1993), p. 43.

pas affaire au « monde » entendu comme extériorité simple, comme milieu ou comme nature. Il a affaire à l'être-au-monde dans son surgissement même'.³⁰

There are no existing critical works that examine Bonnefoy's practice of poetic performance. This is also the first study to draw a comparison between Bonnefoy's poetry and Nancy's philosophy. It should be noted, however, that many important critical studies have analysed the ethical nature of Bonnefoy's poetic act, examining, in particular, his outward-looking gaze and his address to the other.³¹ In *La Question du moi*, published in 1978, John E. Jackson analyses how Bonnefoy's poetry presents an experience of subjectivity that is dominated by 'cette préséance de l'autre (l'autre comme personne ou l'autre comme élément du réel)'.³² Jackson suggests, crucially, that the orality of Bonnefoy's poetry, its vocative mode, going out always to address an other, is 'un acte éthique'.³³ In contrast to 'la splendide isolation de l'écriture mallarméenne [...], l'autonomie graphique de la page constellée et [...] le repli de la forme sur ses seules ressources du langage écrit', a voiced poetry bears witness to 'la volonté de maintenir la fonction *allocutrice* de la parole au cœur de la création poétique, et par là d'ouvrir la clôture esthétique à son dehors primordial'.³⁴ The emphasis that Jackson places upon the openness and receptivity of a vocative poetry – solicitous always of the other – is essential to this current study. Patrick Née echoes Jackson's analysis but introduces the important idea of 'une communauté discursive' in his study of Bonnefoy's referential and metonymic poetic gesture, *Rhétorique profonde d'Yves Bonnefoy*, published in 2004. Née writes,

³⁰ Nancy, *Les Muses* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 36.

³¹ Stamelman sums up the poet's commitment to the other, when he writes, 'A poetics of *allocation* [...] dominates Bonnefoy's poetry. The knowledge of otherness compels the poet, the *moi*, to move in a centrifugal motion away from the self and out into the world' (Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling*, p. 135).

³² John E. Jackson, *La Question du moi. Un aspect de la modernité poétique européenne* (Neuchâtel : À La Baconnière, 1978) pp. 322-3.

³³ Jackson, *La Question du moi*, p. 322.

³⁴ Ibid.

la prière d'Yves Bonnefoy institue une communauté discursive : elle est en effet tout entière *vocativement adressée* (à la différence de celle de Rimbaud, cantonnée à la non-personne) et manifeste donc, sur ce nouveau plan éthique du site comme établi en partage de la communauté de parole, le lien à un univers de référence qui est ce qu'Yves Bonnefoy appelle « la terre ».³⁵

Née introduces the important idea that the orality of Bonnefoy's poetry – shifting attention away from the significations of language and towards the pragmatics of language – allows him to directly address the other, to cultivate an act of reference, and to enter into 'une communauté discursive'.

Michèle Finck's *Yves Bonnefoy. Le Simple et le sens*, published in 1989, also draws our attention away from semantics and towards the physical and gestural nature of language. She offers an in-depth study of the anti-conceptual nature of Bonnefoy's thought, analysing how the poet uses the term 'le sens' not in its semantic sense but in its corporeal and spatial sense and exploring how he subverts traditional conceptions of meaning. Finck writes,

La parole chargée de « sens » est un acte de participation immédiate à ce qui est, par lequel le mot s'ouvre au « réel » et se confond avec lui. Si le poète détourne ici le mot « sens » de son usage courant, c'est qu'il intériorise les acceptations physiologiques et spatiales du mot, au point qu'elles restructurent l'acceptation intellectuelle.³⁶

Foregrounding the importance of negativity and paradox, Finck examines how poetry becomes 'la recherche, par un travail exigeant sur les mots, d'un au-delà des mots'.³⁷ In a similar manner, Gérard Gasarian's *Yves Bonnefoy. La Poésie, la présence*, published in 1986, investigates how Bonnefoy pursues the impossible desire to express 'la présence' within language.³⁸ Roland Gérard Giguère's *Le Concept de la réalité dans la poésie d'Yves Bonnefoy*, published in 1986, also examines the poet's pursuit of an exteriority or 'un réel'

³⁵ Patrick Née, *Rhétorique profonde d'Yves Bonnefoy* (Paris: Hermann, 2004), p 7.

³⁶ Michèle Finck, *Yves Bonnefoy. Le Simple et le sens* (Paris: José Corti, 1989), p. 14.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 447.

³⁸ Gérard Gasarian, *Yves Bonnefoy. La Poésie, la présence* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1986).

that cannot be signified. Giguère explores how Bonnefoy attempts to destroy a language of myth and to accept the paradoxical nature of things, in the hope of experiencing ‘l’*épiphanie du réel*’.³⁹

Using Bonnefoy’s essays to discuss the key tenets of his poetic practice and supporting this analysis by interpreting key poetic images, Gasarian and Giguère present a highly conceptual analysis of Bonnefoy’s anti-conceptual poetic practice. Analysing how Bonnefoy uses ‘la mort’ and ‘la finitude’ to ‘destroy’ a mythic discourse, Giguère, for example, writes, ‘L’*intériorisation de la mort par le «je» des poèmes [...] est essentielle à la démarche poétique bonnefoysienne [...] pour que advienne la «vérité de parole», épiphanie du réel*’.⁴⁰ Death and finitude – these forces that resist and even destroy the concept – remain highly abstract concepts in Giguère’s analysis. Even the forces that are redeemed from this process – ‘[la] vérité’ and ‘[le] réel’ – remain strangely abstract. The reader thus has difficulty sensing the forcefulness or the profundity of ‘la conversion profonde’ that Giguère analyses.⁴¹ In spite of Bonnefoy’s use of the full physical resources of language to deconstruct conceptual thought, his endlessly inventive use of grammar, or rhythm, or temporality, an analysis such as Giguère’s can create the impression that Bonnefoy’s poetry results in nothing more – for all its aspirations towards the anti-conceptual – than an endless conceptual wrangling.

This thesis seeks to address this imbalance. Assessing the anti-conceptual force of Bonnefoy’s poetry, it analyses the dynamics of his poetic performances, examining how non-signifying forces at play within the poem deconstruct the stable structures of conceptual thought and assert the contingent and finite reality – the temporal and spatial reality – of the poetic act, ‘donnant’, as Bonnefoy writes, ‘une dignité à un lieu et à une

³⁹ Ronald Gérard Giguère, *Le Concept de la réalité dans la poésie d’Yves Bonnefoy* (Paris: Nizet, 1989), p. 61.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 71.

heure, une réalité à chaque être' (IM, 122). Presenting close readings of entire poems or entire sequences of poems, this thesis attempts to be as faithful as possible to the movement of the poetic performance as a whole.⁴² Certainly, within Bonnefoy's poetry, a particular phrase or image rarely matters in itself. Rather, it is the movement between images that the poet values, the dynamic by which ideas are transformed or subverted. Bonnefoy observes in an essay published in 2009,

On ne comprend pas un poème si on s'en tient à ce qu'il semble avoir dit de ce dont il parle : si on n'entre pas, en ami, dans l'espace où s'expriment, se clarifient, dans une durée dont il est la trace, les conflits, les aspirations, les espoirs que son auteur a à vivre (SPV, 328).

The close readings presented in this thesis attempt to enter into the poem 'en ami', experiencing, in the time and space in which it unfolds, the conflicts and aspirations of its author.⁴³

There are few critical surveys of late twentieth-century French poetry that analyse how poets stage this kind of theatre of poetic experimentation.⁴⁴ Mary-Ann Caws' *The Inner Theatre of Recent French poetry*, published in 1972, analysing the work of Cendrars, Tzara, Péret, Artaud, and Bonnefoy, promises to be an important survey of this area of

⁴² The only other critical study that offers close readings of Bonnefoy's poems is Olivier Himy, *Yves Bonnefoy. Poèmes commentés*, but this study is a practical guide to reading French verse art and never quite explores the wider implications of the dynamics of Bonnefoy's poems (Olivier Himy, *Yves Bonnefoy. Poèmes commentés* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1991)).

⁴³ It is worth noting that the majority of the above-mentioned studies analyse Bonnefoy's early poetry and that this thesis is one of the few lengthy studies of Bonnefoy's later poetry. An international conference in Zurich in 2009 sought to redress this balance, resulting in the publication of an important collection of essays, *Yves Bonnefoy. Écrits récents, 2000-2009* (Patrick Labarthe and Odile Bombarde, Eds., *Yves Bonnefoy : Écrits récents, 2000-2009* (Geneva: Slatkine Érudition, 2011)). There has also been a tendency for recent critical studies to focus upon Bonnefoy's essays or prose poetry: Daniel Acke, *Yves Bonnefoy, Essayiste. Modernité et présence* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999); John E. Jackson, *À la souche obscure des rêves*; Patrick Née, *Yves Bonnefoy. Penseur de l'image, ou les travaux de Zeuxis* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

⁴⁴ This is surprising if one considers the influence that is exerted by Claudel's odes or Jouve's apostrophes. One can see the influence of these structures of address in Bonnefoy's poetry, but also in Jacques Dupin's *Gravir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), or in Louis-René des Forêts' *Les Mégères de la mer* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983) or *Poèmes de Samuel Wood* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1988).

experimentation.⁴⁵ Her analysis, however, never quite interrogates the temporal and spatial dynamics of this ‘inner theatre’, the force of its ‘happening’, nor the manner in which it resists the essentialising nature of conceptual thought.⁴⁶ Critical works on nineteenth-century French poetry offer a more rigorous thinking of poetic performance: in particular, Roger Pearson’s *Mallarmé and Circumstance, The Translation of Silence* with its in-depth analysis of Mallarmé’s ‘Crayonné au théâtre’ and its exploration of how this practice of poetic performance is then borne out in the sonnets, the sepulchral poems, and poetic rituals of praise and gift-giving.⁴⁷ In *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé*, Mary Lewis Shaw analyses how Mallarmé’s theatrical techniques inform his poetic practice and anticipate many of the dynamics of twentieth-century performance art.⁴⁸ These works play an important role in furthering our understanding of the theatricality of poetic performance. However, whilst Bonnefoy’s work is clearly influenced by Mallarmé’s understanding of poetic performance, this thesis is careful not to conflate these two models. The first chapter of this thesis therefore explores how Bonnefoy simultaneously borrows theatrical devices directly from Mallarmé and insists upon the difference between their respective conceptions of poetic performance.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first analyses the central section of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, ‘La Terre’, investigating how the theatricality of the poetic

⁴⁵ Mary-Ann Caws, *The Inner Theatre of Recent French Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 173.

⁴⁶ Caws’ analysis praises ideals of fixity and stasis. She writes, for example, ‘The place of conversion, one of the formulas Bonnefoy applies to the true place, is here a persuasion to inscribe forever all actions within a chosen fixity [...] Time loses its force, as all movement turns into mere painting, frozen for our unhurried and motionless aesthetic enjoyment’ (Caws, *The Inner Theatre of Recent French Poetry*, p. 168). These notions of stasis and ‘motionless aesthetic enjoyment’ are quite at odds with notions of the dynamism, the contingency and finitude of the poetic act that will be explored in this thesis.

⁴⁷ Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance, The Translation of Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Mary Lewis Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

performance facilitates an exploration of the finitude of existence. It examines how Bonnefoy, deconstructing the transcendental nature of the Mallarmean ‘drame solaire’, presents the poetic act as an infinitely finite act, a perpetual advent and sacrifice. It scrutinises how – through the use of subject pronouns and structures of interpellation – language becomes a place of sharing within the poems, a place in which we might, momentarily, be together. The second chapter scrutinises the relationship between the self and material presence in *Début et fin de la neige*, a collection of snow poems published in 1991. Examining how Bonnefoy presents the snow as an endlessly fleeting presence, this chapter scrutinises the poet’s attempts to make the signifying function of language passive or receptive to its inappropriate excess. It examines how Bonnefoy cultivates a practice of a suspended or missed touch, an address to an infant, and a poetic image that is, not a representation or imitation, but an act of *being towards*. The third chapter, focusing on ‘La Voix lointaine’, the sequence of poems published in *Les Planches courbes* in 2001, analyses Bonnefoy’s dramatisation of the experience of self-presence as the act of listening to a distant voice and as the act of dancing with one’s own shadow. It investigates the exteriorised and dialogic nature of the subjectivity presented by these poems. The fourth and final chapter of this thesis examines Bonnefoy’s meditation upon the unfurling of the present moment and the finitude of form in ‘L’Heure présente’, a sequence of poems published in *L’Heure présente* in 2011. This chapter analyses Bonnefoy’s dramatisation of the ‘passing of form’: the dissolution of a transcendental ideal, the disintegration of an onto-theology, and the discovery of the illusory nature of all human experience. It examines how this passing of form gives rise to what Nancy describes as ‘la forme naissante’: a form that is always coming into being, a dynamic, ‘un possible’.

Chapter One: Performative Utterance in ‘La Terre’

Published in 1975, ten years after his previous collection, *Dans le leurre du seuil* is generally considered to be Bonnefoy’s most ambitious volume of poetry. It is the only volume that is composed of one long poem. Spanning over eighty pages and divided into seven sections, *Dans le leurre du seuil* explores how the conceptual structures of language limit our understanding of existence – of sense, human togetherness, reality, or material presence – and how the dynamics of the poetic act might touch upon that which cannot be signified: the movements and metamorphoses of physical existence, the sense of our shared, everyday lived existence. It is the vitality of *Dans le leurre du seuil* that impresses the reader most of all. Moving energetically between measures, Bonnefoy aligns long incantational poems – with their slow and expansive rhythms – and elliptical little poems of four- or six-syllable lines. He moves constantly between regular versification and free verse. The poet is concerned, throughout the collection as a whole, with the performative capabilities of language. Cultivating countless refrains, Bonnefoy explores the particular force of the different grammatical components of language: temporal and spatial prepositions, particular structures of address, subject pronouns, formulations in the subjunctive mood, parentheses, appositions, or simple affirmations.

This chapter investigates how the highly performative nature of Bonnefoy’s poetics in *Dans le leurre du seuil* and, in particular, in the central series of poems entitled ‘La Terre’, is committed to a rigorous thinking of finitude and to the affirmation of a certain kind of community within the context of finitude. Bonnefoy dramatises his own utterance in ‘La Terre’, using the refrain ‘Je crie, Regarde’. He addresses an unidentified other – perhaps a lover – urging her always to look, to listen, and to attend to the spectacle that is unfurling before them. This spectacle is, he insists, infinitely finite. It is a fleeting burst of

light, a passing flame. Calling out to his companion and urging intimacy, using cohortatives such as ‘Retrouvons-nous’ and ‘Portons-nous l’un vers l’autre’, Bonnefoy meditates upon the rhythm of sharing, upon the movements by which bodies draw together and move apart. He suggests, after Claudel, that all our knowledge of the world is a finite ‘co-naissance’.¹ He explores how the poetic performance might – as Bonnefoy writes of Rimbaud’s poetry – ‘rend[re] la poésie à sa fin qui est [le] partage’.² He explores how we might momentarily be together in language, how we might embrace ‘le réel à être’ (IM, 129), the shared sense of being.

Analysing ‘performative utterance’ in ‘La Terre’, this chapter will scrutinise the means by which Bonnefoy foregrounds the theatricality of the poetic act: the use of different subject pronouns and modes of address, the performance of an act of communication, and the dramatisation of the searching and experimental nature of this act. Yet, ‘performative utterance’ can also be interpreted in a much narrower sense here. A series of performative speech acts recur throughout ‘La Terre’. Pronounced in the first person indicative and present tense, they fit Austin’s definition of a performative speech act almost perfectly.³ The light performs the act of consent as ‘un soleil enfant’ comes over the horizon. The night consents as almond branches are borne into the bridal chamber. These performative speech acts are part of the language of myth and ritual that surrounds the early poems of ‘La Terre’. This chapter will examine how the authority of the mythical or ritualistic speech act dissolves in these early poems, and the theatricality of the

¹ Paul Claudel, ‘Traité de la Co-naissance au monde et de soi-même’, *Œuvre poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967), p. 149.

² Yves Bonnefoy, *Notre besoin de Rimbaud* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2009), p. 23.

³ Austin writes of the performative utterance, ‘to utter the sentence (in, of course, appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it (J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 6.) These are often sentences, Austin notes, ‘in the first person singular present indicative active’ (Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, p. 67).

endlessly finite speech act becomes apparent. It will analyse how this theatricality becomes central to the poet's thinking of the finite sharing of existence.

The first and second sections of this chapter will analyse how the structures of address that Bonnefoy uses attempt to remain faithful – or as faithful as possible – to the finitude of existence, to the constant movement by which the world comes towards us. The third and fourth sections will scrutinise his dramatisation of a series of acts of physical intimacy and analyse how the poetic performance seeks to emulate this sharing, producing a sense of 'l'être-en-commun' of existence (to borrow Nancy's phrase).⁴ Throughout the chapter as a whole, I shall be investigating how, for Bonnefoy, it is the *act* of speaking, addressed to an other and desirous of communication, that *makes sense*. Poetry is not, Bonnefoy insists, a matter of signification. It is an act of communication that exposes the sharing of being and allows us to touch upon 'le sens'. It is for this reason that Bonnefoy affirms the value of 'la parole', the live and ephemeral speech act, over 'la langue'.⁵ In 'La Parole poétique', Bonnefoy writes:

Grande possible vie du langage: grâce à laquelle l'autre être humain, que tant de pensées tendent à réduire à l'état d'objet quantifiable, sera reconnu comme, oui, précisément cela, un être, dans un monde qui en devient un lieu partagé et doté de sens par ce partage. Le mot actif en sa profondeur interdit l'idéologie, se prête à l'élan de la parole. (SPV, 205)

⁴ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 52.

⁵ At the end of his essay 'Pierre Jean Jouve' Bonnefoy writes of Jouve's poetry: 'j'entends lorsque l'on vient à un de ses livres, la poésie est un lieu où l'on peut entrer, un lieu où une voix, comme Phénix, est morte d'être une langue, mais pour renaître parole' (Yves Bonnefoy, *Le Nuage rouge* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1977) p. 284). This privileging of 'la parole' over 'la langue' is one of the aspects of Bonnefoy's poetry that seemed to be diametrically opposed to Derrida's writings, especially his deconstruction of phonocentrism. The fourth chapter of this thesis will investigate the question of voice and sound in *Les Planches courbes* and suggests that Bonnefoy's understanding of 'la parole' is not as far removed from certain aspects of deconstructive thinking as it might first appear.

In the movement of speech between two people – two live and active beings – we experience the world as ‘un lieu partagé’. This shared space is ‘doté de sens par ce partage’.

This understanding of ‘le sens’ as something that precedes signification, as something that always already presents itself in our shared, daily existence, is remarkably close to Nancy’s thinking of ‘le sens’. Nancy writes: ‘Le sens, pour sa part, est le mouvement de l’être-à, ou l’être en tant que *venue* en présence, ou encore, en tant que transitivity, en tant que passage à la présence – et du même coup, en tant que passage *de* la présence.’⁶ The challenge to the philosopher – like the poet who affirms the ‘here’ and ‘now’ – is to remain open to the coming of sense and to the sharing that it demands. Literature, for Nancy, exemplifies this openness and this sharing. In reference to Nancy’s *La Communauté desœuvrée*, Ian James writes, ‘the practice of writing affirms a sharing of sense which is irreducible to any fixed identity or meaning. To this extent the being or existence of literature is that of existence or being per se. That is, in communicating sense outside of any figure of identity, literature communicates shared existence as such.’⁷ This chapter will examine how the poetic performances of Bonnefoy’s ‘La Terre’ refuse fixed or stable identities and insist rather upon the ephemeral acts by which we experience and affirm ‘l’être-en-commun’ of existence.

The Advent and the Sacrifice of the Poem

This section scrutinises the opening three poems of ‘La Terre’, investigating the performative nature of the poetic address and the acts of crying out, summoning, pointing, and apostrophising that it stages. The first two poems turn around the theme of advent.

⁶ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 25.

⁷ James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 200.

Etymologically, ‘advent’ comes from the Latin ‘adventus’, meaning arrival.⁸ The poems bear witness to the arrival of the morning sun and to the arrival of the first almond blossom after winter. The third poem, an apostrophe to a flame, evokes the theme of sacrifice. This first section of my thesis examines how, in these poems, the central Western and Christian concepts of advent and sacrifice give way to an understanding of the finitude of the present moment as a perpetual advent and sacrifice. It analyses how the poetic performance – dramatising the ephemeral nature of the poetic gesture – seeks to remain faithful to the movements by which the world comes to us and goes from us.

The first two poems of ‘La Terre’ evoke a sunrise and the blossoming of a gnarled almond tree. In the first poem, the poet cries out and points to the burgeoning traces of light and to the sun’s progression over the horizon. In the second poem, the poet cries out and points to the arrival of the almond blossom. Both poems are a burst of direct speech, full of imperatives and deictics: ‘Je crie, Regarde, / La lumière / Vivait là, près de nous !’ The poet hails a companion, urges her to look, points, and pursues the traces of light. Presenting the poet’s immediate reactions to the light and to the blossom, both poems are staged as live performances. The unfurling of the poem coincides with the unfurling of the light, or the unfurling of the almond flowers. The poet is interested in precisely the ‘here’ and ‘now’ and the advent of these physical phenomena: the coming of the light and the coming of the almond blossom.

Je crie, Regarde,
 La lumière
 Vivait là, près de nous ! Ici, sa provision
 D’eau, encore transfigurée. Ici le bois
 Dans la remise. Ici, les quelques fruits
 A sécher dans les vibrations du ciel de l’aube.

Rien n’a changé,
 Ce sont les mêmes lieux et les mêmes choses,

⁸ ‘Advent’, in *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 9 August 2012].

Presque les mêmes mots,
Mais, vois, en toi, en moi
L'indivis, l'invisible se rassemblent.

Et elle ! n'est-ce pas
Elle qui sourit là (« Moi la lumière,
Oui, je consens ») dans la certitude du seuil,
Penchée, guidant les pas
D'on dirait un soleil enfant sur une eau obscure. (P, 283)

The first poem of 'La Terre' begins *in medias res*, in the moments following the apparition of a light. Almost every word of the action-driven first lines performs the act of pointing. The command 'Regarde' orders one to look; 'la lumière' designates the object in question; 'là' points to the position of the light; 'près de nous' maps an intimate space around the poet and his companion (a space within which the reader complicitly situates himself or herself). In each of the clauses, 'ici' introduces a purely nominative construction. Lacking a verb, these constructions simply designate objects: 'Ici, sa provision / D'eau, encore transfigurée. Ici le bois / Dans la remise. Ici, les quelques fruits / A sécher dans les vibrations du ciel de l'aube'. Reiterating this shifting deictic, the poet suggests the fleeting nature of the light. Each time the poet fixes its location – 'ici' – the light slips away. And yet, as the light moves, the things of the world stand revealed to the poet: the water, the wood, the hangar, and the fruit. The words of this first stanza resemble a physical performance, a mime show of looking and pointing directed by the imperatives and deictics of the poem.⁹

⁹ This mime show of pointing and looking calls to mind Mallarmé's prose poem 'Mimique' (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), I, p. 178). In this poem, Mallarmé explores how, as Pierrot mimes, the act of representation is indistinguishable from the act of presentation. One cannot distinguish between the act itself and that which it represents; one cannot distinguish between the representation and the physical world, the feigned and the real. Bonnefoy's mime show of pointing and looking blurs these very same boundaries.

Even as the poet points in amazement towards this light, he insists that the world is the same as it has always been: ‘Rien n’a changé, / Ce sont les mêmes lieux et les mêmes choses, / Presque les mêmes mots’. Poetry too performs almost the same task as always, producing ‘Presque les mêmes mots’. Yet, between the poet and his companion – perhaps between the poet and the reader – a force rises: ‘Mais, vois, en toi, en moi / L’indivis, l’invisible se rassemblent’. The internal rhyme in ‘vois, en toi, en moi’ mimics the rising of this force. It is as if, in response to ‘vois’, the sound [wa] becomes apparent ‘en toi’ and ‘en moi’. Equally, the repetition and inversion of sounds in ‘L’indivis, l’invisible’ suggest the complicit but contradictory workings of this force. This force is invisible but undivided. It is, as Bonnefoy writes elsewhere, ‘indécomposée’ or ‘indéfaite’ (SPV, 200).

In the opening line of the final stanza, a female figure looms suddenly on the horizon: ‘Et elle ! n’est-ce pas / Elle qui sourit là’. Fronting the subject pronoun, the poet stages a dramatic entrance: ‘Et elle !’ The poet questions, even as he announces her presence, whether he sees her at all: ‘n’est-ce pas / Elle qui sourit là’. As if in answer to his question, a voice cuts across the poem: ‘(« Moi la lumière, / Oui, je consens »)’. In a personification, a metaphorical leap for which the reader is in no way prepared, the light interrupts the poet’s speech. The presence of both parentheses and *guillemets* sets her speech apart as being doubly ‘other’. The light issues an affirmative, identifies herself, and then performs the act of consent.¹⁰ In the first-person present indicative, this is, by Austin’s definition, a grammatically perfect, performative utterance: ‘(« Moi la lumière, / Oui, je consens »)’.¹¹ This female figure, furthermore, is ‘Penchée, guidant les pas / D’on

¹⁰ As the light is personified in this stanza (it smiles, speaks, and leads a ‘soleil-enfant’), it seems fair to suggest that we are encouraged to read grammatical gender as biological gender here. ‘La lumière’ becomes an active and animate *female* presence within the poem. One might argue that it is precisely this transformation of the subject pronoun that interests the poet in this final stanza.

¹¹ Austin, of course, dismisses such ‘non-serious’ performatives – the use of a performative within a poem – as being ‘a mockery, like a marriage with a monkey’ (J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 24). Derrida’s reading of Austin’s text insists, on the contrary, that the serious act is

dirait un soleil enfant sur une eau obscure'. She leads an infant or nascent sun over the horizon.

The first poem of 'La Terre' is a poem about the *advent* of the light. The poem is a constant succession of arrivals: the light appears, a feeling arises between the poet and his companion, a female figure arrives and then a 'sun-child'. Very little is explained – the poet only observes that nothing has changed – and almost everything is performed. Puncturing the poetic utterance and performing the act of consent, even the light's speech makes a direct incursion into the poem. With each of these arrivals, the poet can only make a series of referential gestures, frantically pointing and summoning our attention.

Bonnefoy evokes the arrival of the dawn sun, and a conspicuous religious imagery suggests that this is also an *advent* in a divine sense. Touched by the first rays of light, the water is 'encore transfigurée'. The force that unites the couple is 'L'indivis, l'invisible'. The female figure appears 'dans la certitude du seuil'. In anthropology, the threshold, 'the transitional or liminal phase-place', is often conceived as a 'gateway to the divine'.¹² In an image which has endless mythical, anthropological, and poetic resonances, this female figure finally leads 'un soleil enfant' over the horizon. Mallarmé considered the setting and the rising of the sun, 'le drame solaire', to be the archetype for all death and resurrection myths. Gardner Davies, citing Mallarmé, describes 'le drame solaire' as 'Le « grand et perpétuel sujet de la Mythologie » [...] l'évolution quotidienne et annuelle du soleil, son

indistinguishable from the non-serious act. He insists that the theatricality of language that comes to our attention in the discussion of performative acts is part of everyday life. Derrida writes, 'Car, enfin, ce que Austin exclut comme anomalie, exception, « non-sérieux », la citation (sur la scène, dans un poème ou dans un soliloque), n'est-ce pas la modification déterminée d'une citationalité générale – d'une itérabilité générale, plutôt – sans laquelle il n'y aurait même pas de performatif « réussi » ?' (Jacques Derrida, 'Signature événement contexte', *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), p. 387). Much like Derrida's analysis, Bonnefoy's use of these performative utterances draws our attention to the theatricality of 'serious' utterances and to the seriousness of theatrical performance.

¹² Alexander Moore, *Cultural Anthropology, The Field Study of Human Beings* (San Diego: Collegiate Press, 1998), p. 145.

voyage à travers le ciel vers l'horizon occidental, et la succession des saisons'.¹³ In *Les Dieux antiques*, Mallarmé writes, 'Persée, Bellérophon, Héraclès, Thésée, Achille, Apollon, Odyssée, Sigurd, Rustem, et une légion d'autres, ne sont que des formes différentes d'une seule et même personne ; et l'idée de cette personne est issue de phrases qui décrivaient originairement la marche du soleil dans son orbe annuel et quotidien'.¹⁴

The advent of the dawn suggests the birth of a child; it suggests the advent of a divine figure, the resurrection of 'un soleil enfant'.¹⁵

The first two poems of 'La Terre' are mirror images of one another. The first poem evokes the breaking of day in late autumn and the second a nocturnal scene in early spring. The second poem – another manifestation of Mallarmé's 'drame solaire' – presents the blossoming and pollination of the almond tree. An ancient symbol of rebirth, the almond tree is the first tree to flower after winter. In many world religions, the almond seed is the symbol of virgin birth.¹⁶

Je crie, Regarde,
L'amandier
Se couvre brusquement de milliers de fleurs.
Ici
Le noueux, l'à jamais terrestre, le déchiré
Entre au port. Moi la nuit
Je consens. Moi l'amandier
J'entre paré dans la chambre nuptiale.

¹³ Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et le drame solaire* (Paris: José Corti, 1959), p. 33.

¹⁴ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, II, p. 1518.

¹⁵ Similarly, in *Illuminations*, at the end of the poem 'Aube', Rimbaud presents the same archetypal image of advent: 'L'aube et l'enfant tombèrent au bas du bois' (Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 306).

¹⁶ The almond is an ancient symbol of procreation and birth. The God Attis was conceived when Nana, the virgin nymph, placed a ripe almond on her breast (Christine Schnusenberg, *The Mythological Traditions of Liturgical Drama: The Eucharist as Theatre* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2010), p. 193). In Christian art, the virgin Mary and Jesus are symbolised by the almond or the almond branch. The 'mandorla', meaning almond nut in Italian, is the almond-shaped contour that surrounds the figures of Mary and Jesus in traditional Christian art (Elizabeth E. Goldsmith, *Sacred Symbols in Art* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2003) p. 67).

Et, vois, des mains
De plus haut dans le ciel
Prennent
Comme passe une ondée, dans chaque fleur,
La part impérissable de la vie.

Elles divisent l'amande
Avec paix. Elles touchent, elles prélèvent le germe.

Elles l'emportent, grainée déjà
D'autres mondes,
Dans l'à jamais de la fleur éphémère. (P, 284)

This second poem also unfurls in the present tense, with the poet crying out, pointing, and bearing witness to the apparition of the almond blossom: 'Je crie, Regarde, / L'amandier / Se couvre brusquement de milliers de fleurs'. Having evoked this efflorescence in an abundant eleven-syllable line, the poem shifts dramatically to the two-syllable line 'Ici'. All our attention is focused upon this one small word. The 'here' and 'now' of the poem is once again a space of arrival: 'Ici / Le noueux, l'à jamais terrestre, le déchiré / Entre au port'. Bedecked with white sails, the almond tree enters port. Echoing the direct speech pronounced by the light in the first poem, the night declares 'Moi la nuit / Je consens'. The almond tree, in turn, declares: 'Moi l'amandier / J'entre paré dans la chambre nuptiale'. These voices – this time unmarked by parentheses and *guillemets* – cut across the poetic utterance, allowing the performative language of ritual to enter directly into the poem. The night consents to this nocturnal fertility ritual. The almond tree, bedecked with blossom, enters the bridal chamber.

The ritual unfolds and the poet bears witness to the miracle of pollination: 'Et, vois, des mains / De plus haut dans le ciel / Prennent / Comme passe une ondée, dans chaque fleur, / La part impérissable de la vie'. Once again, divine imagery enters the poem. The evocation of two hands, descending from the sky, suggests that it is a divine being that

generates the seed. The death of the blossom and the creation of the seed is envisaged as a form of eternity. This is the paradox of eternal renewal of the ephemeral: 'l'à jamais de la fleur éphémère'.

Bonnefoy begins the first poems of 'La Terre' with an exploration of the advent of the natural cycle: sunrise and pollination. Resolutely performative, the poems themselves are an advent. Like the light and the blossom, they *arrive*. They assault the reader with a barrage of commands, petitions, and deictics. Like Mallarmé, Bonnefoy is interested in how the spectacles that we witness in the natural world – 'l'évolution quotidienne et annuelle du soleil, son voyage à travers le ciel vers l'horizon occidental, et la succession des saisons' – mould the poetic, mythical, and religious imagination. He is interested in how one spectacle gives rise to another. If, as in Rimbaud's poetry, the evocation of the natural world hovers between the quotidian and the miraculous, if the first rays of the morning sun call to mind the figure of 'un soleil enfant' coming over the horizon, one might argue that this is because the 'ici' for Bonnefoy is always already the *advent* of being.

The third poem of 'La Terre', 'Ô flamme', is an apostrophe to a flame. The poet's attention turns, from the advent of 'un soleil enfant' and almond blossom, to the sacrificial fire and to the question of the demise of life. The image of the Phoenix is central to Bonnefoy's early poetry: the mythical bird that is destroyed in a burst of flames, only to rise again from the ashes.¹⁷ 'Ô flamme' uses fire as a symbol of destruction and rebirth. Once again, Bonnefoy's fire and light imagery concords with Mallarmé's understanding of 'le drame solaire' as the archetypal spectacle of sacrifice and resurrection. The poet evokes fire as a paradoxical force that at once consumes and celebrates, disperses and gathers. He

¹⁷ In 'Hier régner désert', 'L'Éternité du feu' begins with the words, 'Phénix parlant au feu, qui est destin / Et paysage clair jetant ses ombres, / Je suis celui que tu attends, dit-il, / Je viens me perdre en ton grave pays' (P, 162).

uses the image of ‘la table sacrificielle’ and writes of cleansing ‘la pierre du ciel clair’.¹⁸

Apostrophising the flame, the poet is mimicking the gesture and utterance of religious ritual. The apostrophe addresses ‘a dead or absent person, an animal, a thing, or an abstract quality or idea as if it were alive, present, and capable of understanding’.¹⁹ The poet speaks to the flame as if it were a sentient being. Etymologically, apostrophe comes from the Greek ‘to turn away’. Just as the priest turns his back on the congregation to face the altar, so the poet turns from his audience and invokes the flame.

Ô flamme
Qui consumant célèbres,
Cendre
Qui dispersant recueillies.

Flamme, oui, qui effaces
De la table sacrificielle de l’été
La fièvre, les sursauts
De la main crispée.
Flamme, pour que la pierre du ciel clair
Soit lavée de notre ombre, et que ce soit
Un dieu enfant qui joue
Dans l’âcreté de la sève.
Je me penche sur toi, je rassemble, à genoux,
Flamme qui vas,
L’impatience, l’ardeur, le deuil, la solitude
Dans ta fumée.
Je me penche sur toi, aube, je prends
Dans mes mains ton visage. Qu’il fait beau
Sur notre lit désert ! Je sacrifie

¹⁸ Much has been written on Bonnefoy’s poetry as a process of sacrifice. Gasarian suggests that Bonnefoy uses the image of sacrifice to meditate upon the manner in which language names and abstracts the material world: ‘Il n’y a pas de connaissance sans sacrifice de cela même qu’on veut connaître’ (Gasarian, *La Poésie, la présence*, p. 58). Giguère too explores how Bonnefoy envisages the poem as a sacrifice of a language of myth, out of which ‘le réel’ might be reborn. He writes, ‘au langage du réel s’oppose celui du mythe qu’il faut détruire en tant que langage du monde-image’ (Giguère, *Le Concept de la réalité dans la poésie d’Yves Bonnefoy*, p. 108). Both these critics suggest that the poem enacts a necessary sacrifice. My analysis of the third poem in ‘La Terre’, however, suggests that – far from presenting the poem as a sacrificial act – Bonnefoy uses a sacrificial imagery in order to deconstruct the metaphysical logic of sacrifice itself.

¹⁹ *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, 2nd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 42.

Et tu es la résurrection de ce que je brûle.

Flamme,
Notre chambre de l'autre année, mystérieuse
Comme la proue d'une barque qui passe.

Flamme le verre
Sur la table de la cuisine abandonnée,
A V.
Dans les gravats.

Flamme, de salle en salle,
Le plâtre,
Toute une indifférence, illuminée.

Flamme l'ampoule
Où manquait Dieu
Au-dessus de la porte de l'étable.
Flamme,
La vigne de l'éclair, là-bas,
Dans le piétinement des bêtes qui rêvent.
Flamme la pierre
Où le couteau du rêve a tant œuvré.

Flamme,
Dans la paix de la flamme,
L'agneau du sacrifice gardé sauf. (P, 284-6)

The poet extols the paradoxical nature of the flame. In consuming itself, it celebrates itself. The address to the flame thus quickly becomes an address to the ash, 'Cendre / Qui dispersant recueilles'. The flame is an image for the finite – and thus sacrificial – nature of all existence. It eradicates all things: 'Flamme, oui, qui effaces / De la table sacrificielle de l'été / La fièvre, les sursauts / De la main crispée'. Images of sacrificial fire merge with images of sexual 'burning' to suggest the finite nature of physical passion. The most intensely lived experiences are quickly 'offered up': 'La fièvre, les sursauts / De la main crispée'. They pass 'pour que la pierre du ciel clair / Soit lavée de notre ombre, et que ce soit / Un dieu enfant qui joue / Dans l'âcreté de la sève'. The world is cleansed of our

shadows and another generation arrives: a child is conceived. Leaning over a dying fire, the poet reflects on the experience of loss: 'Je me penche sur toi, je rassemble, à genoux, / Flamme qui vas, / L'impatience, l'ardeur, le deuil, la solitude / Dans ta fumée'. The apostrophe to the flame is an apostrophe to the 'Flamme qui vas', to the finitude of all things.

Yet, the poet leans again, and the apostrophe to the passing flame becomes an apostrophe to a dawn: 'Je me penche sur toi, aube'. Recurring so frequently throughout 'La Terre', the verb 'pencher' comes to resemble a 'tropistic' movement, as if one human being were always being drawn towards another. The poet leans over this 'aube' and takes its face in his hands: 'je prends / Dans mes mains ton visage'. This dawn is a newborn child. The passion and the pain of sacrifice give way to the joy of new life: 'Qu'il fait beau / Sur notre lit désert !' As in Mallarmé's 'drame solaire', life is evoked as a cycle of death and rebirth. Bonnefoy celebrates the eternal destruction and the eternal renewal of the ephemeral.

Across the poem, fire comes to represent expenditure, celebration, passion, loss, and new life. Bonnefoy aligns the theatre of the flame upon the sacrificial altar, the daily spectacle of sunset and sunrise, and the human drama of sex and procreation. All three processes are called to mind in the final line of this stanza: 'Je sacrifie / Et tu es la résurrection de ce que je brûle'. The line break falls after 'Je sacrifie', forming a 'limen' between the moment of sacrifice and the moment of resurrection. As the title *Dans le leurre du seuil* suggests, the poet is interested in precisely this turning point. The individual existence is finite: 'Je sacrifie'. And yet, as one force expires, another force is conceived: 'Et tu es la résurrection de ce que je brûle'. The poet's relationship with death – with finitude – is necessarily also a relationship with the 'other' and, in particular, with the newborn infant.

With this realisation, the structure of the apostrophe changes. The poet addresses a series of divergent objects as a ‘flamme’: ‘Flamme, notre chambre de l’autre année, mystérieuse / Comme la proue d’une barque qui passe’. Last year’s bedroom, this apparently solid structure, has slipped away, ‘Comme la proue d’une barque qui passe’. Hailing each of these objects or memories in turn as a ‘Flamme’, the poet apostrophises the ephemeral nature of all things. He lauds the changing shapes of the light on the wall, ‘Flamme, de salle en salle, / Le plâtre, / Toute une indifférence, illuminée’. A finite world is a world experienced as a series of passing, and thus living, forces: ‘Flamme l’ampoule / Où manquait Dieu / Au-dessus de la porte de l’étable’. The ‘ampoule’ is an electric lightbulb but also a container used to hold the Eucharist during Communion. The light, this stable, contains no divine presence. And yet, Bonnefoy greets this ‘ampoule / Où manquait Dieu’ as a ‘flamme’. It is a finite presence. All existence, Bonnefoy suggests, is an ephemeral flame. Everything is consumed and, yet, for a moment, everything stands revealed in its numinosity.

In the final lines of the poem, the ritual sacrifice itself is greeted as a passing flame: ‘Flamme la pierre / Où le couteau du rêve a tant œuvré’. Sacrifice is ‘the offering of animal, plant, or human life or of some material possession to a deity, as in propitiation or homage’.²⁰ The physical is sacrificed to the metaphysical; it is made sacred. The celebrant seeks, by sacrificing a finite life, to transcend the ‘economy’ of finitude. Bonnefoy’s apostrophe, however, reverses the terms of this transaction. It is the dream of transcendence that is swallowed up by finitude: ‘Flamme la pierre / Où le couteau du rêve a tant œuvré’. Bonnefoy insists that sacrifice can no longer be conceived as a human process with human ends. All existence is a ‘Flamme qui va [...]’. Everything is always already sacrificed and it is sacrificed, as Nancy writes, *by no one and for no one*. In a very

²⁰ ‘Sacrifice’, in *Oxford English Dictionary* <<https://www.oed.com>> [accessed 10 August 2012].

similar vein to Bonnefoy's 'O flamme', Nancy insists that existence is 'l'insacrifiable'.²¹

For existence is that which is always, already 'offered up':

Dire que l'existence est offerte, c'est employer un mot du vocabulaire sacrificiel, sans doute (et si nous étions dans la langue allemande, ce serait le mot même : *Opfer, Aufopferung*). Mais c'est pour essayer de marquer que l'existence, s'il fallait la dire sacrifiée, n'est en tout cas sacrifiée par personne, et n'est sacrifiée à rien. « L'existence est offerte » veut dire la finitude de l'existence.²²

For Bonnefoy, as for Nancy, existence is a flame that consumes itself and that expires and this 'burning' can neither be appropriated nor transcended. 'O flamme' ends with the words: 'Flamme, / Dans la paix de la flamme, / L'agneau du sacrifice gardé sauf'. The ephemera of the world are embraced as ephemera. The lamb is not sacrificed but kept safe, entrusted to finitude: 'Flamme, / Dans la paix de la flamme'. Nancy writes: 'L'existant arrive, il a lieu, et cela n'est qu'un être-jeté au monde. Dans cet être-jeté, il est offert. Mais il n'est offert par personne, ni à personne'.²³ Each being is the 'dieu enfant': a Christ that is always already offered up.²⁴

Each of the first three poems of 'La Terre' bears witness to or is addressed to the spectacle of fire: the dawn sun, the blossoming of the almond tree with the arrival of the spring sun, and the sacrificial flame. These poems address and seek to emulate the spectacle of fire. By doing so, Bonnefoy clearly emulates Mallarmé's conception of performance. In *Crayonné au théâtre*, Mallarmé compares our human attempts at theatre to the far superior spectacle of the fire in the hearth: 'Il est (tisonne-t-on), un art, l'unique ou pur qu'énoncer signifie produire : il hurle ses démonstrations par la pratique [...] il

²¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 104.

²² Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 101.

²³ Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 102.

²⁴ It is worth noting that Nancy's 'L'Insacrifiable', published in *Une pensée finie*, is a reading of Bataille's writings on sacrifice. It seems likely that Bonnefoy's rethinking of sacrifice in 'Ô flamme' is also influenced by Bataille's writings on sacrifice. See, for example, Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), VII, pp. 264-538.

n'admet de lumineuse évidence sinon d'exister'.²⁵ The fire speaks to us only through its actions: 'énoncer signifie produire'. The only evidence of its being is the movement of its being. Of Mallarmé's meditation upon theatre and fire, Roger Pearson writes: 'the fire in the poet's grate is like a speech act, a symbol of the kind of writing to which he aspires. And a literary "démonstration" shall be just that: not a description or analysis, but a display or enactment. A performance.'²⁶

Where Bonnefoy's understanding of poetic performance differs from Mallarmé's, however, is in the poet's relationship to finitude. For Mallarmé, the cosmic pattern of 'le drame solaire', of death and resurrection, offers the glimpse of a pattern that transcends the formlessness and finitude of existence. For Bonnefoy, however, the poetic performance becomes a means of defeating these transcendental and conceptual modes of thought. There is a citational quality to the first two poems of 'La Terre', as signalled by the citation of direct speech from the light, a citation that migrates into the next poem, unmarked, as the voice of the night 'Moi, la nuit / Je consens'. A distinctly Mallarméan language of myth and ritual echoes behind the poetic performance. Yet, in the third poem of this opening trio, the language of myth and ritual are swallowed by the ephemeral and repetitive performance of the poem: 'Flamme, de salle en salle, / Le plâtre, / Toute une indifférence, illuminée. / Flamme l'ampoule [...]'. Taking the advent and sacrifice of fire as its model, the poetic performance asserts its own ephemeral and thus irreducible existence. The poetic performance, in a sense, becomes the flame: an ephemeral speaking that burns up the poet's aspirations to transcendence or eternity. The poem is always coming into being and passing out of being. Advent and sacrifice are shown to be coterminous in each and every gesture.

²⁵ Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, II, p.162.

²⁶ Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, p. 54.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

Many critics have explored the self-critical and ‘self-destructive’ nature of Bonnefoy’s poetry, scrutinising the manner in which the poet sets up transcendental or conceptual images as foils – the flights and evasions to which language lends itself – and deconstructs them in order to accede to the finite and contingent nature of ‘le réel’.²⁷ In *Une Pensée en mouvement*, Arnaud Buchs writes: ‘Aux yeux du poète, l’image incarne la lutte que se livrent le langage et la réalité, et la critique de l’image est au fondement de son esthétique [...] l’image est un mal nécessaire, [...] elle peut et [...] elle doit être dépassée dialectiquement’.²⁸ By constructing and deconstructing the poetic image, Bonnefoy hopes to strike the right balance, as he himself writes, ‘entre illusion et lucidité’.²⁹

This section will analyse the fourth poem of ‘La Terre’ in which the poet – still crying out and pointing – presents a series of images of failed or broken things. These images are suggestive of what Bonnefoy describes, in his essay on Jouve, as ‘les forces d’un mal – d’une catastrophe’ (NR, 260). In this essay, the poet issues a warning that also seems to resonate in the opening stanzas of this poem: ‘prenons garde à ne pas faire être, en les infusant à nos signes par une déviation de l’intelligence première, les forces d’un mal – d’une catastrophe – qui n’est pas le fait de la terre’ (NR, 260). In keeping with this warning, Bonnefoy presents a long series of images of disintegration in the fourth poem of

²⁷ See, for example, Naughton’s *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Giguère’s *Le Concept de la réalité dans la poésie d’Yves Bonnefoy*, or Née’s *Yves Bonnefoy. Penseur de l’image*.

²⁸ Arnaud Buchs, *Une pensée en mouvement*, pp. 94-5.

²⁹ Yves Bonnefoy, *Entretiens sur la poésie* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1981), p. 252.

‘La Terre’ and then deconstructs these images.³⁰ A series of failed conceptual systems, Bonnefoy suggests, should not convince us of the failure of our world.

Et, tard, je crie
Des mots que le feu accepte.

Je crie, Regarde,
Ici a déposé un sel inconnu.

Je crie, Regarde,
Ta conscience n’est pas en toi,
L’amont de ton regard
N’est pas en toi,
Ta souffrance n’est pas en toi, ta joie moins encore.

Je crie, Écoute,
Une musique a cessé.
Partout dans ce qui est,
Le vent se lève et dénoue.
Aujourd’hui la distance entre les mailles
Existe plus que les mailles,
Nous jetons un filet qui ne retient pas.

³⁰ Bonnefoy’s presentation of a series of images of conceptual disintegration and his critique of these images raise the question of deconstruction. Investigating the relationship between Bonnefoy’s essay ‘L’Image et la présence’ and Derrida’s writings, Buchs suggests that Bonnefoy’s deconstruction of the image has much in common with Derrida’s deconstruction. Buchs writes: ‘le poème est [...] à la fois l’objet et le sujet de la critique, et cela conformément d’ailleurs à la démarche déconstructionniste, qui agit toujours de l’intérieur’ (Buchs, *Une pensée en mouvement*, p. 90). However, it could be argued that what is at stake in the fourth poem of ‘La Terre’ is precisely the *deconstruction* of a series of images of *deconstruction*. As Buchs points out, that which Bonnefoy rejects in deconstructionist thought is the notion that one must always work *within* the textual system and deconstruct it from *within*. Bonnefoy deconstructs a conceptual system with the aim of moving beyond it. Whereas Derrida writes, ‘il n’y a pas de hors-texte’, Bonnefoy deconstructs the image precisely in the hope of acceding to a ‘hors-texte’. As Buchs writes: ‘C’est précisément cet absolu du langage que Bonnefoy conteste, et c’est en ce point qu’il va *dépasser* la critique nouvelle’ (Buchs, *Une pensée en mouvement*, p. 90). Rather than turning back upon itself, the poem must be made to turn outwards, towards the physical world.

However, what must equally be observed is that, in seeking to ‘surpass’ deconstruction, Bonnefoy is in many respects faithful to its aims. The profound textual bias of Derrida’s thought does not, admittedly, concord with the materialist and sensual nature of Bonnefoy’s writings. However, the writings of a deconstructionist such as Jean-Luc Nancy – whose thought centres around the identity-in-difference of the material, the corporal, and the linguistic – chimes to a remarkable extent with Bonnefoy’s desires for a deconstructive poetics that might come close to ‘le réel’ or ‘la présence’.

Achever, ordonner,
 Nous ne le savons plus.
 Entre l'œil qui s'accroît et le mot plus vrai
 Se déchire la taie de l'achevable.
 Ô ratures, ô rouilles
 Où la trace de l'eau, celle du sens
 Se résorbant s'illimitent,
 Dieu, paroi nue
 Où l'érosion, l'entaille
 Ont même aspect désert au flanc du monde.
 Comme il est tard !
 On voit un dieu pousser quelque chose comme
 Une barque vers un rivage mais tout change.
 Effondrements sur la route des hommes,
 Piétinements, clameurs au bas du ciel. (P, 286-7)

In the early poems of 'La Terre', in which the poet calls out, points, and urges us to look, he is urging us to attend to and to perceive the physical world. He is also, however, calling upon us to perceive the conceptual structures – the metaphysical ideals – that structure our vision of the world: the transcendental vision of 'un soleil enfant' coming over a horizon or of two hands descending from the sky. Calling out 'Je crie, Regarde', the poet subtly dramatises his self-reflexive and self-critical gaze. In the fourth poem of the series, Bonnefoy cries out again and points towards a series of images of failed or broken structures: a lost music, an unravelling wind, a torn fishing net, illegible signs, a tumbled-down house. He urges us to see that this vision of a broken world – just like the vision of a divine light and a transcendental presence – is also a product of conceptual or metaphysical thought. As the stable structures of conceptual thought dissolve, we perceive only the dissolution and disintegration.

Like the opening poems of 'La Terre', this poem is also associated with fire. The poem presents 'Des mots que le feu accepte'. The poet confronts an unidentifiable salt deposit: 'Je crie, Regarde, / Ici a déposé un sel inconnu'. It is as if the forms of the material world have suddenly become alien and impenetrable. Addressing a companion or perhaps

the reader, the poet cries out: ‘Je crie, Regarde, / Ta conscience n’est pas en toi, / L’amont de ton regard / N’est pas en toi, / Ta souffrance n’est pas en toi, ta joie moins encore’.

Negative after negative dissolves traditional conceptions of the integrity and interiority of the Self. The consciousness that observes the world disperses amongst the things of the world. There is no longer any position of autonomy or impartiality.³¹ Bonnefoy’s poetic performance – calling up this diverse series of images and pointing towards them, one by one – is itself deliberately disjointed. The poet is exploring the fragmentation of systems of conceptual thought.

Bonnefoy urges the reader to listen, only to reveal that a piece of music has ceased: ‘Je crie, Écoute, / Une musique a cessé’. An expectation is raised and disappointed. We find ourselves attending to a silence, to something that is no longer there or that perhaps never existed. Throughout the entire world, a wind rises and then unravels: ‘Partout dans ce qui est, / Le vent se lève et dénoue’. This sentence is composed wholly of monosyllables, apart from the first and last words which create an elegant and chiastic internal rhyme: ‘Partout [...] dénoue’. In the simplest possible language, Bonnefoy evokes a general unravelling of existence. The *vers impair* enacts this unravelling motion. After the six-syllable line, the seven-syllable line creates an effect of slack and surplus. In the final stanza of ‘Le Cimetière marin’, Valéry pits the human intellect *against* the chaos of the physical world with the words: ‘Le vent se lève !... il faut tenter de vivre !’³² In Bonnefoy’s poem, the wind rises and simply unravels. Bonnefoy suggests that an opposition between the ordering force of the human *cogito* and the disorder of the physical world is no longer sustainable. Making reference to Valéry, perhaps the last great poet of this tradition, Bonnefoy suggests that this music has ceased.

³¹ The third chapter of this thesis will examine the exteriorised subjectivity that Bonnefoy evokes here, analysing a sequence of poems published in *Les Planches courbes* in 2001.

³² Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), I, pp. 1503-4.

The next image is an image of a torn fishing net: ‘Aujourd’hui la distance entre les mailles / Existe plus que les mailles’. The holes in the net exceed the net itself. Everything slips away from us: ‘Nous jetons un filet qui ne retient pas’. This eleven-syllable line is what Jérôme Thélôt calls an ‘alexandrin boiteux’.³³ The first six syllables hopefully cast out the net and the final five, falling short of the alexandrine, express the net’s failure to enclose the world. The line of verse is ‘un filet qui ne retient pas’. Humanity has lost its mastery of the world, its ability to enclose and to order: ‘Achever, ordonner, / Nous ne le savons plus’. Bonnefoy evokes a world of increasing sophistication and complexity in which our projects can no longer be fulfilled or completed: ‘Entre l’œil qui s’accroît et le mot plus vrai / Se déchire la taie de l’achevable’. The world, as we understand it, will no longer conform to traditional ideals of closure.

The apostrophe, the archetype of poetic ambition and pretension, is used to address scored out words and rust marks: ‘Ô ratures, ô rouilles’. These scored out words are perhaps the discredited words of the tradition, words such as truth, faith, and presence. Rust marks are signs of decay. The poet compares the two processes by which these marks are deposited: ‘Ô ratures, ô rouilles / Où la trace de l’eau, celle du sens / Se résorbant s’illimitent’. Water evaporates, leaving behind deposits of rust. Sense too has evaporated; it has dispersed and become limitless. And it has left behind words that are now mere marks, like patches of rust, traces of its former presence.³⁴ Allowing one sentence to run into the next, Bonnefoy sets another group of images in apposition: ‘Dieu, paroi nue / Où l’érosion, l’entaille / Ont même aspect désert au flanc du monde’. God is evoked as a

³³ Thélôt writes, ‘le vers de 11 syllabes, lorsqu’il est ainsi séparé en deux segments dont le premier en compte 6, doit être envisagé comme un « alexandrin boiteux »’ (Jérôme Thélôt, *Poétique d’Yves Bonnefoy* (Geneva: Droz, 1983), p. 33).

³⁴ Sense has become a limitless excess. It has become what Bonnefoy describes as ‘un surcroît’ (BR, 34), what Nancy describes as ‘un excès ou un absentement permanents du sens’ (Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 44). As sense evaporates and disperses, language becomes a series of mere traces, of differential markers. I will return to Bonnefoy’s use of the word ‘le sens’ later in this chapter.

‘paroi nue’, a blank surface on which something may be inscribed. On this wall, the ‘arbitrary’ markings of the natural world and the ‘concerted’ markings of human writing have the same vacant look: ‘l’érosion, l’entaille / Ont même aspect désert’. The assonantal play on ‘l’érosion, l’entaille’ echoes the alliteration of ‘Ô ratures, ô rouilles’. Nothing elevates language above the accidental markings of the physical world. Neither one nor the other testifies to a particular presence.

The poet exclaims: ‘Comme il est tard !’, echoing the opening line of the poem: ‘Et, tard, je crie’. Like the Decadents at the end of the nineteenth century, the poet perceives the extreme lateness of his era: it is in an advanced state of cultural crisis, enduring its very death throes. A vision of a god rises and then metamorphoses into something completely different: ‘On voit un dieu pousser quelque chose comme / Une barque vers un rivage mais tout change’. What might have been a salvation is revealed to be a fleeting vision. The poem began by evoking a cultural crisis and now it tips into apocalypse: ‘Effondrements sur la route des hommes, / Piétinements, clameurs au bas du ciel’. The roads are down. There are hoofbeats and clamourings. The fourth poem of ‘La Terre’ evokes a world undone.

The second half of this long poem, however, enacts a movement that might be described as recuperative or redemptive of the negativity, disorder, and despair of the first half. The broken structures of the opening stanzas – the music, the net, the signs – are not restored but, rather, abandoned, as the poet steps out through ‘la brèche’:

Regarde,
Le quatrième mur s’est descellé,
Entre lui et la pile du côté nord
Il y a place pour la ronce
Et les bêtes furtives de chaque nuit.
Le quatrième mur et le premier
Ont dérivé sur la chaîne,
Le sceau de la présence a éclaté
Sous la poussée rocheuse.

J'entre donc par la brèche au cri rapide.
Est-ce que deux combattants qui ont lâché prise,
Deux amants qui retombent inapaisés?
Non, la lumière joue avec la lumière
Et le signe est la vie
Dans l'arbre de la transparence de ce qui est.

Je crie, Regarde,
Le signe est devenu le lieu.
Sous le porche de foudre
Fendu
Nous sommes et ne sommes pas.
Entre avec moi, obscure,
Accepte par la brèche au cri de faim.

Et soyons l'un pour l'autre comme la flamme
Quand elle se détache du flambeau,
La phrase de fumée un instant lisible
Avant de s'effacer dans l'air souverain. (P, 288-9)

The poet cries out and points to another dilapidated structure: a tumbledown house. He urges us to observe the break in the fourth wall: 'Regarde, / Le quatrième mur s'est descellé'. 'Se desceller' means 'Ouvrir ce qui est fermé hermétiquement ou semble l'être' or 'Défaire ce qui est fermé d'un sceau'.³⁵ There is a fissure in that which appeared to be perfectly sealed. Through the breach, wild plants and animals enter the house: 'Il y a place pour la ronce / Et les bêtes furtives de chaque nuit'. The bramble and the wild nocturnal creatures are images of the improper and the outcast. The undomesticated finds a place within the domicile. The breaking of this wall is again evoked as the breaking of a seal: 'Le sceau de la présence a éclaté / Sous la poussée rocheuse'. The phrase 'le sceau de la présence' awakens ideas of the sovereignty, authority, authenticity, and enclosure of presence.³⁶ Like 'le sens' that evaporated in the earlier stanza, this self-contained and

³⁵ 'Desceller', in *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* <<http://www.cnrtl.fr>> [accessed 17th May 2012].

³⁶ A 'sceau' is a 'Cachet où sont gravés en creux des signes propres à une autorité souveraine [...] et qu'on applique sur une matière molle, cire ou plomb, afin que l'empreinte en relief ainsi réalisée

authentic presence now disperses. It gives way ‘Sous la poussée rocheuse’. It succumbs to the finitude and movement of material existence.

Bonnefoy is using the image of the fallen house to represent the fallen ideals and the fractured architecture of our era. He is perhaps also using the image of this tumbled-down fourth wall – ‘Le quatrième mur s’est descellé’ – to make a subtle reference to Brecht’s notion of breaking the fourth wall.³⁷ The line that separates the ‘imaginary’ world of the play from the ‘real’ world of the audience has been dissolved. The closed performative space has been opened up to the things of the world: plants and the wild animals have moved in through the breach. Bonnefoy insists that, just as there can be no self-contained and transcendental philosophical ideal, there can be no enclosed performative space. The theatricality and the reality of existence coexist. In each and every act, they are inextricably intertwined.

The sealed and sovereign space – presence, the stage, the poem – is ruptured. The poet embraces this rupture and steps out through the breach: ‘J’entre donc par la brèche au cri rapide.’ As he does so, there is an overturning of the despair with which the poet greeted ‘l’aspect désert’ of the ‘rouilles’ and the ‘ratures’, ‘l’érosion’ and ‘l’entaille’. Language is no longer an inadequate referent, a failed purveyor of presence. Stepping into the line of fracture itself, the poet insists his performance *is* reality, and vice versa. This new performative freedom is symbolised by the play of the light: ‘la lumière joue avec la lumière / Et le signe est la vie / Dans l’arbre de la transparence de ce qui est’. Language *is*

atteste l’authenticité, l’autorité, la validité des documents sur lesquels il est apposé, ou les close afin d’en tenir caché le contenu’ (‘Sceau’, in *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* <<http://www.cnrtl.fr>> [accessed 17th May 2012]. The seal is in fact a motif that Derrida uses and deconstructs. In *Limited Inc*, in reference to the ‘seal’ of Searle’s copyright, Derrida deconstructs the function of the seal using the concept of iterability. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*. (Paris: Galilée, 1990), p. 66.

³⁷ Brecht initiated theatrical techniques that acknowledged the artificiality of the divide between stage and audience, such as having an actor play the role of spectator. He sought to expose, as Meg Mumford writes, ‘the efforts of traditional theatre to hide and hypnotize’ (Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 66).

life. The sign plays with the sign, just as ‘la lumière joue avec la lumière’. And like the light, language is a transparent medium in which we move and in which things stand revealed to us: ‘le signe est la vie / Dans l’arbre de la transparence de ce qui est’. Language is play and performance, part of the movements and metamorphoses of the physical world. There is no possible separation between language and the physical world. The poet calls out, ‘Je crie, Regarde, / Le signe est devenu le lieu’. Language is our *locus*.

This revelation comes with a vision of forked lightning: ‘Sous le porche de foudre / Fendu / Nous sommes et ne sommes pas’. The twin forks of lightning suggest the cleft nature of human existence. We are and we are not.³⁸ We affirm our actions tremulously, from one moment to the next. We live for a while and we die. Beneath ‘le porche de foudre’, we stand for an instant in a new theatre or a new church. It is nothing more than a split second, a forked path, and a fleeting light. This is our new ‘edifice’. In the final lines of this stanza, the poet breaks into imperatives once more, urging: ‘Entre avec moi, obscure, / Accepte par la brèche au cri de faim’. He urges us to step forward, through the fourth wall and through the decayed context of our dispossession, into darkness and uncertainty. We are urged to accept the ephemeral and unstable architecture of all existence. The poetic cry becomes a ‘cri de faim’.³⁹

In the final line of the poem, the imperative ‘Regarde’ is replaced with the cohortative ‘Soyons’. The poet no longer points towards the image from a critical distance

³⁸ The third chapter of this thesis explores this syncopation of existence and non-existence, the constant grounding and ungrounding of being.

³⁹ There is a marked similarity between Bonnefoy’s evocation of a ‘deconstructed’ language and Heidegger’s writings on the tautological nature of language. In the essay ‘Language’, Heidegger writes: ‘Language is – language, speech. Language speaks. If we let ourselves fall into the abyss denoted by this sentence, we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height. Its loftiness opens up a depth. The two span a realm in which we would like to become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of man’ (Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), p. 189). Both Bonnefoy and Heidegger confront the uncertain space that is opened up by a language that simply gives us language and seek to find a new ‘ontology’ or ‘dwelling place’ for humanity.

but he *assumes* its full performative force: ‘Et soyons l’un pour l’autre comme la flamme / Quand elle se détache du flambeau, / La phrase de fumée un instant lisible / Avant de s’effacer dans l’air souverain’. The image of the flame recurs once again. We are invited to experience human existence as a flame, a life spurt that is momentary, legible, yet vanishing. Our lives are an ephemeral writing. Traces linger a while after our death and then are swallowed up by ‘l’air souverain’, for the air – and not the self – is sovereign. The poet invites us to celebrate the ephemeral performance of existence and the ephemeral sense to which it gives rise.

In this long and complex poem, Bonnefoy casts off the conceptual ideal of language as a means of construction and embraces language as a form of action. He insists that language cannot be separated from the contingency and mutability of the physical world. It does not offer a stable foundation nor a stable framework upon which to build an understanding of the world. It is neither our fishing net nor our cathedral. We cannot distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic, the theatrical from the real. On the contrary, language resembles the playful movement of the light, the transitory flash of lightning, and the spurt of a flame. This is the space in which we are invited to make a home for ourselves. It is, as I suggested in my introduction, a space of existential risk, a space in which ‘the existence of others and a shared relation to being is at stake’, to return to James’s citation. Human existence is envisaged as an ephemeral performance. In the present moment, it is always to be decided and to be affirmed.

‘Une ontologie à venir’

A cluster of poems at the centre of ‘La Terre’ all speak in the first person plural or call out to a collection of people (whether this is conceived as being simply the poet and a

companion, or the poet and his readers, or the poet and all humanity). Having confronted the transience and mutability of existence in the opening poems of ‘La Terre’, and having deconstructed images that attempt to ground this transience and mutability in stable structures, the poet turns his attention to the question of the ‘nous’. If human existence is an unceasing movement without essence and without foundation, how are we to conceive of human togetherness? What kind of togetherness might we experience without a fixed collective identity and without the promise of permanence?

The poems of ‘La Terre’ all begin with the gestures by which we address ourselves and present ourselves to one another in language. They perform acts of communication – a ‘je’ that cries out to a ‘tu’, the presentation of a ‘nous’ – that cannot be reduced to any particular signification. Their ‘sens’ cannot be abstracted. Rather, the performative constructions of ‘La Terre’, the dramatisation and interpellation of different subject positions, explore what might be described as ‘notre présentation dans l’élément du sens’, to use Nancy’s words.⁴⁰ As Bonnefoy’s recurrent use of the image of the birth of the child suggests, our existence manifests itself to us as sense. As Nancy writes, ‘Le sens, c’est nous’.⁴¹

Implicitly considering Mallarmé’s preoccupation with the negativity of existence in ‘La Parole poétique’, Bonnefoy writes:

quand on a « trouvé le néant », preuve que la personne humaine est sans fondement dans quelque absolu que ce soit, comment ne pas lever les yeux de ce champ d’illusions pour constater, dans la société toujours active qu’une autre sorte de réalité se propose là, tout de même, avec un emploi pour les mots, une parole en évident devenir : c’est l’ensemble des êtres comme nous, et semblablement embarqués sur le même flot de matière qui se rabattra sur eux, les noiera, mais

⁴⁰ Nancy writes: ‘Notre existence se présente comme sens (qui peut aussitôt se donner comme non-sens, comme sens pauvre ou puissant, éternel ou ignoble, etc., peu importe pour le moment), et simultanément nous nous présentons à nous-mêmes. C’est à dire à la fois les uns aux autres, les uns par les autres, et chacun à soi. Nous *comparaissons*, et cette parution est le sens’ (Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’Oubli de la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée 1986), pp. 94-5).

⁴¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 24.

décidés à survivre, pour un instant auquel l'effort en commun confère du sens, oui, ce que l'on peut dire du sens. (SPV, 205).

Bonnefoy depicts a 'nous' who are *at sea* and who are, nonetheless, 'décidés à survivre'. We are committed to living and, in the instant in which we come together and take action, there is 'ce que l'on peut dire du sens'. This third section scrutinises a series of poetic performances at the centre of 'La Terre' that dramatise the gestures by which one person reaches out to another and that move towards an affirmation of the sense of our ephemeral togetherness. It investigates, in other words, how 'l'effort en commun' might 'confère du sens'. Each of these short poems repeats the motif of the cry: the cry of sexual pleasure, the cry of childbirth, and the cry of the poetic performance.

The first two of these short poems unfold in the subjunctive mood. One begins 'Et nos mains se cherchant / Soient' and, the other, 'Et notre terre soit'. Using the subjunctive mood to broach that which our hands together might be, that which our earth might be, the poet is beginning to construct a sense of a 'nous', a sense of a shared experience of existence. Expressing a desire or a hypothesis, these poems are tentative performances of that which our shared existence might be.⁴² No single or defined ontology can be extracted from these performances. What emerges is an understanding of ontology as that which is always already shared and as that which is always to be performed.

Et nos mains se cherchant
Soient la pierre nue
Et la joie partagée
Une brassée d'herbes

Car bien que toi, que moi

⁴² This unusual use of the subjunctive at first seems to be optative, expressing a desire and echoing liturgical formulations such as 'Dieu soit loué'. And yet, one is also tempted, especially as the poems progress, to also read these lines as hypotheses, as contingent and unverifiable statements of that which our shared existence might be. Whatever reading we adopt, it is clear that a constative utterance, a simple statement, could not suffice. The poet explores the nature of the 'nous' performatively – tentatively, searchingly, desirously – in the subjunctive mood.

Criant ne sommes
Qu'un anneau de feu clair
Qu'un vent disperse

Si bien qu'on ne saura
Tôt dans le ciel
Si même eut lieu ce cri,
Qui a fait naître,

Toutefois, se trouvant,
Nos mains consentent
D'autres éternités
Au désir encore.

The poet wishes that the endless searching of my hand for yours, of my body for yours, might be fixed in naked stone; that the ephemeral sharing of two divided bodies, 'la joie partagée', might simply materialise as 'Une brassée d'herbes'. Images of the body infiltrate images of the landscape, 'la pierre nue' and 'une brassée d'herbes', mimicking the couple's intimate 'sharing'. In the speculative and desirous haze of the subjunctive mood, a plural noun governed by a present participle, 'nos mains se cherchant', gives way to a noun in the singular, 'la pierre'. The fleetingness and instability of existence – two bodies always having to move towards one another and to find one another again – gives way to permanent union.

Yet this desirous and speculative modality gives way to qualifications and reservations: the poet knows the limitations of sex and the sharing that it permits. It is an ephemeral act that soon ends and disperses: 'Car bien que toi, que moi / Criant ne sommes / Qu'un anneau de feu clair / Qu'un vent disperse'. What seems to be an unending and unbreaking 'anneau' is simply an 'anneau de feu'. It is dispersed on the wind. Such is the transience of the lovers' cries that, after the event, one will not even know if they happened: 'on ne saura / Tôt dans le ciel / Si même eut lieu ce cri'. The future negative expresses the inevitability of uncertainty and loss. The future tense is followed by a

preterite, ‘annulant l’acte jusque dans l’apparence de son non-accomplissement’, to use the words of Blanchot.⁴³ The act will pass without a trace and we will look back in confusion. Blanchot of course writes these words about Mallarmé’s ‘Un coup de dés’ and Bonnefoy’s construction seems to echo the formulation to which he refers, ‘RIEN [...] N’AURA EU LIEU [...] QUE LE LIEU’.⁴⁴ Looking forward with desire, the poet is acutely aware that he will look back at loss and dispersal. He is poised between the uncertainty of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

By the final stanza, however, in spite of loss and uncertainty, one hand is already finding the other again. The two figures come together and human desire leads them onwards again: ‘se trouvant, / Nos mains consentent / D’autres éternités / Au désir encore’. The hands turn from ‘autres éternités’ to consent ‘Au désir encore’. They consent to the repetition of desire.⁴⁵ Playing on the double meaning of ‘encore’, Bonnefoy suggests that desire is ‘still’ to be realised and to be realised ‘again’. Reaching out, the hand consents to this restlessness, going ‘still’ ‘again’ towards the other: ‘se cherchant’, ‘Criant’, ‘se trouvant’.

The subjunctive expresses the contingency of the movement by which existence unfurls and the contingency of any relationship with an other. In the present moment, we move forward in anticipation and uncertainty. These poems are tentative explorations of what ‘nous’, ‘nos mains’ and ‘notre terre’ might be. Addressing the question of human togetherness and its meaning in the subjunctive mood, Bonnefoy seems to suggest that any attempt to fix its meaning is mere hypothesis or wishful thinking. And yet, equally, Bonnefoy seems to insist, we *can* speak of being – of a human ontology – in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive expresses the poet’s desire that existence *might* have

⁴³ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 294.

⁴⁴ Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 400.

⁴⁵ I will return to this crucial image of consent in the final section of this chapter.

sense. Michèle Finck writes, 'Le subjonctif est le signe linguistique de la simultanéité du désir et du manque'.⁴⁶ From one poem to the next, the poet consents 'Au désir encore'. He consents to a desire that is never quite realised and never quite sated. And thus the next poem unfolds, once more, in the subjunctive mood:

Et notre terre soit
L'inachevable
Lumière de la faux
Qui prend l'écume

Et non parce qu'est vraie
Sa seule foudre,
Bien que le vide, clair,
Soit notre couche

Et que toi près de moi,
Simples, n'y sommes
Que fumée rabattue
Du sacrifice,

Mais pour sa retombée
Qui nous unit,
Blé de la transparence,
Au désir encore.

The poet speaks – perhaps wistfully, perhaps speculatively – of a consummately finite existence: 'Et notre terre soit / L'inachevable / Lumière de la faux'. Light glints off the blade of the scythe and life disappears with the greatest ease, like a blade skimming froth.

Yet it is not that death is the singular and unfailing truth of human existence: 'Et non parce

⁴⁶ Michèle Finck's analysis of how Bonnefoy uses the subjunctive to move towards 'le simple' is revealing. She writes, 'Le poète ne peut parler du simple que sur le ton de la prière : « Tout nous soit simple ». Le subjonctif est le signe linguistique de la simultanéité du désir et du manque. La poésie moderne ne peut accomplir l'avènement du « simple », vers lequel cependant est tendue sa prière. Le poème à la fois promet le « simple » et le dérobe à l'instant même où il semble sur le point de l'offrir (« de loin »). La poésie de Bonnefoy est fondée sur la coexistence de la promesse et du retrait' (Finck, *Le Simple et le sens*, pp. 170-1). Finck, however, has a tendency to present the poet's progression towards 'le sens' or 'le simple' as a teleological movement, as if 'le simple' and 'le sens' were something that could be grasped. This chapter suggests that the movement itself – the movement forwards or towards – is the very sense and the very simplicity of existence. The desirous and uncertain reaching of the subjunctive mood is the shared sense of our coexistence.

qu'est vraie / Sa seule foudre'. The poet does not embrace a nihilistic vision of existence, even if he understands its logic 'Bien que le vide, clair, / Soit notre couche'. Even though the world may be foundationless, even though two lovers are only smoke, beaten back off the sacrificial fire, the repeated falling of the scythe draws us on towards desire: 'sa retombée / Qui nous unit [...] Au désir encore'. The scythe suggests at once the steady sweep of the blade at harvest time and the steady recurrence of death as *la Faucheuse* claims each and every human life. It beats a steady rhythm, and its cycles of life and death move steadily onwards. The negativity of existence – the notion that 'le vide, clair, / Soit notre couche' – does not preclude the resurgence of life. Rather, it is the rhythm of death – there always in the background – that quickens and intensifies the rhythms of desire.

The sense of 'notre terre' does not take the form of a stable image (as in the image of 'nos mains' becoming 'la pierre nue'). It emerges as a rhythm: as the repetition of cycles of life and death and as the ebb and flow of human desire.⁴⁷ The 'nous' is never united with itself. As the scythe 'nous unit / Au désir encore', we are simply reconciled to the rhythm of existence. Human existence perpetuates itself and repeats itself without ever completing itself. The first line of this poem reads, 'Et notre terre soit / L'inachevable', and the poems of 'La Terre' emulate this unending force. They do not foreclose possibility or crystallise as fact. They venture a desire or a hypothesis, move towards a sense of our shared being, and then they repeat this performance. In the opening of *Être singulier pluriel*, Nancy writes: 'la répétition est condition de l'affirmation. Je dis : « cela est, que cela soit ». Ce n'est pas un « fait », et cela n'a rien à voir avec une évaluation d'aucune espèce, c'est le retranchement d'une singularité dans son affirmation de l'être : une touche

⁴⁷ In 'La Terre', and in *Dans le leurre du seuil* as a whole, Bonnefoy cultivates repetition, using refrains such as 'Je crie, Regarde'. Large sections of 'Deux Couleurs' and 'Dans le leurre du seuil' are structured around the refrain 'Plus avant que' (P, 260-74). The entirety of 'L'épars, l'indivisible' is structured around the refrain 'Oui, par [...] ' (P, 317-32). Throughout all of *Dans le leurre du seuil* Bonnefoy uses structural repetitions to cultivate the incantational nature of the verse.

de sens'.⁴⁸ Like Bonnefoy's poetic performances in the subjunctive mood, Nancy suggests that we venture an affirmation and we affirm it only by repeating this venture, over and over again. The poet and the philosopher go forward saying: '« cela est, que cela soit »'.

For Bonnefoy, the 'nous' is something that we venture in the subjunctive mood. It is to be enacted and re-enacted, to be gone towards and to be imagined anew. The poet's successive performative constructions – 'Retrouvons-nous', 'Portons-nous l'un vers l'autre', 'Et nos mains cherchant / Soient', 'Et notre terre soit' – are part of this never-ending performance. In *Être singulier pluriel*, Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

la « pensée » de « nous », antérieure à toute pensée – et, en vérité, sa condition même –, n'est pas une pensée représentative (pas une idée, une notion, un concept), mais une *praxis* et un *ethos* : la mise en scène que la comparution est. Nous y sommes déjà, toujours déjà, à chaque instant. Ce n'est pas une nouveauté – mais il faut, il *nous* faut, chaque fois la réinventer, chaque fois entrer en scène à nouveau.⁴⁹

There is a marked similarity between Bonnefoy's aversion to the concept and his insistence upon a performative poetics, and Nancy's thinking of 'la mise en scène que la comparution est' which is not 'une pensée représentative (pas une idée, une notion, un concept)'. Refusing to ground thought in a static figure or concept, both the poet and the philosopher insist upon the present moment of performance: 'la mise en scène que la comparution est'. Spatially, ethically, we always already appear alongside one another. We are committed to a 'nous' that is always to be performed and always to be reinvented. Like Nancy, Bonnefoy perceives the inherent theatricality of our constant need to approach one another, of the impermanence of the words and the gestures that we share, and of our constant need to repeat these actions and reinvent these relationships, again and again. All these notions are present in the wistful refrain with which one of the early poems of 'La Terre' begins: 'Retrouvons-nous'.

⁴⁸ Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, p. 94.

The poetic act becomes analogous to the sexual act: the ephemeral cry of sexual pleasure and the ephemeral sharing between two bodies.⁵⁰ The poetic performances – to return to a formulation cited earlier – ‘rendent la poésie à sa fin qui est [le] partage’ (BR, 23). The next poem of this short central cluster, however, evokes the cry of the newborn child. It is not the transience of the cry that is foregrounded in this poem but its singularity. The exploratory performances in the subjunctive mood are suddenly punctured by a dramatic address and an assured present tense:

Éternité du cri
De l’enfant qui semble
Naître de la douleur
Qui se fait lumière.

L’éternité descend
Dans la terre nue
Et soulève le sens
Comme une bêche.

The first stanza is an address, an invocation to the ‘Éternité du cri / De l’enfant’. The word ‘Éternité’ suggests the process of regeneration that transcends the finitude of the individual. It suggests the infinite finitude of the cry. The child ‘semble / Naître de la douleur / Qui se fait lumière’. The poet depicts a movement from physical suffering to light, from the pain of childbirth to the arrival of a new life. The second stanza no longer takes the form of an invocation but presents a simple constative statement: ‘L’éternité descend / Dans la terre nue / Et soulève le sens / Comme une bêche’. This ‘éternité’

⁵⁰ Just as Bonnefoy uses the figure of two lovers – reaching for one another still again – to explore the sharing of being in ‘La Terre’, Nancy writes in *La Communauté désœuvrée* ‘Les amants exposent, sur la limite, l’exposition des êtres singuliers les uns aux autres, et le battement de cette exposition : la comparution, le passage et le partage’ (Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p. 95). Nancy’s text on the lovers is a reading of Georges Bataille’s writings on the notion of a community of lovers (Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, V, p. 296). Bataille’s influence can certainly be felt in both Bonnefoy’s and Nancy’s writings on desire and sharing. As I pointed out earlier, it can also be felt in their writings on sacrifice. The influence of Bataille is, perhaps, one of the major reasons for the affinity that exists between Bonnefoy and Nancy.

descends upon the earth and turns the clay upwards. At once a downwards and an upwards motion, it is a kind of *bouleversement*. ‘L’éternité’ collides with the physical earth. ‘Le sens’ rises up out of the overturned clay, as if thrust up by a shovel.

The arrival of the child is presented as the arrival of ‘le sens’. Yet this ‘sens’ is not any kind of expressible meaning or signification. On the contrary, it is as if, upon hearing the cry of the newborn, the poet’s conceptual reckoning of the world is dismantled and he too is thrown back upon the naked earth. Birth presents this *singular* ‘naissance du sens’. Of the image of birth, Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

Dès l’aube de la pensée contemporaine, dès Hegel (il suffit de relire l’introduction de la *Phénoménologie*), « naissance » est un mot pour dire un excès absolu sur la représentation. Déjà, Hegel saisit le savoir essentiel – celui qui *enfantera* le savoir absolu – comme ce mouvement de surgir *et de nier toute représentation donnée avec ce surgissement*, aussi bien que toute représentation *de* ce surgissement.⁵¹

Like Nancy, Bonnefoy presents birth as a ‘*surgissement*’ that undermines representation. The poet’s tentative explorations of the nature of human togetherness are punctuated by this short poem. It is only half the length of the previous two poems and it is perhaps the most powerful poem of all of those in ‘La Terre’. It presents a cry that *undoes* any generalisation, a cry that we can only respond to by allowing the conceptual systems with which we map the world to fall away. This singularity, Bonnefoy suggests, is ‘le sens’.

The last of these short poems evoking the human cry returns to the first-person present indicative and to the utterance with which ‘La Terre’ began: ‘Je crie’. Now, the poet himself simply performs the cry. The resurgence of the first person singular coincides with the singularity of the cry of the newborn. This performance resonates with all the other permutations of the cry: it can be read as a cry of sexual pleasure; it can be read as the cry of one who, having heard the newborn child, opens his lungs and cries too.

⁵¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Poids d’une pensée* (Sainte-Foy: Le Griffon d’argile, 1991) p. 131.

Breaking the run of quatrains, Bonnefoy presents a single sentence that stretches over a tercet and a couplet:

N'étant que la puissance du rien,
La bouche, la salive du rien,
Je crie,

Et au-dessus de la vallée de toi, de moi
Demeure le cri de joie dans sa forme pure.

Opening with a present participle in the negative, 'N'étant que la puissance du rien', the poet depicts himself as nothing more than a negative force, a groundless vigour or impulse. Accepting that even his physical presence is groundless – 'La bouche, la salive du rien' – the poet cries out: 'Je crie'. These two small words hang in the space between stanzas; they resonate in the silence of the pause. The poet cries into an emptiness and, yet, as we move into the second stanza, the cry finds the other: 'Et au-dessus de la vallée de toi, de moi / Demeure le cri de joie dans sa forme pure'. It hangs in the space between the self and the other. There is no *union* between one person and another and yet, there is a sharing and a communication across a divide. This sharing, Bonnefoy suggests, is the joy of human existence: 'le cri de joie dans sa forme pure'.

Dramatising the poetic performance, emulating both the cry of sexual pleasure and the cry of the newborn, Bonnefoy insists upon the act of communication itself and not the communication of a particular message.⁵² The poem becomes a cry, like any other. The cry is simply let go. Poetry, envisaged as some form of appropriation or preservation, is let go. The power of these two small words, 'Je crie', lies in the fact that they do not seek to preserve or protect anything. As Nancy writes: 'Le sens d'être n'est sans doute jamais dans ce qui est dit – dans les significations – , mais il est à coup sûr dans ceci, qu' « il est

⁵² Nancy writes, 'la communication n'est pas celle d'un message – mais elle a lieu'. He adds, 'Que l'œuvre soit offerte à la communication, cela veut dire qu'elle soit effectivement *offerte*, c'est-à-dire présentée, proposée et abandonnée sur la limite commune où se partagent les êtres singuliers' (Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, pp. 181-2).

parlé », au sens absolu de l'expression'.⁵³ Like the cry of the newborn child, the poetic performance has a 'sens' that cannot be reduced to any signification. The act of crying out and the address to the other *are* 'le sens'. Bonnefoy writes, 'L'être n'a nul besoin d'une autre cause que soi. Nous sommes notre propre cause'. Nancy writes: '*l'être lui-même nous est donné comme le sens. L'être n'a pas de sens, mais l'être lui-même, le phénomène de l'être, c'est le sens*'.⁵⁴

The call towards togetherness that is voiced in the early poems of 'La Terre', 'Retrouvons-nous', culminates in this cry. It is delivered in the first-person present tense. In the 'here' and 'now', the self calls out to the other. The poet expresses, to use Nancy's formulation, 'l'être-avec de tout ce qui est, lui-même nu et inévaluable'.⁵⁵ The poetic performances of 'La Terre' thus present the beginnings of an ontology, one that is yet to realise itself and that cannot realise itself. They present, in other words, a thinking of ontology as 'l'inachevable'. Nancy writes:

Ce *nous* du sens, qui est le sens, ce sens qui est l'être du « nous » avant toute anthropologie, avant tout humanisme et tout antihumanisme, exige une ontologie qui est encore à venir, ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'elle viendra, mais peut-être qu'elle est en elle-même, comme pensée, ordonnée à la dimension d'un « venir » ou d'un « survenir » : celui de notre comparution, qui est notre présentation dans l'élément du sens. Cette présentation n'a pas elle-même de signification, elle a seulement lieu, sans cesse, à travers d'innombrables significations. Elle ne procède pas comme la reconnaissance ni comme l'identification de ceux – *nous* – qui sont présentés. Elle procède comme une exposition : nous *sommes* exposés, c'est là notre être – ou c'est le sens de l'être.⁵⁶

Like the birth of the child, this ontology is 'ordonnée à la dimension d'un « venir » ou d'un « survenir »'. It comes. It arises, moment after moment, generation after generation. It thus always remains 'une ontologie à venir'. Bonnefoy aligns the cry of sexual pleasure,

⁵³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, pp. 46-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, p. 22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

the cries of child birth, the cry of the newborn child, and the poetic cry, for they are all ‘un surgissement’. In sex, or childbirth, or poetry, ‘nous sommes exposés’. The one who cries is laid bare, as if thrust upon the earth for the first time. The cry surges again and again and, from these *repeated* performances, sense – the sense that we ourselves are – arises. The ‘ontologie à venir’ is perhaps nothing more than a thinking of existence as rhythm: rhythms of life and death, rhythms of sowing and harvesting, the rhythm of sex, and the rhythm of the poetic voice. Each of these rhythms takes us onwards and no closer to resolution.

Consenting

In the first poem of ‘La Terre’, the poetic discourse is interrupted by the voice of the light which pronounces: ‘(« Moi la lumière, / Oui, je consens »)’. In the second poem, this same formulation appears again but, this time, it is absorbed into the poet’s speech: ‘Moi la nuit / Je consens. Moi l’amandier / J’entre paré dans la chambre nuptiale’. These performative utterances are echoed in the central series of short poems, when the lovers’ hands ‘consentent / D’autres éternités / Au désir encore’. The final poem of ‘La Terre’ (except for the final four short stanzas) is one long incantation of this performative utterance. In the final section of this first chapter, I want to investigate the various meanings of the verb ‘consentir’, the ritualised and performative nature of this utterance, and the nature of the subjectivity to which this recurrent act of consent gives rise.

Oui, moi les pierres du soir, illuminées,
Je consens.

Oui, moi la flaque
Plus vaste que le ciel, l’enfant

Qui en remue la boue, l'iris
Aux reflets sans repos, sans souvenirs,
De l'eau, moi, je consens.
Et moi le feu, moi
La pupille du feu, dans la fumée
Des herbes et des siècles, je consens.

Moi la nuée
Je consens. Moi l'étoile du soir
Je consens.
Moi les grappes de mondes qui ont mûri,
Moi le départ
Des maçons attardés vers les villages,
Moi le bruit de la fourgonnette qui se perd,
Je consens. Moi le berger,
Je pousse entre la fatigue et l'espérance
Sous l'arche de l'étoile vers l'étable.
Moi la nuit d'août,
Je fais le lit des bêtes dans l'étable.
Moi le sommeil,
Je prends le rêve dans mes barques, je consens.

Across the poems of 'La Terre', the poet has struggled to negotiate some kind of 'agreement' between language and the physical world, between the self and the 'other'. In the performance of the act of consent and the repetition of this act, the final poem seems to have reached a form of 'consensus': 'Oui, moi les pierres du soir, illuminées, / Je consens'. The act of consent is at once an act of authority (a giving of permission) and a petition to authority (a submission to the will of the other). It is at once active and passive. Etymologically, 'consentir' comes from the Latin 'consentire' meaning 'to feel with or alongside'.⁵⁷ The prefix 'con' suggests the shared or co-originary nature of human feeling: we feel *with* the things of the physical world. Catching a glimpse of 'les pierres du soir, illuminées', the poet recognises that these stones are a part of his consciousness and that he too is a part of their reality. Bonnefoy suggests that the self does not exist in opposition to

⁵⁷ 'Consent', in *Online Etymological Dictionary* <<http://www.etymonline.com>> [accessed 7th March 2013].

the physical world but that one is always *constitutive* of the other. Finally, the act of consent might also be understood in relation to the concept of the ‘numen’, the spirit that inhabits an object or natural phenomena. ‘Numen’ comes from the Latin verb ‘nuere’, meaning ‘to nod the head in commanding or consent’.⁵⁸ As in the Christian tradition, the head is bowed in the presence of the divine. The act of consent could thus be conceived as a bowing to or recognition of the numinosity of the physical world.

This *phrase matrice* sets the subject pronoun ‘Moi’ in apposition with a noun clause such as ‘les pierres du soir, illuminées’. It allows both these lexical items to function as subject. The poet speaks as self and other, singular and plural, subject and object. He shares his voice with the stones and he declares: ‘Je consens’. The formalisation and the enactment of a grammatical impossibility is an essential part of this act of consent: the subject pronoun that signals the integrity of selfhood is elided with an inanimate noun. The world is no longer conceived, in instrumentalist terms, as object, and nor is the self defined in opposition to this object. Subject and object are set in apposition, in a relationship of contiguity and parity. As self and other, the poet performs the act of consent.

At once a granting of permission, an act of submission, an agreement, a feeling with, and a reverential nodding, the act of consent presents a relationship between the self and the world that is not defined by polarities of the active and the passive, the sentient and the insentient, and subject and object. Rather, Bonnefoy expresses the *consent* (even the consensience or consensus) by which the things of the world disclose themselves to one another. The act of consent bears a resemblance to Jean-Luc Nancy’s thinking of ‘la comparution’. Nancy writes,

La comparution doit donc signifier – tel est désormais l’enjeu – que le « paraître », c’est-à-dire la venue au monde et l’être au monde, l’existence comme telle, est

⁵⁸ ‘Numen’, in *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 9 August 2012].

strictement inséparable, indiscernable du *cum*, de l'*avec* où il a non seulement son lieu et son avoir-lieu, mais aussi – et c'est la même chose – sa structure ontologique fondamentale.⁵⁹

The appositional structure that Bonnefoy uses, 'moi les pierres du soir, illuminées', and the appositional structures that manifest themselves so repeatedly throughout *Dans le leurre du seuil* and all Bonnefoy's poetry, suggest an ontological principle similar to that to which Nancy refers: a thinking of existence as coexistence, an ontology of 'being-with'.

In the second stanza of this poem, the poet sets the subject pronoun 'moi' in apposition with several nouns: 'la flaque', 'l'enfant', and 'l'iris'. The puddle is used as an image of something small that contains immensities. It is 'Plus vaste que le ciel'. The child stirs up the mud at the bottom and reflections flash across its surface. Across the sentence, Bonnefoy sets 'la flaque', 'l'enfant', and 'l'iris' in apposition. The noun falls consistently at the line end and each noun phrase is carried forward by enjambments: 'la flaque / Plus vaste que le ciel, l'enfant / Qui en remue la boue, l'iris / Aux reflets sans repos, sans souvenirs'. Like images flashing up and replacing one another as the child unsettles the puddle, one appositional clause cuts across another. The reflections on this puddle are 'sans repos, sans souvenirs'. They move endlessly, never holding or fixing any form. The many meanings of the word 'l'iris' resemble these shifting reflections. 'L'iris' is the iris of an eye, perhaps the child's eye. One pool of liquid reflects another, in an interplay of internal and external worlds. Yet, 'l'iris' also suggests Iris, the messenger of the gods who displayed her sign as a rainbow. Light, broken down into its component colours in a rainbow, is reflected in the pool of water. 'L'iris' also designates the flower that grows near water. As transient reflections of the 'iris' flicker across the surface of a puddle, various permutations of the word's meaning flicker in the reader's mind. The word itself is 'aux reflets sans repos, sans souvenirs'.

⁵⁹ Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, p. 83.

The whole sentence is framed by the words ‘Oui, moi [...] moi, je consens’. This formulation delays the arrival of the verb, leaves the subject position ‘open’, and permits the accumulation of appositional clauses. Between ‘Moi’ and ‘Je’, the subject thus encompasses the poet narrator, the puddle, the child, the ‘iris’, the shifting forms in the mud, the shifting reflections in the water, and even the shifting nature of the language used. Within this formulation, the subject becomes a receptive category. It is open to and constituted by the happenings of the physical world *and* the happenings of language. Like the puddle, it is receptive, reflective, permeable, and shifting.

Throughout ‘La Terre’, diverse images have been used in quick succession. With the repetition of the performative utterance in this final poem, the poem is now constructed around a diverse list of images.⁶⁰ The poem moves from the fleeting to the eternal: ‘Moi la nuée / Je consens. Moi l’étoile du soir / Je consens’. It embraces the banal and the archetypal: ‘Moi le départ / Des maçons attardés vers les villages, /Moi le bruit de la fourgonnette qui se perd, / Je consens. Moi le berger, / Je pousse entre la fatigue et l’espérance / Sous l’arche de l’étoile vers l’étable’. As the poet inserts clauses of varying lengths in the space between the ‘Moi’ and the ‘Je’, the whole structure embraces a diverse range of materials with great suppleness. With the biblical image of the shepherd following the star to a stable, the poem returns to the image of the birth of ‘un dieu enfant’ with which ‘La Terre’ began. The ‘Je’ of the poetic voice becomes the ‘Je’ of ‘le berger’: ‘Je pousse entre la fatigue et l’espérance / Sous l’arche de l’étoile vers l’étable’. The shepherd is an image of a weary but hopeful mankind, waiting for a miraculous birth. In the next line, the shepherd disappears and an August night beds down the animals in the stable: ‘Moi la nuit d’août, / Je fais le lit des bêtes dans l’étable’. The image of the shepherd, and its freight of Christian history, shifts out of focus. As in all the poems of ‘La

⁶⁰ The list becomes one of the predominant poetic structures of *Dans le leurre du seuil*. The final poem ‘L’Épars, l’indivisible’ is one long list of images (P, 317).

Terre’, an image rises for a moment and then metamorphoses into something else. This stanza ends with an image of sleeping and dreaming: ‘Moi le sommeil, / Je prends le rêve dans mes barques, je consens’. Like dreams, Bonnefoy’s images are produced and dispersed, constructed and deconstructed.

At a recent conference in Zurich, Bonnefoy stated that poetry ‘n’est pas pour signifier mais pour rassembler’.⁶¹ Assembling a diverse list of items in ‘La Terre’, the poet gathers images together. The relationship between these items is one of contiguity, not continuity. It seems fair to suggest that these lists of nouns partake in the gesture of consent. They depict the simultaneity and contiguity of the things of the physical world and they present themselves with the same simultaneity and contiguity: they *comparaissent*, to use Nancy’s term.

A ceremonial language is a shared language. A refrain is designed to be taken up by and repeated by an audience, transforming the passive listener into an active participant in the ceremony.⁶² In the poems of ‘La Terre’, Bonnefoy repeats the subject pronouns, ‘je’, ‘tu’, and ‘nous’, exploring the ways in which we inhabit language and the ways in which we share language. From the beginning of ‘La Terre’, the poet dramatises his own voice with the words ‘Je crie’. With this dramatisation of the ‘je’, the poet speaks as self and other. He lends his voice to his reader. The dramatisation of the ‘je’ is a means of sharing

⁶¹ Yves Bonnefoy, ‘Propositions pour une méthode critique’, *Colloque Yves Bonnefoy, Écrits récents* (2001-2009), organised by Patrick Labarthe et Odile Bombarde, L’Université de Zurich.

⁶² The ceremonial nature of this final poem is suggestive of Mallarmé’s writings on performance, ritual, and of course the ceremony of the Book. In his ‘Notes en vue du Livre’, Mallarmé envisages a performance, based on the Christian Eucharist, in which a participant audience would ‘consecrate’ the poet’s ‘Lecture’. Between the poet and the audience, the text would at once be administered and embodied (Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, I, pp. 617-22). Here again, however, Bonnefoy’s fidelity to the finitude of existence produces a very different conception of the poetic performance. Whereas Mallarmé envisages a ceremony – a transcendental act, an exchange between self and other, a consecration – Bonnefoy envisages an endless litany, a series of acts: a ceremony in which the self must always reach out to the other, still, again, a ceremony that is ‘inachevable’.

the 'je'. In the final poem of 'La Terre', as the reader assumes the subject pronoun 'je' and repeats variations of this incantational formulation, 'Oui, moi les pierres du soir, illuminées, / Je consens', the poem becomes a therapeutic process of opening oneself up to the physical world, of learning to speak as self and other.⁶³ As Nancy suggests in *La Communauté désœuvrée*, literature is exemplary in that it demonstrates the sharing of sense.⁶⁴ Like the refrain that is uttered by the priest and that is taken up by one member of the congregation, and then another, and another, literature is a means of sharing one's voice. The poet's gesture of consent is thus inseparable from his dramatisation of his own voice and his use of a ritualistic language. Poetic utterance becomes, not simply a means of communication, but a place of *cohabitation*. It becomes, to return to the earlier quotation, 'un lieu partagé et doté de sens par ce partage'.

Like the cry of sexual pleasure and the gestures of intimacy explored in the previous poems, the act of consent is an act that must always be repeated. We must move towards one another and be with one another, accepting this sharing of being that is the very sense of world, over and over again. The final poem of *Dans le leurre du seuil* – using a structure very similar to the final poem of 'La Terre' – pronounces the word 'Oui', followed by the preposition 'par' and a noun phrase: 'Oui, par même l'erreur, / Qui va, / Oui par le bonheur simple, la voix brisée'. Coupling this affirmation with this preposition, 'Oui par', and repeating this structure over and over again, Bonnefoy suggests that poetry

⁶³ Roger Pearson points out that Mallarmé's 'drame solaire' seeks to invest the poem with the 'therapeutic' function of myth (Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, p. 20). Whilst Bonnefoy's performance is not 'therapeutic' in this way, its incantation allows us to refuse the separateness and uniqueness of the 'Moi' and to speak as beings that are always already implicated in the physical world. Resisting the intemporal nature of signification, we embrace the transience of all our acts.

⁶⁴ In *La Communauté désœuvrée*, Nancy writes, 'l'être en tant qu'être *en commun* est l'être (de) la littérature. [...] Cela veut dire [...] que la littérature, dès le moment du moins où nous comprenons par ce mot l'interruption du mythe, a pour être [...] l'exposition commune des êtres singuliers, leur comparution. L'écrivain le plus solitaire n'écrit que pour l'autre' (Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p. 165).

is a *means* of affirmation, an action that goes endlessly towards affirmation without ever resulting in a conclusive ‘Oui’.⁶⁵ This final litany of ‘Oui’s is suggestive of Molly Bloom’s monologue at the end of *Ulysses*, and also of Derrida’s reading of the repeated affirmation, ‘yes, yes’, in *Ulysse gramophone*. Derrida writes: ‘[...] le *oui* s’adresse à de l’autre et ne peut qu’en appeler au *oui* de l’autre [...] L’autre signe. Et le *oui* se relance à l’infini’.⁶⁶ The poet’s affirmation of the present moment of consent – of being *with* – is always contingent on the other and always to be repeated: ‘Oui, moi les pierres du soir, illuminées, / Je consens’.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I would like to discuss one essential point, until now always implicit in my analysis: the structure of ‘La Terre’ and the structure of *Dans le leurre du seuil* as a whole. Each of the seven long poems of *Dans le leurre du seuil* is punctuated by a series of dotted lines, dividing them into several shorter poems. These dotted lines, Bonnefoy comments, mark feelings or avenues of thought that have been left unpursued:

Ils marquent précisément les contours de ces foyers de parole que je disais tout à l’heure, de ces lieux de surgissement où mon questionnement de mon inconscient et aussi du monde extérieur s’est amorcé et peut s’interrompre – et a fini par le faire. Et l’espace interstitiel [...] c’est donc celui des explorations que je n’ai pas faites, et dont je voulais pourtant que soit pressentie la présence obscure. (E, 66)

These dotted lines – designating potential but unrealised lines of poetry – confer a remarkable structural indeterminacy upon the collection as a whole. Are these dotted lines to be read as interruptions, similar to stanzaic breaks, or as separations, similar to the

⁶⁵ It is from Rimbaud, Bonnefoy insists in his essays, that this conception of poetry as a means, and not an end, comes to us. Bonnefoy writes, ‘Nous lui devons de savoir, de savoir *vraiment* que la poésie doit être un moyen et non une fin’ (IM, 119).

⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Ulysse gramophone* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 130, p. 143.

breaks between poems? It is, of course, impossible to decide. ‘La Terre’ is at once one long poem and a series of shorter poems; it is a poem and also a fragment of the poem that is *Dans le leurre du seuil*.⁶⁷ All of the poems of *Dans le leurre du seuil* are simultaneously part and whole. As the title of one of the sections suggests, they are ‘L’épars, l’indivisible’.

A comment cited by Dominique Combe, made by Bonnefoy just after the publication of *Poésie* by Gallimard in 1978, suggests that this ambivalence between part and whole goes to the heart of Bonnefoy’s conception of poetry: ‘Je n’écris pas de poèmes, s’il faut entendre par ce mot un ouvrage bien délimité, autonome [...], ce que j’écris ce sont des ensembles dont chacun de ces textes n’est qu’un fragment.’⁶⁸ Each piece of writing is a fragment and the ‘whole’ is an assemblage of fragments. Musing on the notion of the ‘ensemble’ in *Être singulier pluriel*, Nancy writes:

Le sens même du mot « ensemble », tout comme celui du mot « avec », paraît osciller indéfiniment et sans point d’équilibre entre deux acceptions : ou bien l’« ensemble » de la juxtaposition *partes extra partes*, parties isolées et sans rapports, ou bien l’« ensemble » du rassemblement *totum intra totum*, unitotalité où le rapport se dépasse en être pur. Mais on voit bien par là que la ressource du terme se situe précisément au point d’équilibre entre les deux acceptions. « Ensemble », ce n’est ni *extra*, ni *intra*.⁶⁹

The structure of *Dans le leurre du seuil* is inherently relational; it is at once an ‘ensemble’ of ‘parties isolées et sans rapports’ and an ‘ensemble’ as a ‘unitotalité où le rapport se dépasse en être pur’. The poems are *together*, in a way that is *at once* fragmentary and unified. Like the ‘nous’, they express a principle of being ‘with’. In other words, the structure of *Dans le leurre du seuil* consents.

⁶⁷ It is for this reason that I refer to *Dans le leurre du seuil* as a whole, ‘La Terre’ as a whole, or each of the sections of ‘La Terre’ simply as ‘a poem’.

⁶⁸ Dominique Combe, ‘Du “recueil” au “Poème-livre”, au “Livre-poème”’, *Méthode ! revue de littératures française et comparée*, II, ed. Didier Alexandre, Madeleine Frédéric and Jean-Marie Gleize (Billère: Éditions de Vallongues, 2002) p. 21.

⁶⁹ Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, p. 81.

The spectacle of light or fire around which almost all of the poems of ‘La Terre’ turn is a spectacle of simultaneity and contiguity. Of the fire in the grate, Mallarmé writes, ‘énoncer signifie produire’.⁷⁰ To put it quite simply, ‘to say is to do’. This is, my chapter suggests, one of the founding principles of Bonnefoy’s poetry. Performance – the need to act or improvise in the present moment – reveals at once the contingency and the singularity of the present moment. The poem is an act of communication with the other and with the things of the physical world. In each and every moment, this act is to be reinvented and reaffirmed. Bonnefoy consents to the sharing of existence and to the infinitely finite nature of each of these acts of sharing. He consents to the endless repetition of the act of consent. And the *sense* of this performance reveals itself ‘*partes extra partes*’ and ‘*totum intra totum*’. As Bonnefoy writes: ‘Nous sommes *avec* cet arbre, avec cette source, avec ce sang qui bat dans nos membres, nous sommes les enfants du pays, et toute idée d’être plus, ou d’avoir plus, est désormais, littéralement, impensable’ (E, 241).

⁷⁰ Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, II, p.162.

Chapter Two: Being towards the World, *Début et fin de la neige*

Début et fin de la neige, published in 1991, is one of Bonnefoy's shortest but most coherent collections of poetry. It presents a series of meditations on snow: its fleetingness and mutability, its tracks and its traces, its paradoxical 'ombres claires' (DF, 119). Using an address to one of the physical elements to ponder the nature of material being, Bonnefoy's snow poems have much in common with his earlier elemental poems, particularly the poems devoted to fire, water, and clouds in *Dans le leurre du seuil*.¹ And yet, at the same time, there is something quite distinct about the manner in which Bonnefoy devotes this entire collection only to snow. Its publication date too is something of an irregularity: Bonnefoy publishes a collection of poetry approximately once every ten years, and yet *Début et fin de la neige* appeared in 1991, just four years after the publication of *Ce qui fut sans lumière*.² It is as if, living and working in America during long, snow-filled winters, Bonnefoy discovers for the first time a fifth element: snow. With the discovery of this 'other' material presence comes a fresh set of reflections about the material world.

¹ I am thinking in particular of the poems devoted to water in 'Deux Barques', to light and fire in 'La Terre', and to clouds in 'L'Épars, l'indivisible'.

² After the outstandingly coherent and affirmative vision of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, 1987, represents an uncertain and equivocal moment in Bonnefoy's career. Rather than building on the achievements of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, the poet reverts to the themes and forms of earlier collections, in particular, the long-running series of poems entitled 'Une Pierre' and 'Une Voix'. The mood of this collection resembles the somewhat troubled and equivocal *Hier régnant désert*, a collection of poetry which also succeeded another hugely successful collection, *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*. It is in *Début et fin de la neige*, this thesis argues, that Bonnefoy builds on the achievements of *Dans le leurre du seuil*. There is a marked continuity between the performative poetics of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, 1975, and those of *Début et fin de la neige*. The third chapter of my thesis thus charts the course of this development in *Début et fin de la neige*, published in 1991, rather than in *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, published in 1987.

As the poet finds himself in the company of others and seeks to express the sense of this togetherness, the sense of being 'with', in the poems of 'La Terre', so he finds himself facing the materiality of existence and questioning his relationship to this materiality in the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*. This chapter will investigate how Bonnefoy presents the encounter with material presence as an encounter with an inappropriable excess: a simultaneous presence and absence, presentation and withdrawal, materiality and immateriality.³ In each of the snow poems, Bonnefoy is faithful to the movement of withdrawal or dispersal by which presence comes. He is at pains to dramatise a moment of finite embodied sense – the hand that reaches out to touch, the gaze that follows the solitary snowflake as it falls through the sky – and yet he knows that nothing of this present situation can be possessed or preserved. He knows that the joy of this moment of finite sense resides precisely in the fact that it cannot be possessed or preserved.

In his interview with Fabio Scott in 2003, responding to a question about the affinities that exist between poetry and theatre, Bonnefoy observes,

Je ressens de plus en plus la parenté de la poésie et du théâtre [...] Écrire en poésie, disons plutôt en direction de la poésie, c'est assurément tenter de forcer sa voie vers l'immédiat dans la chose, vers ce que j'appelle la présence, et cela prend et reprend sans cesse, ou devrait sans cesse reprendre, l'aspect d'une sorte de « théologie négative » : celle-ci la déconstruction des représentations dont sont faites nos idées du monde, et des autres êtres, conceptuelles et donc abstraites et réductrices.⁴

³ In all his critical writings, Bonnefoy presents 'la présence' as an irreducibly paradoxical force. Bonnefoy presents 'la présence' as an experience of presence and absence, life and death, the fragmentary and the whole, singularity and plurality, finitude and infinitude. In 'Les Tombeaux de Ravenne', Bonnefoy writes, 'Dans la mesure où il est présent, l'objet ne cesse pas de disparaître. Dans la mesure où il disparaît, il impose, il crie sa présence' (IM, 26). Presence is a 'présence affirmée dans son éclatement déjà de toutes parts' (IM, 26); 'Cela semble un fragment d'espace parmi d'autres, mais cela nous appelle et nous contient' (IM, 27); 'Et c'est un instant qui va mille fois se perdre, mais il a la gloire d'un dieu' (IM, 27).

⁴ Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Inachevable, entretiens sur la poésie, 1990-2010* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2010), p. 389.

This second chapter of this thesis investigates how, across the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, Bonnefoy attempts within language to ‘forcer sa voie vers l’immédiat dans la chose, vers ce que j’appelle la présence’. It examines how the poet – deconstructing the abstract, reductive, and appropriative properties of language – attempts to open language up to the unmasterable excess of material presence. It analyses how the poem becomes ‘une sorte de « théologie négative »’, a gesture that goes towards that which exceeds its limits.⁵

In the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, Bonnefoy is concerned with the relationship between bodily sense and material presence, and with the relationship between language and material presence. He is interested in how the human hand or language might come into contact with material presence without traducing or transposing it in any way. This chapter investigates how the motif of *Noli me tangere* – a biblical scene that depicts a near or a failed touch, an *effleurement* of near contact – recurs throughout this collection of poetry. It examines a series of encounters in which material presence flees the poet’s grasp and refuses to be signified. It explores how – refusing to lament this distancing or withdrawal, attending to the very movement by which this presence exceeds his grasp – the poet hopes to ‘touch upon’ something of its inappropriable excess.

The linguistic gesture that Bonnefoy cultivates in the poems of *Début et fin de la neige* might be described as a passive gesture. Deconstructing the appropriative or reductive properties of language, the poet foregrounds the materiality of language. He stages the poem as an address to an infant (etymologically, one who is without speech). He works at the limits of language, at the point where speech begins to slip towards speechlessness. At this point, Bonnefoy hopes that language might touch upon all that

⁵ It is striking to note that the affinity that Bonnefoy perceives between poetry and theatre resides in the manner in which they both deconstruct abstract or conceptual thought. For Bonnefoy, the theatre is the place where language is opened up to the finitude of existence. This chapter explores how Bonnefoy, dramatising a series of acts of touching or failing to touch, attempts to open language up to all that exceeds it: the infinite finitude – or unmasterable excess – of material presence.

exceeds it: a flurry of snowflake, a child's laughter, a cluster of falling leaves. The touch to which he aspires is – as the poet's use of the motif of *Noli me tangere* suggests – a kind of contact in separation. It is a 'touch that is not a touch'. It is a touch that is open and receptive to all that resists and exceeds it. In *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, Nancy writes,

la passivité dont il est ici question ne se laisse pas déterminer par une opposition à l'activité. Elle ne consiste pas à être « passif » : elle consiste à être, si on peut le dire ainsi, *passible* du sens. C'est-à-dire, capable de le recevoir, susceptible de l'accueillir. La pensée, ce n'est pas un discours, c'est la disposition et l'activité passibles de l'événement du sens : elle laisse cet événement venir – ce qui veut dire qu'elle le fait advenir comme tel, ou qu'elle l'inscrit.⁶

This chapter examines how Bonnefoy allows the poem to come close to all that exceeds its grasp. It investigates how he makes the signifying structures of language 'passibles de l'événement du sens'.

Noli me tangere

St. John's Gospel is the only gospel to describe Mary Magdalene's encounter with the resurrected Christ and Christ's warning to her not to touch him, saying: 'Noli me tangere'. This scene – which has come to be referred to as the scene of *Noli me tangere* – is depicted in paintings by Rembrandt, Dürer, Correggio, and Titian. The paintings all centre around what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as 'un jeu de mains remarquable'.⁷ One hand reaches out in desire or humility; the other hand is raised in warning or withdrawal. There is often a near or slight touching at the moment of the refusal of contact.

Début et fin de la neige begins with a series of nineteen short, delicately sketched poems about snow. In one of these poems, which bears the title 'Noli me tangere', Bonnefoy compares the descent of a solitary snowflake to the biblical scene in which Jesus

⁶ Nancy, *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, p. 105.

⁷ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, pp. 55-6.

withdraws, saying ‘Non, ne me touche pas’, as Mary Magdalene rushes forth in expectation. This first section of this chapter investigates how Bonnefoy configures and reconfigures the scene of *Noli me tangere* across this series of snow poems. Firstly, it examines how the poet repeatedly dramatises a desire to touch and a failure to touch. And secondly, it analyses how, in all these poems, the failed touch nonetheless permits an *effleurement* of near contact. It scrutinises how the poet – curbing the appropriative gesture of the human hand and the appropriative gesture of language – manages to come close to the volatile and fleeting presence of snow. Without grasping or containing it, without reducing or representing it, he ‘touches upon’ its inappropriable excess.

There are powerful similarities between Bonnefoy’s exploration of touch in the opening poems of *Début et fin de la neige* and the thinking of touch that occurs in Nancy’s philosophical writings. In 2003, in a book entitled *Noli me tangere: Essai sur la levée du corps*, Nancy conducts a close reading of the biblical scene and the paintings of it and elaborates a conception of a touch in separation, of an interrupted contact between sense and matter. This section will draw connections between Bonnefoy’s configurations of the scene of *Noli me tangere* in *Début et fin de la neige* and Nancy’s *Noli me tangere: Essai sur la levée du corps*. It will examine how Bonnefoy and Nancy both conceive of material presence as an inappropriable excess. It will examine how they both use the scene of *Noli me tangere* – this scene of near or missed contact – as a way of engaging with this excess.⁸

⁸ It is important to note that Nancy’s meditation on the figure of touch long predates the publication of *Noli me tangere*. This book was in fact written in response to Jacques Derrida’s *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*, which examines the figure of touch as it recurs in Nancy’s philosophy – in *La Communauté désœuvrée*, 1983, *Une pensée finie*, 1990, *Le Sens du monde*, 1993, *Être singulier pluriel*, 1997 – and in western philosophy. Derrida argues that, whilst Nancy’s thinking of touch breaks radically with traditional conceptions of the body, it remains, to some extent, implicated within a ‘haptocentric’ metaphysical tradition, a metaphysical tradition centred on touch (Jacques Derrida, *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), pp. 179-180). In response to Derrida’s commentary, Nancy’s reading of the biblical scene of *Noli me tangere* very deliberately foregrounds ‘a touch which never occurs as touch but only ever as a touch in the refusal of touch’, to use the words of Ian James (James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 140). Nancy writes, ‘On

In the poem ‘Noli me tangere’, Bonnefoy watches the last snowflake of the season as it falls hesitantly across a blue sky.

Hésite le flocon dans le ciel bleu
À nouveau, le dernier flocon de la grande neige.

Et c’est comme entrerait au jardin celle qui
Avait bien dû rêver ce qui pourrait être,
Ce regard, ce dieu simple, sans souvenir
Du tombeau, sans pensée que le bonheur,
Sans avenir
Que sa dissipation dans le bleu du monde.

« Non, ne me touche pas », lui dirait-il,
Mais même dire non serait de lumière. (DF, 124)

The very last snowflake of the season hesitates to fall across the sky, as if it were too insubstantial. It is about to melt and dissolve back into the atmosphere. It trembles on the brink of expiration. Watching the hesitating snowflake, the poet is reminded of the scene of *Noli me tangere*: Mary’s expectations upon entering the garden and the simplicity and intangibility of the figure that she encounters there. Mary Magdalene is ‘celle qui / Avait bien dû rêver ce qui pourrait être’. She dreams of that which could be – contact, presence, possession, love – and she reaches out to touch. Christ is evoked as a mere gaze, ‘[c]e regard, ce dieu simple’. In contrast to Mary Magdalene, the one who dreams, he looks upon the world with a passive gaze, without remembering, without thinking, and without desiring, ‘sans souvenir / Du tombeau, sans pensée que le bonheur, / Sans avenir / Que sa dissipation dans le bleu du monde’. He exists only in the present, a present that is itself always slipping away, bringing him closer to his ‘dissipation dans le bleu du monde’. He says ‘Non, ne me touche pas’ but even these words melt away, becoming only light: ‘Mais

n’aura pas touché au sens, voilà la vérité’ (Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p. 76). The conception of a suspended or interrupted touch, Nancy argues, has always been present in his writings on the body.

même dire non serait de lumière’. The utterance is nothing more than incandescence. It slips away, refusing to be touched.

A solitary snowflake enacts the drama of *Noli me tangere*. It makes a tremulous descent through an empty sky. The poet, captivated by its hesitation, its apparent refusal to fall, dreams of ‘ce qui pourrait être’. Like Mary Magdalene, he is all expectancy and desire. And like Mary Magdalene, his dreams are met with refusal. The snowflake hesitates on the point of departure. It is here but it is going. Its material substance is withdrawing, even as it presents itself. The poet finds himself caught up in this interplay of forces: this experience of longing and refusal, hope and indifference, presentation and withdrawal. He allows himself to be touched by this paradoxical motion. Nancy similarly, in his reading of the scene of *Noli me tangere*, writes,

Ce n’est pas que Jésus se refuse à Marie-Madeleine : c’est que le vrai mouvement de se donner n’est pas de livrer une chose à empoigner, mais de permettre le toucher d’une présence, et par conséquent l’éclipse, l’absence et le départ selon lesquels, toujours, une présence doit se donner pour se présenter.⁹

Bonnefoy’s snowflake evaporates, disappearing into the light, saying ‘Non, ne me touche pas’. Nancy suggests that presence withdraws, refusing to be touched, even as it presents itself. Both Nancy and Bonnefoy use the scene of *Noli me tangere* to explore how presence touches us with its very refusal, with the movement by which it absents itself.

In many of the snow poems, Bonnefoy is interested in an illusion that inhabits the act of touching: a desire to possess a presence absolutely or to preserve it eternally. In ‘Le peu d’eau’, the poet holds a snowflake for a moment and wishes that he might assure it an eternal life: ‘À ce flocon / Qui sur ma main se pose, j’ai désir / D’assurer l’éternel’ (DF, 114). The snowflake melts upon contact: ‘Mais déjà il n’est plus / Qu’un peu d’eau, qui se perd / Dans la brume des corps qui vont dans la neige’ (DF, 114). The desire for eternity is

⁹ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p 82.

met with evaporation and dispersal. The next poem in the series explores the figure of touch in similar terms:

Neige
Fugace sur l'écharpe, sur le gant
Comme cette illusion, le coquelicot,
Dans la main qui rêva, l'été passé
Sur le chemin parmi les pierres sèches,
Que l'absolu est à portée du monde.

Pourtant, quelle promesse
Dans cette eau, de contact léger, puisqu'elle fut,
Un instant, la lumière ! Le ciel d'été
N'a guère de nuées pour entrouvrir
Plus clair chemin sous des voûtes plus sombres.

Circé
Sous sa pergola d'ombres, l'illuminée,
N'eut pas de fruits plus rouges. (DF, 115)

The snow lingers fleetingly upon the poet's scarf and glove. This fleeting presence is compared to last summer's poppy, 'cette illusion, le coquelicot'. Holding this most fragile of flowers, the poet – or rather the poet's hand – dreamed that 'l'absolu est à portée du monde'. Now the snowflake, illuminated for an instant as it melts, seems to offer the promise of a faint contact with the absolute: 'quelle promesse / Dans cette eau, de contact léger'. Using these images of holding, reaching, and making contact, Bonnefoy suggests that the human hand and the sense of touch are intimately connected to a desire for the metaphysical. As Valéry observes in his 'Discours aux chirurgiens', 'Cette main est philosophe'.¹⁰ A certain corporeal relation to the world – a desire for appropriation, for example – gives rise to a certain philosophical apprehension of the world.¹¹

¹⁰ In his 'Discours aux chirurgiens', Valéry lists a series of verbs to demonstrate the manner in which the human hand makes itself felt in conceptual thought: '*Mettre ; prendre ; saisir ; placer ; tenir ; poser*, et voilà : *synthèse, thèse, hypothèse, supposition, compréhension...*' Moving in the opposite direction from Valéry, Bonnefoy's meditations on the human hand are concerned with how the hand might resist these kinds of appropriative gestures ('*Mettre ; prendre ; saisir ; placer*

The hand that holds the poppy dreams that the absolute is within reach of this world. A fleeting snowflake seems to promise a ‘contact léger’. Paradoxically, it is the very ephemerality of these material presences that awakens a desire for an absolute. Bonnefoy writes, ‘Le ciel d’été / N’a guère de nuées pour entrouvrir / Plus clair chemin sous des voûtes plus sombres’. As a dark sky throws one clear beam of light into relief, so the fleetingness of material existence quickens a desire for the eternal. And yet, as the final stanza of the poem warns, ‘Circé / Sous sa pergola d’ombres, l’illuminée, / N’eut pas de fruits plus rouges’. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Circé laces food and wine with a magical potion and enchants Odysseus’s crew.¹² Bonnefoy insists that the desire to preserve the ephemeral for eternity is a lure. The reddest and most ephemeral of summer fruits – like ‘cette illusion, le coquelicot’ – lead us to betray the very ephemerality that they embody.

The hand that seeks to appropriate in the act of touching seeks more than the transience of this world. Bonnefoy feels the allure of the eternal and the absolute, even if he knows them to be lures. This is an interesting point of ‘contact in separation’ between Bonnefoy and Nancy and, also, between Bonnefoy and Derrida. Bonnefoy explores the allure of the metaphysical in a way that seems to distance the poet from both these thinkers. Yet, by probing the connection between touch and the metaphysical, and by exposing these illusions as illusions, Bonnefoy comes close to an exposition of what Derrida calls a ‘haptocentric’ metaphysics.¹³

; *tenir* ; *poser*’), with how the body and the intellect might resist the traditional gestures of conceptual thought (‘*synthèse, thèse, hypothèse, supposition, compréhension*’) (Valéry, *Œuvres*, I, p. 919).

¹¹ Using these various images of the human hand, Bonnefoy suggests that philosophy is inseparable from the finite sense of the human body. Of Nancy’s *Noli me tangere*, Ian James writes ‘however much thought abstracts, spiritualizes, or idealizes itself, it is always only ever possible, and indeed only ever is, as finite embodied sense’ (James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 142).

¹² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by E.V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1945), p. 165.

¹³ Derrida, *Le Toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, pp. 179-80.

As the poet evokes a series of different encounters with the snow, however, he begins to dramatise a very different scene of corporeal and philosophical ‘apprehension’. The poet develops a more ‘passive’ conception of touch. He attempts to be faithful to the movement by which presence retreats, slipping beyond his grasp. Abandoning ideals of possession and preservation, the poet allows himself to be touched by the movement by which presence exceeds his apprehension. In the poem ‘L’Été encore’, for example, the appropriative gesture of the human gaze is rebuffed by the material world, and this refusal triggers an intense sensation of presence. Experiencing the refusal or withdrawal of material presence, the poet touches upon something of the irreducibility of its ‘ombres claires’ (DF, 119). He opens himself up to – and is touched by – its inappropriable excess.

J’avance dans la neige, j’ai fermé
Les yeux, mais la lumière sait franchir
Les paupières poreuses, et je perçois
Que dans mes mots c’est encore la neige
Qui tourbillonne, se resserre, se déchire.

Neige,
Lettre que l’on retrouve et que l’on déplie,
Et l’encre en a blanchi et dans les signes
La gaucherie de l’esprit est visible
Qui ne sait qu’en enchevêtrer les ombres claires.

Et on essaye de lire, on ne comprend pas
Qui s’intéresse à nous dans la mémoire,
Sinon que c’est l’été encore ; et que l’on voit
Sous les flocons les feuilles, et la chaleur
Monter du sol absent comme une brume. (DF, 119)

As the poet advances through the snow, he closes his eyes. The light, however, permeates his closed eyelids. In the half light, against the translucent veils of his closed lids, the poet sees the snow once again: ‘je perçois / Que dans mes mots c’est encore la neige / Qui tourbillonne, se resserre, se déchire’. Words swirl chaotically in his mind; snow pulls endlessly together and apart. Bonnefoy evokes the snow, using an elaborate metaphor, a

conceit almost, in the second stanza: ‘Neige, / Lettre que l’on retrouve et que l’on déplie, / Et l’encre en a blanchi’. The snow is a letter that one rediscovers and unfolds, and the script has faded to whiteness. An internal rhyme on ‘déplie’ and ‘blanchi’ hints at the interdependence of these two verbs. We reach out eagerly, covetously even, only to find that what we are seeking has retreated beyond our grasp. All that this ‘text’ exposes is the clumsiness of the human intellect, ‘[l]a gaucherie de l’esprit [...] / Qui ne sait qu’en enchevêtrer les ombres claires’. These ‘ombres claires’ are as clear as they are obscure, as obscure as they are clear. They emerge in the light, only to retreat into darkness. The intellect, as it seeks to grasp or decipher them, knows only how to tangle or to complicate.

‘L’Été encore’ evokes a presence that refuses to yield to the human intellect, a presence that retreats even as it presents itself. We try to read and we cannot comprehend that which is calling out to us from the past, from memory. Etymologically, ‘comprendre’ means to ‘saisir ensemble, embrasser quelque chose, entourer quelque chose’.¹⁴ The snow refuses to be circumscribed or contained. It says, ‘Non, ne me touche pas’. And yet, as he fails to comprehend, the poet is overtaken by a very different kind of intuition. Suddenly, it is summer again; it is summer still, ‘c’est l’été encore’. The poet sees, ‘Sous les flocons les feuilles, et la chaleur / Monter du sol absent comme une brume’. The solid ground gives way to nothingness. Summer – which has been on the wane, lying dormant – is now rising up. Failing to comprehend the snow and accepting this failure to comprehend, the poet is suddenly touched by its presence. He is touched by a force that trembles between presence and absence, between light and shadow, summer and winter.

In ‘L’Été encore’, the poet embraces the sensation of failing to comprehend, of failing to seize or grasp this material presence, and this failure comes with its own richness. As Nancy writes of Mary Magdalene’s failure to touch Jesus, ‘[c]’est le point de

¹⁴ ‘Comprendre’, in *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* <<http://www.cnrtl.fr>> [accessed 22 March 2012].

l'abandon : elle s'abandonne à une présence qui n'est qu'une partance, à une gloire qui n'est que ténèbre, à une senteur qui n'est que froideur. Son abandon procède aussi bien de l'amour que de l'accablement [...].¹⁵ In 'L'Été encore', Bonnefoy recognises the need to give oneself over to an irreducible and paradoxical presence. The poet allows himself to be touched by something that cannot be grasped.

In the next two poems in the series, 'On dirait beaucoup d'e muets dans une phrase' and 'Flocons', Bonnefoy continues to renounce the desire for comprehension. He draws further comparisons between snow and language. Snow – which was compared to the words in the poet's mind and to a blank letter in 'L'Été encore' – is now compared to clusters of phonemes and to slips of the tongue. Repeatedly evoking the material substance of language, Bonnefoy hopes to curb the signifying function of language and to cast off the desire for comprehension. He envisages a contact with the physical world that is non-appropriative and a use of language that is non-teleological:

On dirait beaucoup d'e muets dans une phrase.
On sent qu'on ne leur doit
Que des ombres de métaphores.

On dirait,
Dès qu'il neige plus dru,
De ces mains qui repoussent d'autres mains

Mais jouent avec les doigts qu'elles refusent. (DF, 120)

Without evoking the snow directly at all in the opening lines of the poem, without even naming it, Bonnefoy compares it to language: 'On dirait beaucoup d'e muets dans une phrase'. Snowflakes are compared to mute 'e's, this unsounded or partially sounded vowel, this highly uncertain and unstable phoneme. The mute 'e', articulated only in poetic utterance, is a moment of pure 'voicing'. It is, Bonnefoy writes, 'cette faille entre les concepts, cette intuition de la substance, cette chance extraordinaire du français' (IM, 105).

¹⁵ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p. 72.

This shadowy and ephemeral linguistic presence suggests, without quite conceptualising or signifying it directly, the shadowy and ephemeral presence of snow. It suggests that the snow is – like these partially sounded or unsounded vowels – a presence that never quite presents itself.

The poet continues, ‘On sent qu’on ne leur doit / Que des ombres des métaphores’. We owe the snow only shadows of metaphors. What is a shadow of a metaphor, or what might it be? This first stanza contains three possible examples. Firstly, rather than simply comparing one thing to another, Bonnefoy uses the formulation ‘On dirait’. This idiom, drawing our attention to the speculative nature of all comparisons, reminds us that any metaphor is an approximation, a shadow of a metaphor. Secondly, the comparison between snowflakes and mute ‘e’s is so subtle that the very indistinctness of the metaphor suggests something of the insubstantiality of snow. Finally, this very line is a veiled metaphor: ‘On sent qu’on ne leur doit / Que des ombres des métaphores’. The phrase ‘ombres des métaphores’ is itself a metaphor for the half-realised, shadowy, and fugitive snowflakes. Bonnefoy does, as he suggests, veil his metaphors. The tentativeness, subtlety, and indirection that this creates become a metaphor for snow. Bonnefoy suggests that the snow deserves a poetry of indeterminate forms, of hints and traces. And so the poetry, like the snow, retreats even as it presents itself.

It begins to snow heavily, and snow is no longer compared to language but to human hands: ‘On dirait, / Dès qu’il neige plus dru, / De ces mains qui repoussent d’autres mains / Mais jouent avec les doigts qu’elles refusent’. The squalls of snow are envisioned as hands that push one other away and yet play with the fingers that they refuse. The abrupt rebuffing of one hand by another is contrasted with the more delicate interaction of the fingers. They play with one another at the very moment of the refusal of contact. This is another reconfiguration of the scene of *Noli me tangere*. Like Nancy, Bonnefoy sees

Noli me tangere as a model for a different kind of contact with the physical world. This is a contact that accepts distance, separation, and movement. In the very moment or movement of separation, Bonnefoy perceives a certain play, fragility, and intimacy. He perceives what Nancy would describe not quite as a touch but as a ‘caresse’. Nancy writes: “‘Ne me retiens pas’ revient aussi à dire : ‘Touche-moi d’une touche vraie, retirée, non appropriante, et non identifiante’”. Caresse-moi, ne me touche pas’.¹⁶ Derrida describes this thinking of a touch in separation succinctly as: ‘Toujours la loi du *partage* au cœur du toucher [...] partage comme participation *et* comme partition’.¹⁷

The first stanza of this poem evokes the snow in terms of language. The second stanza depicts the snow as human hands. This final image of hands pushing away hands but playing with the fingers that they refuse might tell us something about the relationship between snow, language, and the human hand, something about the relationship between materiality, significance, and sense. Bonnefoy suggests, like Nancy, that there is always a distancing and a disjuncture between one and the other. Yet, like Nancy, he suggests that there is a playful interaction across a divide, a fluttering or flirtation of fingers even at the moment of the refusal of contact.

In the next poem of the series, Bonnefoy once again uses the non-signifying substance of language to evoke the snow’s reticent or fugitive presence. He is interested in the ‘contact in separation’ that occurs between one substance and another. He is interested in the ‘contact in separation’ that occurs between language, sense, and materiality.

Flocons,
Bévues sans conséquences de la lumière.
L’une suit l’autre et d’autres encore, comme si
Comprendre ne comptait plus, rire davantage.

Et Aristote le disait bien,

¹⁶ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p. 82.

¹⁷ Derrida, *Le Toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, p. 225.

Quelque part dans sa *Poétique* qu'on lit si mal,
C'est la transparence qui vaut,
Dans des phrases qui soient comme une rumeur d'abeilles,
comme une eau claire. (DF, 121)

A 'bévue' is an error in a text or speech. It breaks the continuous and transparent flow of meaning and makes evident the substance of language. The opaque snowflakes against the seamless transparency of the light thus resemble these errors. These snowflakes fall thick and fast 'comme si / Comprendre ne comptait plus, rire davantage'. One error follows another so rapidly that all comprehension is lost. Bonnefoy suggests that the influx of snow cannot be comprehended; it cannot be grasped or encompassed; it cannot be reduced to any idea, abstraction, or essence. It must simply be experienced, like laughter, like an outburst of joy or pleasure.

In the second stanza of this poem, Bonnefoy suggests that we read Aristotle's *Poetics* badly. We do so because we interpret transparency as a semantic property of language: a transparent language is a clear window onto a meaning, onto the world. For Bonnefoy, however, transparency seems to be a sensible – rather than a semantic – property of language. The transparent phrase is 'comme une rumeur d'abeilles'. It sounds clearly. Its parts sound together in one continuous phrase and it is this sensory clarity that renders a phrase limpid, 'comme une eau claire'. Bonnefoy suggests that language is not a window onto anything else. It is a sensible phenomenon in its own right, like a swirl of snowflakes, a burst of laughter, or a swarm of bees.

If it is not a window onto anything else, language does not give us anything else. Nothing is there to be touched except the sensible contingency of language. Nothing can be reduced, extracted, or possessed. The poem is only to be experienced – like snow, laughter, or bees – and we must accept that this experience will always, to some extent, flee us and get away from us. The poem, like the snow, says 'noli me tangere'. There is a

striking similarity between the image of hands pushing away hands but playing with the fingers that they refuse and the image of not comprehending the snow but simply laughing. In both there is a renunciation of an ideal – touch or comprehension – and in both there is a joy in interaction, receptiveness, and play. In reference to the biblical scene of *Noli me tangere*, Nancy writes: ‘L’amour et la vérité touchent en repoussant : ils font reculer celle ou celui qu’ils atteignent, car leur atteinte révèle, dans la touche même, qu’ils sont hors de portée’.¹⁸ Addressing his reader, he continues: ‘Tu ne tiens rien, tu ne peux rien tenir ni retenir, et voilà ce qu’il te faut aimer et savoir. Voilà ce qu’il en est d’un savoir d’amour. Aime ce qui t’échappe, aime celui qui s’en va. Aime qu’il s’en aille’.¹⁹ Nancy urges us to love that which goes. Bonnefoy urges us to play and to laugh as it goes. It seems that Bonnefoy and Nancy have similar conceptions of touch and similar conceptions of love and understanding.

The nineteen short poems with which *Début et fin de la neige* opens are a series of meditations upon the human hand, language, and the presence of the physical world. They are a series of meditations upon sense, signification, and materiality. In each of these poems, the poet experiments with snow. He reaches out to touch, to grasp, or to preserve. He reaches out using language too, trying to translate and to transpose something of corporeal and material experience. He realises that the snow – material and yet strangely immaterial, singular and yet infinitely plural, withdrawing even as it presents itself – exceeds any attempt we make to contain it. An appropriative gesture only disperses this delicate substance. It conveys nothing of its tremulous and fleeting presence. And so, musing upon the scene of *Noli me tangere*, Bonnefoy experiments with a touch that is not a touch. He embraces his failure to comprehend the snow’s ‘ombres claires’. He embraces the very sensation of falling short, the *effleurement* of near contact. Evoking the

¹⁸ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p. 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

asignifying properties of language, the shadowy and ephemeral presence of ‘beaucoup d’e muets’, ‘des ombres de métaphores’, and ‘Bévues sans conséquences’, he allows the material presence of words to come close to the material presence of snow. Between language and the physical world, he cultivates a contact in separation.

In their respective meditations upon the scene of *Noli me tangere*, Bonnefoy and Nancy seek to engage with a presence that exceeds any physical act of appropriation or any linguistic act of signification or comprehension. They attempt to be faithful to the movement by which material presence simultaneously presents itself and withdraws, by which it slips beyond our grasp. Both the poet and the thinker elaborate a different conception of touch – one that playfully accepts the distancing, deferral, and dissipation of presence – and a different conception of disjuncture. Refusing to be bound to the ideal of signification, and refusing to lament the reality of disjuncture, they celebrate the proximity or contiguity between forces. Language, at its very limit, touches upon all that exceeds it: the material presence of snow.

It is interesting to note that Derrida is ambivalent about thinking the distance or the separation of touch: it offers a means of thinking disjuncture and, yet, in the same motion, it perhaps permits some slight *frôlement* with a metaphysics of presence. Derrida’s ambivalence is perhaps not surprising. Bonnefoy and Nancy explore the movement of dissipation by which presence comes to us; they explore a kind of near contact in disjuncture. The scene of *Noli me tangere* is itself archetypally ambivalent. What is certain, however, is that it provides both Bonnefoy and Nancy with a means of thinking disjuncture that does not lament disjuncture, a means of celebrating the fact that presence goes.

‘Le tout, le rien’: ‘Un geste pour toucher au sens’

The first section of this chapter explored how, across the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, the scene of ‘Noli me tangere’ is used as a model for a certain kind of contact in separation, as a means of thinking the relationship between sense and material presence, or language and material presence. The second section of this chapter analyses how Bonnefoy structures the poem as an address to a child in ‘Le tout, le rien’, a sequence of three poems that appears in the later sections of *Début et fin de la neige*. This section examines how the poet uses the structure of address to send language out towards that which is exterior to it. Etymologically, ‘l’enfant’ comes from the Latin ‘infans’, meaning ‘not being able to speak’.²⁰ The poet – the one who fashions speech – addresses one who is without speech, one who receives the material world without seeking to comprehend it, one who simply participates in the sense of the physical world.

Across the poems of ‘Le tout, le rien’, as in the earlier, shorter snow poems, the image of the human hand recurs. The verb ‘prendre’ also manifests itself repeatedly, migrating from one formulation to another: ‘prendre sur’, ‘la surprise’, ‘prendre dans ses mains’, ‘comprendre’. As my previous section suggested, Bonnefoy is interested in the human hand and how its typically appropriative gesture impacts upon structures of human thought. Playing upon the tensions and contradictions thrown up by the verbs ‘prendre’, ‘surprendre’, and ‘comprendre’, Bonnefoy is exploring, once again, different models of contact. The poet is interested in that which cannot be appropriated by language, in that

²⁰ ‘Infans’: ‘In’ and the present participle of ‘fari’, together, mean ‘not speaking, unable to speak, speechless’ (Sir William Smith, *Smith’s Smaller Latin English Dictionary* (London: John Murray, 1965), p. 347).

which language can only broach negatively: the child, a snowfall, surprise, the cry, laughter. He is interested in how language might suppress (or infantilise) its signifying function, allowing it to participate in a shared horizon of physical sense. He seeks the threshold – the point of contact in separation – between the linguistic and the non-linguistic, adulthood and childhood, utterance and sense:

C'est la dernière neige de la saison
La neige de printemps, la plus habile
À recoudre les déchirures du bois mort
Avant qu'on ne l'emporte puis le brûle.

C'est la première neige de ta vie
Puisque, hier, ce n'étaient encore que des taches
De couleur, plaisirs brefs, craintes, chagrins
Inconsistants, faute de la parole.

Et je vois que la joie prend sur la peur
Dans tes yeux que dessille la surprise
Une avance, d'un grand bond clair : ce cri, ce rire
Que j'aime, et que je trouve méditable.

Car nous sommes bien proches, et l'enfant
Est le progéniteur de qui l'a pris
Un matin dans ses mains d'adulte et soulevé
Dans le consentement de la lumière. (DF, 139)

The first two stanzas of this poem are a subtle interplay of oppositions. The last snow of winter, 'la dernière neige de la saison', is the first snow of spring, 'la neige de printemps'. This late snow is 'la plus habile / À recoudre les déchirures du bois mort'. Wounds are stitched up in the already dead wood; healing gives way to destruction; snow gives way to fire. The poet turns to address a small child, musing that the last snow of winter is the first snow of this child's life. Yesterday, the landscape was still a mass of different colours and, today, it is white. As the adult addresses the child, he is interested in a liminal phase in the year, in which apparently opposing states come into proximity with one another: winter and spring, the last and the first, old wood and new life.

The poet's attention turns, in the second stanza, to the child's perception of the world. The patches of colour are a series of ill-defined and constantly shifting emotions: 'plaisirs brefs, craintes, chagrins / Inconsistants, faute de la parole'. The child fitfully intuits each vision, 'faute de la parole'. The snow descends and a different emotion takes over: 'Et je vois que la joie prend sur la peur'. The child's eyes wide are opened wide with surprise: 'Dans tes yeux que dessille la surprise'. The use of the verb 'prend sur' anticipates the arrival of the noun, 'la surprise'. Surprise, the experience of being overtaken, is depicted as a great, discontinuous jump, a sudden incursion into the world: 'Une avance, d'un grand bond clair'. The poetic syntax, setting one noun in apposition to another across the line break, enacts this great leap: 'la surprise / Une avance'. This leap is utterly unexpected and at the same time 'clair': transparent, obvious, or right. Introducing a colon, the poet sums up this sweeping sensation of joy and surprise with the words: 'ce cri, ce rire / Que j'aime, et que je trouve méritable'. A pair of nouns in apposition – 'la surprise / Une avance, d'un grand bond clair' – is defined by another pair of nouns in apposition – 'ce cri, ce rire'. The spaces between words, the discontinuous leaps that we make from one noun to another, articulate, within language, the non-rational and non-discursive nature of surprise, 'un grand bond clair'.

Bonnefoy's use of the image of laughter here echoes the earlier poem, in which laughing was set in opposition to comprehending: 'comme si / Comprendre ne comptait plus, rire davantage'. Here, once again, the image of laughter accompanies the image of snow. Laughter is emblematic of a non-rational response to material presence.²¹ Yet, it is this laugh – and this cry – that the poet loves and finds ponderable: 'Que j'aime, et que je

²¹ Nancy's evocation of laughter in *Une pensée finie* helps us to understand why laughter is such a fitting response to snow. Nancy writes, 'Le rire toujours éclate – et se perd dans ses éclats. Dès qu'il éclate, il est perdu pour toute appropriation, pour toute présentation' (Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 297). It is as if one irreducibly effusive presence gives rise to another irreducibly effusive presence.

trouve méditable'. It is the very displacement or suspension of thought that occurs in 'ce cri, ce rire' which is 'méditable'. Similarly, in *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, Nancy defines the philosophic act as 'accueillir l'étonnement devant ce qui se présente'.²² The philosopher, like the poet, is interested in all that surprises or interrupts thought, in all that overtakes it.

The final stanza points to a special affinity between father and child, poet and child: 'Car nous sommes bien proches'. Bonnefoy revisits the line from Wordsworth, the poet of childhood delight, 'The Child is father of the Man'.²³ Wordsworth's formulation subverts the traditional linear chronology of human development: childhood is viewed as a time of unequalled richness and receptivity to the physical world and, through the acquisition of language, reasoning, and experience, the adult falls away from this richness and receptivity. Therefore the adult can only hope to learn from the child. Bonnefoy reworks Wordsworth's formulation, foregrounding the image of human hands: 'et l'enfant / Est le progéniteur de qui l'a pris / Un matin dans ses mains d'adulte et soulevé / Dans le consentement de la lumière'. Bonnefoy insists that the child is the 'progéniteur'. Genesis comes, not from language, but from 'infancy'. The traditionally appropriative or manipulative gesture of the human hand is once again inverted: taking the infant 'dans ses mains', the poet raises him or her up in a gesture of consent. This wordless gesture – consenting to his child, consenting to 'infancy', consenting to the light – has the thoughtlessness and the spontaneity of 'ce cri, ce rire'.

²² Nancy writes, 'l'attitude et l'acte philosophiques – l'attitude et l'acte qu'on oublie, désormais, lorsqu'on veut revenir à une signification du monde : accueillir l'étonnement devant ce qui se présente. C'est cet accueil qui fait la pensée. La pensée ne donne pas du sens : elle éprouve l'exigence du sens, elle nous éprouve, elle laisse parler cette exigence, elle nous laisse parler' (Nancy, *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, p. 103).

²³ William Wordsworth, 'My heart leaps up when I behold', *A Wordsworth Selection* (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 104-5.

In the first poem of ‘Le tout, le rien’, Bonnefoy presents several non-rational and non-discursive experiences: the joy of an infant, the feeling of surprise, and a purely physical gesture. A series of oppositions – winter and spring, snow and fire, adulthood and childhood, speech and speechlessness – are drawn into proximity with one another and established hierarchies are deconstructed. In the final stanza of the poem, both the poet and the child bathe ‘Dans le consentement de la lumière’. Using the noun ‘le consentement’, Bonnefoy echoes the gesture of consent that he makes at the end of ‘La Terre’. Surrendering his sovereignty, deconstructing the opposition between self and world, adulthood and infancy, speech and speechlessness, the poet opens himself up to the finite sharing of existence. This is a sharing, a ‘consentement’, Bonnefoy subtly suggests, in which the child always already participates.

In the second poem of ‘Le Tout, le rien’, the poet, inspired by the spontaneity and effusiveness of the child’s cry of joy, feels the urge to understand this cry and to make it his own. The poet, however, knows that he cannot possess this cry. He knows that language can only be made, as Nancy writes, ‘capable de le recevoir, susceptible de l’accueillir’.²⁴ The poem can only approach this cry passively. It can only touch negatively upon that which it cannot *have*:

Oui, à entendre, oui, à faire mienne
 Cette source, le cri de joie, qui bouillonnante
 Surgit d’entre les pierres de la vie
 Tôt, et si fort, puis faiblit et s’aveugle.

Mais écrire n’est pas avoir, ce n’est pas être,
 Car le tressaillement de la joie n’y est
 Qu’une ombre, serait-elle la plus claire,
 Dans des mots qui encore se souviennent

De tant et tant de choses que le temps
 A durement labourées de ses griffes,

²⁴ Nancy, *L’Oubli de la philosophie*, p. 105.

– Et je ne puis donc faire que te dire
Ce que je ne suis pas, sauf en désir.

Une façon de prendre, qui serait
De cesser d'être soi dans l'acte de prendre,
Une façon de dire, qui ferait
Qu'on ne serait plus seul dans le langage. (DF, 140)

This second poem opens with the affirmation: 'Oui, à entendre, oui, à faire mienne / Cette source, le cri de joie'. The poet seeks to understand and to make his own 'Cette source, le cri de joie'. Describing the cry as a 'source', he expresses the archetypal poetic ambition to find and take possession of the very wellsprings of poetry. Yet, 'bouillonnante', the cry is essentially dispersive. It surges up between the cracks of life: 'Tôt, et si fort, puis faiblit et s'aveugle'. It is strong and sudden, precocious even, and, yet, already, it is weakening and disappearing. The poet's desire to possess the cry is immediately at odds with its diffuse and fleeting nature. The next stanza addresses the distance that exists between the poet's desire and the reality of the poetic project. Language can neither contain nor animate such a cry: 'Mais écrire n'est pas avoir, ce n'est pas être'. In writing, the live quiver of joy becomes a mere shadow: 'le tressaillement de la joie n'y est / Qu'une ombre, serait-elle la plus claire'. Language is depicted as a storehouse of eroded, passed-over objects: 'des mots qui encore se souviennent // De tant et tant de choses que le temps / A durement labourées de ses griffes'. Nothing of the child's spontaneity and effusiveness can be preserved within language. The cry becomes a mere shadow, 'serait-elle la plus claire'.

The poem begins with the affirmative ambition, 'Oui, à entendre, oui, à faire mienne / Cette source', only to break into a long series of negatives. The poet admits: '– Et je ne puis donc faire que te dire / Ce que je ne suis pas, sauf en désir'. The poet cannot *be* in writing. Embodied existence does not cross this threshold. In language, the poet can only express 'Ce que je ne suis pas'. The written text thus becomes the negative image of

embodied existence, the place in which, to use Nancy's expression, the body is 'ex-crit'.²⁵

Bonnefoy's poetic language – here circumlocutionary, monosyllabic – is suggestive of this process of 'excription'. The words circle slowly around that which remains exterior to the text: '– Et je ne puis donc faire que te dire / Ce que je ne suis pas, sauf en désir'.

Yet, these lines also suggest that the poet casts ahead in language, expressing that which he *would be*: '– Et je ne puis donc faire que te dire / Ce que je ne suis pas, sauf en désir'. In the poems of 'La Terre', the poet speculated about the nature of our shared identity in the subjunctive mood. Now, Bonnefoy suggests that the poet must express himself 'en désir', in the optative mood. Setting a dash before this line of verse, staging it as a burst of direct speech, the poem behaves 'as if': '– Et je ne puis donc faire que te dire / Ce que je ne suis pas, sauf en désir'. The poem heads, negatively, desirously, towards all that it is not, towards the moment of finite embodied sense.²⁶

Bonnefoy envisages the poetic act as 'Une façon de prendre, qui serait / De cesser d'être soi dans l'acte de prendre, / Une façon de dire, qui ferait / Qu'on ne serait plus seul dans le langage'. The poet simultaneously takes and surrenders himself, just as he held up

²⁵ In *Corpus*, Nancy writes, 'L'*excription* de notre corps, voilà par où il faut d'abord passer. Son inscription-dehors, sa mise *hors-texte* comme le plus *propre* mouvement de son texte : le texte même abandonné, laissé sur sa limite' (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, (Paris : Éditions A. M. Métailié, 1992), p. 14). In *Le Sens du monde*, Nancy writes, 'La pensée du sens du monde est une pensée qui devient elle-même, au fil de sa pensée, indiscernable de sa *praxis*, qui se perd tendanciellement comme « pensée » dans sa propre exposition au monde, ou qui s'y *excrit*, qui laisse le sens l'emporter, toujours un pas de plus, hors de la signification et de l'interprétation' (Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 19). In a similar fashion, in a critical essay, Bonnefoy writes that 'la poésie est un *acte*, alors que le texte qu'elle produit n'est précisément que cela, un *texte*, ce poème où la signification foisonne sinon plus encore que dans tout texte de prose. Et le texte entrave l'acte, le paralyse' (SPV, 185). For Bonnefoy, poetry is synonymous with the poetic act. The poetic text however crystallises and paralyzes this act. The poetic text is the place where, as Nancy would write, the poetic act is 'ex-crit'.

²⁶ Of writing and the body, which touch at their limit, Nancy writes: 'On a demandé : comment toucher au corps ? [...] ce qu'il faut dire, c'est que cela – toucher au corps, toucher le corps, *toucher* enfin – arrive tout le temps dans l'écriture. [...] Cela n'arrive peut-être pas exactement dans l'écriture, si celle-ci a un « dedans ». Mais en bordure, en limite, en pointe, en extrémité d'écriture, *il n'arrive que ça*. Or l'écriture a son lieu sur la limite. Il n'arrive donc rien d'autre à l'écriture, s'il lui arrive quelque chose, que de *toucher*' (Nancy, *Corpus*, pp. 12-13).

the child in his hands ‘Dans le consentement de la lumière’. Giving up all thoughts of the self, the poet curbs the appropriative nature of the linguistic act. This ‘façon de prendre’ permits a genuine sharing. It permits ‘Une façon de dire, qui ferait / Qu’on ne serait plus seul dans le langage’. Resisting the solipsistic nature of signification, the poem is sent out towards the possibility of contact and communication. It is sent out towards the possibility of a touch. The poem becomes a kind of limit experience, an experience of bordering or sharing, a touch which is not a touch.

The final poem of the sequence is what might be called a ‘prayer’ for a child.²⁷ Written entirely in the subjunctive mood, it is another expression of desire. The poet expresses a series of wishes for the growing child and, by extension, a series of wishes for poetry. Each of the wishes that the poet expresses presents two opposing terms, drawn into apposition.

Te soit la grande neige le tout, le rien,
Enfant des premiers pas titubants dans l’herbe,
Les yeux encore pleins de l’origine,
Les mains ne s’agrippant qu’à la lumière.

Te soient ces branches qui scintillent la parole
Que tu dois écouter mais sans comprendre
Le sens de leur découpe sur le ciel,
Sinon tu ne dénommerais qu’au prix de perdre.

Te suffisent les deux valeurs, l’une brillante,
De la colline dans l’échancrure des arbres,
Abeille de la vie, quand se tarira
Dans ton rêve du monde ce monde même.

Et que l’eau qui ruisselle dans le pré
Te montre que la joie peut survivre au rêve
Quand la brise d’on ne sait où venue déjà disperse
Les fleurs de l’amandier, pourtant l’autre neige. (DF, 141)

²⁷ Bonnefoy, the translator of Yeats, is perhaps thinking of Yeats’s ‘Prayer for my Daughter’ (W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 211-4).

Across the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, ‘la grande neige’ serves as an image for the atomistic flux of material existence, for the atoms and void that make up all matter, for their endless movements and metamorphoses.²⁸ Now the poet writes, ‘Te soit la grande neige le tout, le rien’. He wishes that the child might accept the flux of the material world as all (as all that there is) and as nothing (as the emptiness or void in which all of this moves). These two terms are presented in apposition: ‘le tout, le rien’. Like atoms and void, they coexist. They are concurrent and interdependent. The world is at once material plenitude and nothingness, presence and absence.

The poet wishes this vision upon the ‘Enfant des premiers pas titubants dans l’herbe’. This is the child that is taking its first faltering steps in the grass. The child teeters forwards ‘Les yeux encore pleins de l’origine, / Les mains ne s’agrippant qu’à la lumière’. He or she hovers between the fullness of a material origin and the emptiness of the light. The child is still absorbed in a world of physical sense, and yet, he or she goes lurching forwards, ‘Les mains ne s’agrippant qu’à la lumière’. The poet wishes that the child might always retain something of this experience: ‘Te soit la grande neige le tout, le rien’. He wishes that he or she might always have what he describes elsewhere as ‘un sentiment qui est [...] à la fois de non-être et de plenitude de l’être’ (SPV, 178).

²⁸ Bonnefoy makes reference to Lucretius’s *De Rerum natura* in *Début et fin de la neige*. Lucretius’s scientific treatise elaborates a ‘strict’ or ‘radical, anti-teleological’ materialism, positing that ‘Everything is made up of indivisible (*a-tomos*) particles of matter moving, colliding, and congregating at random in an infinite void’ (Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie, ‘Introduction’, *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 3). In *Début et fin de la neige*, in a poem entitled ‘De Rerum natura’, Bonnefoy uses the swirl of snowflakes as a metaphor for the atomistic flux of all existence: ‘Lucrèce le savait : / Ouvre le coffre, / Tu verras, il est plein de neige / Qui tourbillon. // Et parfois deux flocons / Se rencontrent, s’unissent, / Ou bien l’un se détourne, gracieusement / Dans son peu de mort’ (DF, 122). In one chest of air, Bonnefoy suggests, we can see the nature of the whole material universe: a flurry of endlessly moving particles. We can see matter, coming into and going out of being, composing and decomposing itself.

The child who is learning to walk is also learning to speak, and the next stanza begins: ‘Te soient ces branches qui scintillent la parole / Que tu dois écouter mais sans comprendre / Le sens de leur découpe sur le ciel’. The poet wishes that the outline of branches against the sky might be ‘la parole’ to the child. This material ‘parole’ – a speechless speech – is to be listened to without being comprehended.²⁹ It is to be received, sensually. Bonnefoy insists that the sense of existence presents itself in the very outlines of the material world: ‘Le sens de leur découpe sur le ciel’. This sense speaks without speaking; it makes itself felt without making itself comprehensible. It is the very concreteness of material existence. It is, as Nancy writes, ‘la structure du sens en tant que sens du monde’.³⁰ Or, as Nancy observes, ‘il s’agit du sens du monde comme de sa concrétude même en tant que cela à quoi notre existence *touche* et par quoi elle est touché, en tous les sens possibles’.³¹ Bonnefoy, like Nancy, conceives of sense as a shared horizon of material sense. If one attempts to signify this sense, to encapsulate the outline of the branches against the sky, Bonnefoy warns, ‘tu ne dénommerais qu’au prix de perdre’. Language, like the physical senses, can only be passive and receptive to this sense, ‘passible de sens’ as Nancy writes.³²

The third stanza of the poem begins with the words: ‘Te suffisent les deux valeurs’. The first of these two values is one that shines in the distance, through the break in the trees: ‘l’une brillante, / De la colline dans l’échancrure des arbres’. This hill shines at us, ‘Abeille de la vie, quand se tarira / Dans ton rêve du monde ce monde même’. May this distant and inaccessible vision sustain you, he urges, when our immediate existence

²⁹ I will investigate the motif of listening, an activity that the poet once again conceives of in opposition to signification and comprehension, in the third chapter of my thesis. This chapter will analyse the poems of *Les Planches courbes*.

³⁰ Nancy writes, ‘monde n’est pas seulement corrélatif de *sens*, il est structuré comme *sens*, et réciproquement, *sens* est structuré comme *monde*’ (Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 12, p. 18.)

³¹ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 24.

³² Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 103.

disappoints. The elsewhere, significantly, is no longer any kind of higher realm or other world. Part of our own landscape, it is the ever-receding line of the horizon. And after the distant hill, comes the second value: the gushing of the stream through the meadow, the immediacy of physical experience and the sensation of joy. The poet urges, ‘Et que l’eau qui ruisselle dans le pré / Te montre que la joie peut survivre au rêve’. In the first poem of the sequence, joy is associated with surprise. In the final poem, it is associated with survival: ‘la joie peut survivre au rêve’. Joy survives the dream. The dream – this crystallisation of reality into some distant and inaccessible form – passes or is passed over. It is ‘l’eau qui ruisselle dans le pré’ that shows us that joy survives the dream: a water that surges up, spills over us, and disperses. The childlike sensation of joy, Bonnefoy suggests, is nothing more than an openness, a receptivity to the motion by which the world comes to us. It is our (excessive and insufficient) response to the excess and the insufficiency of the present moment, ‘le tout, le rien’. The water shows us that joy survives dream, ‘Quand la brise d’on ne sait où venue déjà disperse / Les fleurs de l’amandier, pourtant l’autre neige’. As if from nowhere, the breeze comes. It is already – before we realise what is happening – dispersing the blossom. Rushing up and rushing onwards, joy *surprises* and *survives*.

The opening lines of ‘Le Tout, le rien’ evoked the turning of the seasons, balancing images of destruction and healing, life and death. Now, the poem ends with an image of almond blossom: an image of fertility and renewal.³³ The almond blossom is ‘pourtant, l’autre neige’. The white petals fall like snow. An image of warmth and rebirth is set in apposition with an image of coldness and death. Bonnefoy celebrates metaphor, the poet’s capacity to see one thing in terms of another. He celebrates the metaphor that is inspired by the metamorphoses of the physical world. Setting the almond blossom and the snow in apposition, ‘Les fleurs de l’amandier, pourtant l’autre neige’, Bonnefoy suggests the

³³ It is with this image of rebirth that ‘La Terre’ begins.

liminality, the turning, by which one thing becomes another. In the final line of the poem, he suggests that existence is always a simultaneous beginning and ending, renewal and destruction.

The final poem of this sequence sets all and nothing in apposition: the origin in the child's eyes and nothingness grasped by its hands; the mute sense of the world and the significations of language; the dream of a distant hill and the immediacy of physical experience. All across the poems of 'Le Tout, le rien', Bonnefoy has been drawing oppositions into apposition: 'C'est la dernière neige de la saison [...] C'est la première neige de ta vie'; 'Une façon de prendre [...] Une façon de dire'; 'Les yeux encore pleins de l'origine, / Les mains ne s'agrippant qu'à la lumière'; 'ton rêve du monde ce monde même'. He has been drawing us towards the *limen* between winter and spring, adulthood and childhood, signification and sense. Addressing the infant, the one who has yet to acquire these conceptual oppositions, the poet wishes: 'Te soit la grande neige le tout, le rien'. He wishes that the child might always receive the world – running water, a flux of snow, a cloud of almond blossom – as all and nothing. He wishes that the child might always accept the moment of material presence as presence and absence, clarity and obscurity, speechlessness and speech. The poet hopes that the child – as he or she grows – might always remains close to the condition of infancy.

The rhetorical structure of these appositions, 'Le tout, le rien', tells us something of the nature of the contact to which the poet aspires. 'Le tout' and 'le rien' coexist. The two terms are separate and yet close, different and yet the same. They touch and they do not touch, showing us that proximity and distance too are always coterminous. In other words, the hiatus is as real as the touch. Touch is 'Le tout, le rien'; 'Une façon de prendre, qui serait / De cesser d'être soi dans l'acte de prendre'. Writing, for Bonnefoy, is this paradoxical act. The poet attempts to provoke, within language, the slightest *effleurement*

with something which is not language. He seeks ‘Une façon de dire, qui ferait / Qu’on ne serait plus seul dans le langage’. Nancy writes:

« Écriture » veut dire : non la monstration, ni la démonstration, d’une signification, mais un geste pour *toucher* au *sens*. Un toucher, un tact qui est comme une adresse : celui qui écrit ne touche pas sur le mode de la saisie, de la prise en main [...] mais il touche sur le mode de s’adresser, de s’envoyer à la touche d’un dehors, d’un dérobé, d’un écarté, d’un espacé. Sa touche même, et qui est bien *sa* touche, lui est dans le principe retirée, espacée, écartée.³⁴

The structure of Bonnefoy’s poem – the poet addressing the infant – is ‘Sa touche même’. The poet speaks to the one who is without speech and he tells us ‘nous sommes bien proches’. And it is this proximity to which the poet aspires: proximity, apposition, a touch which is not a touch, ‘le tout, le rien’ of the poetic project. The poem is sent out towards that which is exterior to itself. It is ‘Une avance, d’un grand bond clair’. It is, as Nancy writes, ‘un toucher clair au seuil obscur du sens’.³⁵

Facing the Image: ‘J’entre pour un instant dans la grande neige’

The final section of this chapter examines how Bonnefoy’s deconstructive thinking of corporeal sense, and in particular touch, manifests itself in his practice of the poetic image. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, many critics have explored Bonnefoy’s ‘destruction’ or deconstruction of the traditional image. Bonnefoy’s practice of the poetic image is defined by what Née describes as ‘le refus iconoclaste de toute médiation imaginaire’³⁶ and by what Finck describes as ‘l’espoir d’une guérison du mal de l’image’.³⁷ Giguère writes, ‘la méthode créatrice bonnefoysienne [...] consiste en son principe même

³⁴ Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 19.

³⁵ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 132.

³⁶ Née, *Yves Bonnefoy. Penseur de l’image*, p. 17

³⁷ Finck, *Le Simple et le sens*, p. 407.

de base [...] à détruire l'image traditionnelle par l'image poétique'.³⁸ In his essays, Bonnefoy suggests that the image has an inherent tendency towards transcendence, a tendency to betray the moment of finite embodied sense. In *Le Nuage rouge*, Bonnefoy describes 'l'être propre à l'image' as 'sa capacité d'évasion, où se perd ce que j'appelle le sens' (NR, 379). And yet, for Bonnefoy, the image is also the device that permits a consideration of these very ills. It is, he writes, 'cette étude de l'illusoire dans les œuvres de la poésie' (E, 188).

This section examines the act of looking that is staged by the poetic image in a poem entitled 'Hopkins Forest', the longest poem in *Début et fin de la neige*. It examines two instances of what Finck describes as '[le] mal de l'image': an act of looking that would read the world, reducing the material presence of a landscape to a solitary, transcendental sign, and an act of looking that would represent the world in all its contingent detail. Both these gazes, dominated by a linguistic consciousness, seek to reduce or to contain the excess of material presence. Both are met by resistance or refusal. The excess of material presence, refusing to signify, refusing to be reduced or contained, suddenly appears as 'un dehors abyssal', (SPV, 204). In this moment, 'quand nous éprouvons des impressions de présence, c'est n'est que sur un fond de non-signifiante absolue dans le fait du monde, nommons cela l'absence' (SPV, 204).

In 'Hopkins Forest', as in the other poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, Bonnefoy meditates upon the experience of disjuncture, the experience of resistance or refusal as material presence refuses to be contained by the signifying structures of language. He meditates upon the sensation of nothingness that arises, as language swirls off into the abyss, forcing us to confront 'l'irréalité foncière du fait humain' (IN, 95). And once again, the moment of resistance inspires a different conception of the poetic act. It inspires a

³⁸ Giguère, *Le Concept de la réalité dans la poésie d'Yves Bonnefoy*, p. 86.

different conception of the poetic image and a different conception of the act of looking. The poet embraces the movement by which the visible slips towards the invisible, the audible towards the inaudible. He embraces the liminality of physical sense and the *excess* of material presence. The poetic image becomes, not a reduction or representation of this excess, but a simple – a passive and open – act of looking. It becomes a simple act of *being towards*.³⁹

J'étais sorti
Prendre de l'eau au puits, auprès des arbres,
Et je fus en présence d'un autre ciel.
Disparues les constellations d'il y a un instant encore,
Les trois quarts du firmament étaient vides,
Le noir le plus intense y régnait seul,
Mais à gauche, au-dessus de l'horizon,
Mêlé à la cime des chênes,
Il y avait un amas d'étoiles rougeoyantes
Comme un brasier, d'où montait même une fumée.

Je rentrai
Et je rouvris le livre sur la table.
Page après page,
Ce n'étaient que des signes indéchiffrables,
Des agrégats de formes d'aucun sens
Bien que vaguement récurrentes,
Et par-dessous une blancheur d'abîme
Comme si ce qu'on nomme l'esprit tombait là, sans bruit,

³⁹ The poem hopes to 'touch upon' the excess of material presence. It hopes to 'touch upon' 'le réel', to use one of Bonnefoy's preferred terms. Whilst Bonnefoy rejects traditional notions of representation or *mimesis*, he conceives of poetry as a gesture that goes towards the real. It goes towards the real although it can never give us the real. In 1959, in 'L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie', Bonnefoy writes of poetry: 'je pourrais dire qu'elle est un réalisme initiatique si elle nous donnait, au dénouement, le réel (IM, 132). Similarly, of the realist nature of Nancy's writings on art, James writes, 'Nancy's thinking on art can be qualified, albeit tentatively, with the term *realism*. Tentatively because his realism bears little resemblance to what might be traditionally thought under this term. For instance he rejects any notion of art as imitation or *mimesis*, and rejects also any logic of representation whereby art could be thought, like a mirror, to reflect or give an image of some determinate and determinable pre-existing reality. Yet art, in Nancy's thought, exists in, or as, a relation to the world, a relation to finite existence, and more specifically to that movement of sense which is, or opens up, world-hood itself in all its singular plurality' (James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 203).

Comme une neige.
Je tournai cependant les pages.

Bien des années plus tôt,
Dans un train au moment où le jour se lève
Entre Princeton Junction et Newark,
C'est-à-dire deux lieux de hasard pour moi,
Deux retombées des flèches de nulle part,
Les voyageurs lisaient, silencieux
Dans la neige qui balayait les vitres grises,
Et soudain,
Dans un journal ouvert à deux pas de moi,
Une grande photographie de Baudelaire,
Toute une page
Comme le ciel se vide à la fin du monde
Pour consentir au désordre des mots.

J'ai rapproché ce rêve et ce souvenir
Quand j'ai marché, d'abord tout un automne
Dans des bois où bientôt ce fut la neige
Qui triompha, dans beaucoup de ces signes
Que l'on reçoit, contradictoirement,
Du monde dévasté par le langage.
Prenait fin le conflit de deux principes,
Me semblait-il, se mêlaient deux lumières,
Se refermaient les lèvres de la plaie.
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, et mystérieuse
Comme un qui sortirait du sépulcre et, riant :
« Non, ne me touche pas », dirait-il au monde.

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.
Je l'écoute, à travers les bruits, et parfois même,
L'été, poussant du pied les feuilles mortes
D'autres années, claires dans la pénombre
Des chênes trop serrés parmi les pierres,
Je m'arrête, je crois que ce sol s'ouvre
À l'infini, que ces feuilles y tombent
Sans hâte, ou bien remontent, le haut, le bas,

N'étant plus, ni le bruit, sauf le léger
 Chuchotement des flocons qui bientôt
 Se multiplient, se rapprochent, se nouent
 – Et je revois alors tout l'autre ciel,
 J'entre pour un instant dans la grande neige. (DF, 133-5)

The first stanza of Hopkins Forest evokes a dream of a world transfigured. As the poet goes out to the well to fetch water, he witnesses the epiphany of an extraordinary cosmic phenomenon: 'Et je fus en présence d'un autre ciel. / Disparues les constellations d'il y a un instant encore, / Les trois quarts du firmament étaient vides, / Le noir le plus intense y régnait seul'. All recognisable forms drain away from the sky, leaving only the purest blackness. Huge swathes of the sky are completely empty. In just one corner, however, just above the horizon, bleeding into the tips of the oak trees, the poet perceives a cluster of burning red stars: 'à gauche, au-dessus de l'horizon, / Mêlé à la cime des chênes, / Il y avait un amas d'étoiles rougeoyantes'. This red ball of fire is compared, in the final line of the stanza, to 'un brasier, d'où montait même une fumée'. In the poet's imagination, this vision is already becoming an image of human habitation and settlement, a hearth of sorts.

As the poet evokes this dream, he presents one visual image after another: the well, the blackness, the red stars. Using a few measurements and directions, Bonnefoy roughly sketches a landscape – 'Les trois quarts du firmament', 'à gauche, au-dessus de l'horizon' – and then he saturates the scene with colour, a pure black and a smouldering red: 'Le noir le plus intense y régnait seul', 'un amas d'étoiles rougeoyantes'. If this dream is highly 'painted', it is perhaps because this inexplicable cluster of red stars resembles Mondrian's *Nuage rouge*, a painting in which one solitary cloud is inexplicably illuminated by a vivid red light. Of this cloud Bonnefoy writes,

le nuage, qui a une intensité extraordinaire dans sa flambée sans origine visible, et une forme très remarquable aussi – c'est une lettre d'un alphabet inconnu, mais avec quelque chose respirant sinon de sexuel, masse pourpre qui a jeté sa semence –, le nuage s'intensifie plus encore, se proposant comme un *signe*, au sens où un

vol brusque d'oiseau ou un rocher d'aspect insolite le furent si constamment pour la conscience archaïque. On le pressent augural. (NR, 128)

In the first stanza of 'Hopkins Forest', the image of the cluster of smouldering red stars seems to be inspired by Mondrian's red cloud. It presents itself as 'une lettre d'un alphabet inconnu', 'un *signe*'.

The second stanza of 'Hopkins Forest' offers a mirror vision of the first, skilfully repeating and inverting its images. Having walked out and looked towards the sky, the poet now returns home and opens his book. Like the constellations that vanished from the sky, the words of the book now refuse to yield any meaning. The poet confronts page after page of unrecognisable characters: 'Page après page, / Ce n'étaient que des signes indéchiffrables, / Des agrégats de formes d'aucun sens / Bien que vaguement récurrentes'. They are mere graphics, a series of recurring patterns without meaning, 'lettre[s] d'un alphabet inconnu'. The text floats on 'une blancheur d'abîme'. It is as if 'ce qu'on nomme l'esprit tombait là, sans bruit, / Comme une neige'. Language, mind, or human aspiration – whatever we choose to call it – is being poured into a vast emptiness. The text swirls and dissolves upon the page; the world swoons into the abyss; and the poet turns page after page.

This nightmare bears a striking resemblance to Mallarmé's *crise de Tournon*, the nights in which, as Bonnefoy writes, 'toutes les significations se révèlent sans prise sur la chose, [...] toutes les représentations imaginées avant cohérentes et véridiques s'effacent ainsi dans les mots' (LD, 243-4). The poet realises 'le caractère à jamais subjectif et incohérent de la signification, « vaine forme » produite par le hasard ; et que nous ne sommes donc qu'une « présence » – à nous-mêmes ou à autrui dans l'univers – de simple apparence, sans substance, absence en fait, le néant' (LD, 243). The poet makes a

vertiginous descent into 'le néant'. He intuits that 'rien n'est, sauf un dehors abyssal qui ignore tout de la prétention humaine, de son langage'.⁴⁰

In the first stanza of 'Hopkins Forest', the world is illuminated by some kind of transcendental sign. In the second, meaning falls away from language, revealing its fundamentally arbitrary character and exposing the nothingness of material existence. Bonnefoy presents a miracle and then a nightmare, a presence and then an absence, a patch of colour and then the whiteness of the abyss, a smoke which rises and then a spirit which falls. One dream is the mirror image of the other. These two visions are, the poet suggests, two sides of the same dream. The human imagination soars upwards and then plunges downwards. It interrogates the transcendental 'signs' of the night sky and then despairs at the inadequacy of language, at its failure to decipher the physical world. These visions are both, Bonnefoy suggests, the product of a 'dreaming' and transcendental linguistic consciousness.

The third stanza of 'Hopkins Forest' is another meditation upon the image. This stanza, however, recounts a memory of an actual encounter that took place many years earlier, in America. The poet is travelling on a train 'au moment où le jour se lève', the time of day which is so emblematic, for Bonnefoy, of the liminality of existence. The train is between between two arbitrary locations: 'Princeton Junction et Newark, / C'est-à-dire deux lieux de hasard pour moi, / Deux retombées des flèches de nulle part'. The passengers in the railway carriage are reading silently, as the snow rushes in gusts against the windows. The steady flow of nine-, ten-, eleven-syllable lines is then punctured by a three syllable line: 'Et soudain'. The poet perceives: 'Dans un journal ouvert à deux pas de moi, / Une grande photographie de Baudelaire'. In this modern American rail carriage, full of newspaper print in English, he confronts an enormous photograph of Baudelaire. In this

⁴⁰ Yves Bonnefoy, 'Igitur et le photographe', *Mallarmé 1842-1898, Un Destin d'écriture*, ed. Yves Peyré (Paris : Gallimard, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1998), p. 60.

place to which he has no connection, the poet suddenly confronts that which is most his own. A short four-syllable line suggests Bonnefoy's continuing disbelief: 'Toute une page'.

The apparition of this photographic image gives rise to a profound – an almost apocalyptic – sense of disorder. The image appears, 'Comme le ciel se vide à la fin du monde / Pour consentir au désordre des mots'. The sky is endlessly emptying itself, as if it were the end of the world. It is consenting to the anarchic and meaningless nature of language. It is the photographic image – a medium that Bonnefoy describes as 'le hasard mis à nu' – that awakens this extraordinary sense of contingency. In his essay, '*Igitur et le photographe*', Bonnefoy explores the relationship between the development of the first daguerreotype and the Mallarméan intuition of 'le néant', suggesting that Mallarmé witnessed, for the first time in history, contingent detail being fixed within the image.⁴¹ He witnessed, Bonnefoy writes, 'cette figure au fond du papier qui permet le transissement de toutes les significations par l'épiphanie dans l'image de ces détails au hasard, de cet infini sans raison, qui sont évidemment le déni du rêve d'être de la personne'.⁴² It is a photograph of Baudelaire that appears, in this railway carriage, in the middle of nowhere. Baudelaire is, of course, the poet who professed to 'glorifier le culte des images (ma grande, mon unique, ma primitive passion)'.⁴³ Baudelaire also famously criticises certain

⁴¹ Bonnefoy writes, 'Et que ce détail au hasard, que le hasard comme tel, se révèle ainsi dans l'image, qu'il y marque, pour la première fois dans l'immense histoire des images, sa réalité spécifique, c'est un événement dont il ne faut pas sous-estimer la capacité d'ébranler toutes les assises de la conscience. [...] voici en effet qu'apparaît dans le champ de la représentation, domaine de la pensée qui organise le monde, quelque chose sur quoi les signes n'ont pas de prise' (Bonnefoy, '*Igitur et le photographe*', *Mallarmé 1842-1898*, p. 63).

⁴² Ibid., p. 73.

⁴³ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975-6) I, p. 701.

uses of photography in 'Le Publique moderne et la photographie' in his *Salon de 1859*.⁴⁴

Now, as this photograph manifests itself, Bonnefoy feels an uncanny and vertiginous sensation of non-being: 'Comme le ciel se vide à la fin du monde / Pour consentir au désordre des mots'. The world seems to slip into the abyss, consenting to the disorder of words. The photograph is 'une sorte d'épiphanie de l'absence, où paraît le non-être de tout ce qu'on ressentait comme être : en somme, un enseignement de ce que Mallarmé va appeler le Néant'.⁴⁵

Across the first three stanzas of 'Hopkins Forest', Bonnefoy aligns this dream of a stellar apparition and this chance encounter on a train. He aligns an image that is a projection of the human mind with an image that is captured as a photograph. Both these images awaken a sense of the 'désordre des mots'. Having placed his faith in some transcendental signifier, having accepted the contingency of the photographic detail, the poet feels a violent sense of refusal or disjuncture. As the poet senses that language has no hold over the material world, the world suddenly appears to be a 'dehors abyssal'. As Bonnefoy writes of Mallarmé's *crise de Tournon*, 'il n'y a rien derrière ces apparences et quand nous éprouvons des impressions de présence, c'est n'est que sur un fond de non-signifiante absolue dans le fait du monde' (SPV, 204). Functioning as a sign, or an objective representation of contingent detail, the poetic image awakens a sense of the non-being of material existence. It awakens a sense of 'le néant'.

All autumn long, as he walked in Hopkins Forest, the poet drew together this dream and this memory: 'J'ai rapproché ce rêve et ce souvenir'. He meditates upon this experience of the 'désordre des mots'. Walking 'Dans des bois où bientôt ce fut la neige / Qui triompha', he sees the snow fall 'dans beaucoup de ces signes / Que l'on reçoit,

⁴⁴ Baudelaire writes, 'je suis convaincu que les progrès mal appliqués de la photographie ont beaucoup contribué, comme d'ailleurs tous les progrès purement matériels, à l'appauvrissement du génie artistique français, déjà si rare' (Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, II, p. 618).

⁴⁵ Bonnefoy, 'Igitur et le photographe', *Mallarmé 1842-1898*, p. 64.

contradictoirement, / Du monde dévasté par le langage'. The snow is a flurry of signs that all seem to bespeak the devastation of the world. And yet, Bonnefoy insists, these snowflakes are received 'contradictoirement'. The snowflakes are received as if they were a set of signs that might be deciphered. When the human intellect finds itself unable to decipher these signs, it suddenly despairs of the impenetrable materiality of existence, its 'non-signifiante absolue'. As our representations of the world dissolve and go swirling off into the abyss, we are convinced of the devastation of the world. And yet, these snowflakes are not signs. They are received 'contradictoirement' – the world is devastated 'contradictoirement' – 'par le langage'. Speaking of Mallarmé's intuition of nothingness in an interview, Bonnefoy observes, 'Je me demande si le langage n'est pas lui-même et lui seul la cause de ce mal, de cette impression du néant contre laquelle il s'insurge' (E, 45).

As the snow falls, innocently, inscrutably, Bonnefoy observes that this quarrel between the signs of the world and the world itself is drawing to a close: 'Prenait fin le conflit de deux principes, / Me semblait-il, se mêlaient deux lumières, / Se refermaient les lèvres de la plaie'. Conceptual oppositions – language and materiality, the ideal and the real, being and nothingness – are beginning to dissolve. The light of one begins to blend into the light of the other. Two sides of a wound – a wound in human consciousness, in human perception – are knitting together.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Bonnefoy insists in an interview in 1998 that, to understand Mallarmé's discovery of 'le néant', it is essential to understand that his discovery of 'l'irréalité foncière du fait humain' occurs almost simultaneously with the poet's discovery of the beauty of the sensible contingency of existence. The intuition of 'le néant' must be considered a means and not an end in itself. It frees the poetic imagination from the strictures of conceptual thought, *enabling* the poetic imagination to experience 'le beau'. As Bonnefoy observes, 'Ce qu'il faut bien comprendre, c'est que Mallarmé n'a fait du néant de toutes les représentations – sa découverte, aussi bien, de l'irréalité foncière du fait humain, crue jadis fondée en être par Dieu – qu'en en faisant tôt après une autre, qui lui rendit sa confiance. Le monde avait été comme décapé de son sens par la pensée du néant, réduit par elle à rien que sa figure la plus simplement sensorielle. Mais cette figure, constate Mallarmé, a beauté. La fleur est belle. Le « ciel terrestre » d'un jour d'été a une beauté si parfaite, dans son en-soi, qu'on peut le dire « divin ». « Après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau », écrit Mallarmé à un ami' (IN, 95).

The snow falls in great gusts, eradicating all traces of colour: ‘La masse blanche du froid tombait par rafales / Sur la couleur’. In the distance, however, the poet perceives one isolated form. Amidst the consuming whiteness, one painted board remains uncovered: ‘un toit au loin, une planche / Peinte, restée debout contre une grille, / C’était encore la couleur’. It is ‘mystérieuse / Comme un qui sortirait du sépulcre et, riant : / « Non, ne me touche pas », dirait-il au monde’. The painted board is compared to the scene of *Noli me tangere*, to the paradoxical figure of the risen Christ: this body which is tangible and yet intangible, alive and yet dead, mortal and yet immortal, here and yet leaving. Inexplicably escaping the downfall of snow, the board stands out, as if it were a sign. And yet, the message that this sign communicates is a rebuffal ‘« 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, its unavailability. It is a revelation of its own 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 »’.

As Bonnefoy writes in his essay on Mallarmé in *Lieux et destins de l’image*, ‘Peu importe si les langues ne savent pas de secret, [...] on aura retourné les mots contre leurs discours pour y entendre, intuitivement, ce qu’on ne sait plus définir’ (LD, 242). This painted board – this young god – laughs ‘Comme si comprendre ne comptait plus, / Rire davantage’. He tells us that the material world is not our object, is not within our grasp. Of *Noli me tangere*, Nancy writes:

Non, rien n’est disponible ici : ne cherche pas à t’emparer d’un sens de cette vie finie, ne cherche pas à toucher, ni à retenir ce qui essentiellement s’éloigne et en s’éloignant te touche de sa distance même [...] comme de ce qui, en décevant définitivement ton attente, fait surgir devant toi, pour toi, cela même qui ne surgit pas, cela dont la surrection ou l’insurrection est une gloire qui s’emploie à décevoir et à écarter ta main tendue vers elle. Car son éclat n’est pas autre chose que le vide du tombeau.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p. 30.

The poet sees the board, refusing to be covered by the falling snow. The moment of epiphany is the moment in which the world touches us with its essential inappropriability. It is the moment in which material presence reveals its essential mysteriousness. The failure of signification, the poet realises, need not convince us of the non-being of existence. Rather, in our failure to grasp or represent, we touch upon the unmasterable excess of presence. We are touched by the dynamic by which it retreats, saying 'Non, rien n'est disponible ici', '« Non, ne me touche pas »'.

And so, the final stanza of 'Hopkins Forest' presents a different kind of image, one that does not function as a sign or as an objective representation. Bonnefoy intuitively grasps the presence of this snow-filled forest, as it trembles between the visible and the invisible, the audible and inaudible. He frankly avows, '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'. Hopkins Forest has become synonymous with the liminality of physical sense. The poet keeps this memory 'à mon horizon'. It is always there, on the periphery of his vision, just about to slip over the horizon. It allows the poet to touch upon the excess of material presence. And hoping to revisit this experience, the poet listens out between noises: 'Je l'écoute, à travers les bruits'. He listens to the breaks or the silences between sounds.

In summer, in the chinks of dappled light on the dark forest floor, the poet pushes back layers of dead leaves with his foot. Sometimes, he freezes, 'Je m'arrête, je crois que ce sol s'ouvre / À l'infini'. The ground – this finite substance, this foundation or base – opens out onto infinity. And as it falls open, one sentence falls through into another: 'je crois que ce sol s'ouvre / À l'infini'. In this empty space, the poet sees the leaves falling: 'ces feuilles y tombent / Sans hâte, ou bien remontent, le haut, le bas, / N'étant plus, ni le bruit'. One short clause after another accumulates; monosyllables and negative

constructions proliferate; and all conceptual oppositions dissolve. The poet perceives the endless motion of these infinitely moving particles. There is no longer any conception of up or down, no longer any noise either, nothing except ‘le léger / Chuchotement des flocons’.

Lightly whispering, it is as if these snowflakes speak some infinitely delicate and inaudible language. As the snowflakes ‘Se multiplient, se rapprochent, se nouent’, these three reflexive verbs form a syntactic cluster. The snowflakes proliferate: ‘se multiplient’. The mass converges as if in mutual understanding, ‘se rapprochent’. Carrying the ‘ch’ of ‘Chuchotement’, they whisper as they ‘se rapprochent’. Finally, the cluster knits together, ‘se nouent’. Each verb within the line contains a steadily diminishing number of syllables, from four, to three, to two. This deft use of metre allows the reader to hear multiplicity, convergence, and then condensation. And in this instant, the poet glimpses once again the whole other sky: ‘– Et je revois alors tout l’autre ciel, / J’entre pour un instant dans la grande neige’. He sees, not an apparition of some cosmic sign, but, rather, being and nothingness, summer and winter, the earth and the sky, one within the other, one alongside the other. For an instant, he enters ‘la grande neige’.

In the final stanza of ‘Hopkins Forest’, as one clause accumulates after another, as one enjambment flows into another and monosyllables proliferate, Bonnefoy uses the visual and sonorous patterns of language to stage a tremor, a rustling, and a clustering motion. These particles whisper what language cannot directly articulate. As Bonnefoy writes of Mondrian’s *Le Nuage rouge*,

c’est la profondeur comme telle qui du coup se signifie à l’encontre, s’indique non abolie. Dimension autre, cet horizon. Non la troisième de l’espace perspectivé, mais l’hétérogène à jamais qui dresse la présence contre l’image, la faille qui revendique ce que nulle écriture ne saurait jamais accepter, à savoir qu’il y a un ailleurs, là-bas, et donc un ici, en retour, c’est-à-dire, au total un lieu, ce qui ne peut valoir que pour une vie, dans une durée, et oblige à l’expérience de l’être. (NR, 136)

Deconstructing conceptual oppositions, reducing the significations of language to a whisper, Bonnefoy touches upon the irreducible depth of being. The poem draws us towards ‘la profondeur comme telle’, ‘l’hétérogène à jamais qui dresse la présence contre l’image’. Similarly, in *Au fond des images*, Nancy writes, ‘L’image touche à cette ambivalence par laquelle le sens (ou la vérité) se distingue sans fin du réseau lié des significations, auquel en même temps il ne cesse pas de toucher : chaque phrase formée, chaque geste accompli [...] met en jeu le sens absolu (ou la vérité même) qui ne cesse aussi bien de s’écarter et de s’absenter de toute signification’.⁴⁸ The poetic image, the significations of language, open – like the forest floor – onto a whispering mass of snowflakes, a clustering of material particles, the nebulous sense of material existence.

In the final two stanzas of ‘Hopkins Forest’, Bonnefoy presents a refusal ‘« Non, ne me touche pas »’ and a fleeting entrance ‘J’entre pour un instant dans la grande neige’. He suggests that these two dynamics are to be thought in conjunction. The painted board and the flurry of atomistic particles refuse to be interpreted as signs. They will not be taken, deciphered, or transposed. This refusal, however, becomes the site of a different kind of contact. The poet, staring at the forest floor, begins to intuit the flux that gives rise to all being, the circulating particles which endlessly compose and decompose the world’s nebulous form. He holds himself before this vision and he is momentarily enveloped in the flux. He experiences a fleeting entrance, a brief moment of penetration and participation. It is not a moment of comprehension or decipherment; there is, Bonnefoy suggests, nothing to be deciphered. There is only the evidence of being itself, irreducible, untranslatable, ‘le tout, le rien’. In this instant, faced with this evidence, Bonnefoy suggests, all we can do is look.

⁴⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), p. 31.

Across the stanzas of ‘Hopkins Forest’, the poetic image is transformed from a ‘sign’ into a simple act of looking. The image is no longer, as Nancy writes, ‘dans la relation de la « figure » au « propre », ni dans la relation de l’« apparence » à la « réalité », ou dans la relation mimétique’.⁴⁹ These conceptual oppositions have been steadily dissolved across the poem. On the contrary, we are asked to hold ourselves before the image, to accept it ‘dans la relation de l’image à la vue’, as Nancy writes.⁵⁰ We enter into the act of seeing. The poet feels the visible slipping towards the invisible, the audible towards the inaudible, the finite towards the infinite. He opens himself up to the inappropriate excess of material presence: ‘J’entre pour un instant dans la grande neige’. Nancy writes, ‘Entre l’image et la vue, ce n’est pas imitation, c’est participation et pénétration. C’est participation de la vue au visible et du visible à son tour à l’invisible qui n’est autre que la vue elle-même’.⁵¹

The vision presented by the final stanza of the poem might be described as a vision of a world. The ground opens onto infinity and the poet perceives a cluster of particles that ‘Se multiplient, se rapprochent, se nouent’. In *La poétique de l’espace*, Bachelard writes: ‘tout univers s’enferme dans des courbes; tout univers se concentre en un noyau, en un germe, en un centre dynamisé. [...] Ce noyau noyautant est un monde’.⁵² The poetic image becomes an act of looking, a relation to the world, to the sense of the world. In *Au fond des images*, Nancy describes the poetic image as ‘un monde où nous entrons tout en restant devant lui, et qui s’offre ainsi pleinement pour ce qu’il est, un *monde*, c’est-à-dire une totalité indéfinie de sens’.⁵³ Similarly, in the concluding paragraphs of ‘Quelques notes sur

⁴⁹ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, p. 15.

⁵² Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), p.148.

⁵³ Nancy, *Au fond des images*, p. 18.

Mondrian', the poet moves towards a different perception of Mondrian's red cloud. It is, he suggests,

un regard sur [une] totalité dont le sens, aussi obscur nous demeure-t-il, nous semble désormais le réel ultime. En somme, c'est là un autre « nuage rouge ». Non plus une chose de notre monde qui se fait le signe d'un absolu, mais 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)

The whispering mass of snowflakes – like Mondrian's red cloud – is a gaze upon the world in its totality, 'de l'intérieur'. It is a vision of the world in its being and nothingness, multiplicity and union, shadow and light, as 'une totalité indéfinie de sens'. As obscure as this indefinite totality of sense is, it remains 'le réel ultime'.

Conclusion

In all his critical writings, Bonnefoy insists that the poet should not attempt to *have* within language but should simply try to *be*.⁵⁴ In the poems of 'La Terre', Bonnefoy uses different subject pronouns and structures of interpellation, as well as different performative formulations, to cultivate an experience of finite sharing *within* language. In the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, Bonnefoy explores an experience of material presence – a coterminous presence and absence, presentation and withdrawal – that can neither be appropriated or abstracted. As Nancy writes,

le monde hors de l'homme – bêtes, plantes et pierres, océans, atmosphères, espaces et corps sidéraux – est bien plus que le corrélat phénoménal d'une prise-en-main, d'une prise-en-compte ou en souci par l'homme, [...] il est [...] l'extériorité effective *de l'homme lui-même*, si la formule doit être comprise sans restituer de l'homme au monde un rapport de sujet à objet. Car c'est de cela qu'il s'agit : de

⁵⁴ In the essay 'Il reste à faire le négatif', Bonnefoy refers to 'un de ces nœuds de parole à quoi on se voue quand on veut avoir et non être' (E, 247).

comprendre le monde, non pas comme l'objet ou comme le champ d'action de l'homme, mais comme la totalité d'espace de sens, totalité elle-même *existante*.⁵⁵

In the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, Bonnefoy investigates how the poem, subduing or making passive the appropriative impulse of language, might simply be *towards* – be *with* or *alongside* – ‘la totalité d'espace de sens’. Meditating upon the instant in which presence exceeds our grasp or exceeds the signifying structures of language, the poet hopes to touch upon something of this inappropriable excess. Between the signifying structures of language and material presence, Bonnefoy cultivates a form of contact in separation. He cultivates a ‘touch that is not a touch’. The poem becomes an address to an infant – to one who cannot speak – or an attempt to look or to listen without comprehending. In ‘Hopkins Forest’, allowing the tangible to slip towards the intangible, the visible towards the invisible, the poem moves towards all that it cannot master: a painted board, a flurry of snowflakes, a cluster of falling leaves. The poem consents to simply be-*with* or to be-*towards*. It enters into what Nancy describes as ‘la praxis du sens du monde’.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 92.

⁵⁶ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 19.

Chapter Three: Voice and Subjectivity, ‘La Voix lointaine’

In the snow poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, Bonnefoy explores the liminality of physical sense. He explores a moment of contact that hovers always between tangibility and intangibility, materiality and immateriality. The third chapter of this thesis examines how Bonnefoy explores this same experience of liminality in relation to the aural sense, the act of listening, in his 2001 collection of poetry *Les Planches courbes*. Shifting the emphasis from the hand to the ear, from the poet’s relationship to the material world to the poet’s relationship with the self, this chapter investigates how the poet dramatises the experience of self-presence as the act of listening to a distant voice. It scrutinises how the poet, attuned to forces that are at once defined and undefined, disclosed and undisclosed, experiences subjectivity as an endless oscillation or hesitation. It scrutinises how the poet, experiencing this oscillation, finds himself drawn into this dance.

A preoccupation with voice is, as many critics have observed, evident at each stage of Bonnefoy’s career.¹ In *Du mouvement et de l’immobilité de Douve*, poems bear titles such as ‘Une Voix’, ‘Une autre Voix’, ‘Douve parle’, and ‘Voix basses et phénix’; in *Hier régnant désert* too, ‘Le Bruit des voix’, ‘Une Voix’, and ‘La même Voix toujours’. The entire structure of *Dans le leurre du seuil* is voiced, organised around a series of

¹ In his essay ‘Yves Bonnefoy. L’Évocation d’une voix’, Pierre Brunel suggests that Bonnefoy’s dramatisation of voices in *Douve* and *Hier régnant désert* grows out of his early fascination with Rimbaud’s notion of an ‘opéra fabuleux’ (Pierre Brunel, ‘Yves Bonnefoy. L’Évocation d’une voix’, *Yves Bonnefoy. Poésie, peinture, musique*, ed. Michèle Finck (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 1995), p. 24). In *Les Mots comme le ciel*, Vernier writes that Bonnefoy’s poetry is defined by ‘cette croyance que le poème peut et doit maintenir envers et contre tout la résonance d’une voix, et que là, dans cette obstination, résident notre vérité et notre espoir’ (Richard Vernier, *Les Mots comme le ciel* (Tübingen, Narr, Paris: Éditions Place, 1985), p. 19).

apostrophes, imperatives, and incantations (as I explored in my first chapter). In collections such as *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, or even the most recent *L'Heure présente*, the title 'Une Voix' recurs – much like the title 'Une pierre' – distributing itself across collections, across the poet's entire career, creating one long series of poems. Each of these poems dramatises a live and yet mysterious speaking voice, a disembodied and fleeting presence. As Dominique Rabaté writes, in his essay 'L'Appel des voix',

La voix semble toujours se surprendre, s'entendre derrière un rideau (d'arbres le plus souvent). Et c'est une voix proche et lointaine où se dit aussitôt la qualité même, l'essence pourrait-on dire, de la voix qui est le médium de la présence comme de l'absence, la marque du concret et de l'abstrait, le signe d'un corps qui ne peut pas être là tout à fait.²

This voice that recurs in Bonnefoy's poetry is a fugitive presence, one that hovers between presence and absence. It foregrounds – in contrast to the fixity of the printed word – the immediacy, contingency, and fleetingness of utterance.

Les Planches courbes, published in 2001, is replete with voices. It begins with the words, 'Rauques étaient les voix / Des rainettes le soir' (PC, 11).³ Later, we read, 'La voix que j'écoute se perd, / Le bruit de fond qui est dans la nuit la recouvre' (PC, 75). One of the poems of 'L'Or sans visage' begins with the words, 'Ils me parlent. Quelle étrange chose que leurs voix !' (PC, 117). Across the collection, attention is constantly drawn towards the act of listening: 'Passant, ce sont des mots. Mais plutôt que lire / Je veux que tu écoutes : cette frêle / Voix comme en ont les lettres que l'herbe mange' (PC, 40).

Elsewhere, an anonymous voice urges, 'Écoutez la musique qui élucide / De sa flûte savante au faîte des choses / Le son de la couleur dans ce qui est' (PC, 79). The whole

² Dominique Rabaté, 'L'Appel des voix', in *Poétique et ontologie. Colloque international*, Yves Bonnefoy, ed. Serge Canadas, Mary-Ann Caws, and Michel Demangeat (Paris: William Blake & Co, 2008), p. 232.

³ In her essay 'Poétique de la voix rauque', Michèle Finck suggests that 'la raucité de la voix' is 'la matrice' of a poetry that seeks to open up language to a corporeal, material, and finite existence (Michèle Finck, 'Poétique de la voix rauque', Yves Bonnefoy. *Poésie, peinture, musique*, ed. Michèle Finck, p. 33).

volume also reverberates with descriptions of sounds: ‘le murmure’ (PC, 40), ‘[le] roucoulement’ (PC, 37), ‘[le] Clapotement’ (PC, 46), ‘[le] Bruit de l’eau’ (PC, 46), ‘le tumulte’ (PC, 77), ‘un chant’ (PC, 61), ‘[la] musique’ (PC, 64), ‘[la] rumeur’ (PC, 64). In a paper given in 2000, one year before the publication of *Les Planches courbes*, Bonnefoy discusses the role that sound plays in poetry and he observes,

c’est un fait [...] que cet aspect sonore du mot, cette dimension spécifiquement et uniquement sonore de la parole ont été peu étudiés, dans les travaux de la critique littéraire, ou, disons plutôt, ne l’ont guère été d’une certaine façon qui va nous permettre d’accéder à une pensée nouvelle du rapport de l’être parlant au langage. (SPV, 181)

One can hear this corrective impulse, this concern for the ‘aspect sonore du mot’, all across the pages of *Les Planches courbes*, in the dramatisation of voices, in the pleas to listen, and in the use of sound effects. Bonnefoy asks us to attune ourselves to the sonority of the human voice – a sonority that cannot be reduced to any kind of significance – and to open ourselves up to ‘une pensée nouvelle du rapport de l’être parlant au langage’.

This chapter examines the relationship between the act of listening, the sonority of the human voice, and the experience of subjectivity in a sequence of eleven poems that appears in the centre of *Les Planches courbes*: ‘La Voix lointaine’. Across the poems of this sequence, the poet listens to a distant voice, a voice that remains always just out of reach, diffuse and dispersed, inappropriably ‘other’. This voice is associated with childhood and it hovers unsteadily between sonority and sense. This chapter investigates how the poet stages acts of voicing and listening in order to explore the nature of self-presence or subjectivity. It explores how the one who listens is as, Nancy suggests, ‘aux aguets d’un sujet’, ‘tendu vers ou dans un accès au soi’.⁴ Analysing the liminality of the voice to which the poet listens, this unstable threshold between sonority and sense, this

⁴ Nancy, *À l’écoute* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), p. 25.

chapter scrutinises the entirely dynamic conception of human subjectivity to which this liminal or dancing voice gives rise.⁵

Etymologically, the word 'subject', *subiectum*, implies the existence of a base or foundation.⁶ Certainly, in the Cartesian tradition of the *Cogito*, the subject is conceived as a stable base – one which cannot be doubted – from which the world can be measured, known, and mastered.⁷ Across the poems of 'La Voix lointaine', however, the experience of subjectivity is explored through voice. The poet explores the experience of self, experiences of memory, emotion, thought, and desire, in terms of this most 'baseless' resonance, a series of vibrations which travel through the air, which drift towards us and disperse. This voice is the voice of memory, an echo of past experience, a voice that always calls the poet back. It is a voice that the poet desires, a voice that trembles uncertainly at the very limits of perception, just out of reach. Now distant, now close, these voices come and they go. From the beginning of 'La Voix lointaine', subjectivity, far from being a base or foundation, is the space in which voice awakens. It is the place, which is also no place, the *limen*, through which diaphanous voices come and go. Bonnefoy

⁵ Finck's *Le Simple et le sens* offers an in-depth analysis of the importance of sound in Bonnefoy's poetry. In the final chapter of this book, Finck explores how the musicality of language offers a pathway – beyond the conceptual structures of language – towards 'le simple' and 'le sens'. However, when the distinction between 'l'acception intellectuelle' and 'l'acception physiologique du mot « sens »' becomes blurred within her work, the analysis of Bonnefoy's use of sound effects sometimes demonstrates how sound is working in the service of signification (Finck, *Le Simple et le sens*, p. 404). She explores how, for example, 'Dans l'œuvre de Bonnefoy, la dissémination des sons travaille le plus souvent au dévoilement d'un mot caché' (Finck, *Le Simple et le sens*, p. 421). This chapter analyses the manner in which sound is continually used to counter signification in the poems of 'La Voix lointaine', the manner in which it continually interrupts and suspends conceptual thought.

⁶ 'The Latin, "subjecta materia", is a loan translation from the Greek "hypokeimene hyle" (Aristotle), literally, "that which lies beneath"' ('subject', in *Online Etymological Dictionary* <<http://www.etymonline.com>> [accessed 10th July 2012]).

⁷ Critiquing Descartes' conception of the subject, Heidegger writes: 'According to the concept of its essence, *subiectum* is in a distinctive sense that which always lies before and so lies at the basis of something else whose ground it therefore is' (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, I* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 96-7).

explores being as experienced through voice. He explores – for want of a more elegant term – an exteriorised subjectivity.⁸

Throughout the poems of ‘La Voix lointaine’, Bonnefoy is, implicitly, in conversation with Valéry and his monodialogue *La Jeune Parque*. In the final poem of the sequence, Bonnefoy refers to the figure who speaks, whose voice has accompanied him since childhood, as ‘la Parque’. Alluding to the Parca in this manner, Bonnefoy subtly acknowledges that the form of his sequence – an exploration of correlative acts of voicing and listening and the experience of subjectivity to which they give rise – emulates the form of many of Valéry’s poems. We are in a terrain opened up by Valéry. And yet, Bonnefoy acknowledges Valéry’s influence only to suggest that the dramatisation of voice in ‘La Voix lointaine’ gives rise to a very different conception of subjectivity. The acts of voicing and listening that Bonnefoy evokes give rise to an experience of participation – a dance – in the physical world. And in spite of Valéry’s fascination for voicing, listening, and dancing, Bonnefoy insists that Valéry ‘se savait pris entre la perception extériorisante du « Cimetière marin » et l’intériorité mais fantasmatique et sans vie de « La jeune Parque »’ (IN, 124). This chapter suggests that, in the poems of ‘La Voix lointaine’, Bonnefoy to some extent ‘re-writes’ *La Jeune Parque*, writing against the side of Valéry’s poetry that he rejects: ‘[une] mainmise de l’intellect sur ce qui est bien plus important que lui, et qu’il faut protéger’ (IN, 104); ‘le mirage d’une intelligence, d’une pensée, imaginées souveraines’ (IN, 104); ‘un vaste réseau de représentations anthropocentrées ou anthropomorphes’ (IN, 116). Writing against *La Jeune Parque*, Bonnefoy is also – we should not forget – writing *for* the other side of Valéry’s poetry, the exteriority of « Cimetière marin » that he so cherishes, the Valéry who produces, in ‘Fragments de

⁸ John E. Jackson comes closest to this conception of subjectivity in Bonnefoy’s poetry when he describes ‘ce pas hors de soi’ or ‘cette sortie progressive de soi’ which is made by the subject. Jackson writes, ‘N’étant rien « en soi », le sujet peut devenir ce pur rapport à l’être [...]’ (Jackson, *La Question du moi*, p. 316).

Narcisse’, one of Bonnefoy’s favourite lines of verse, ‘La voix des sources change, et me parle du soir’ (IN, 113).

This chapter is divided into four sections. Firstly, it investigates how, in the opening poems of the sequence, Bonnefoy dramatises the act of listening to a distant voice and the experience of liminality to which it gives rise: the endlessly fluid position that the poet occupies as he listens to a voice that is ‘entre voix et langage’. Secondly, examining some of the central poems of the sequence, this chapter explores the poet’s confrontation – as he seeks to accede to this voice – with the limits of signification. It examines how feelings of disappointment and despair are transformed into feelings of serenity and elation, as the poet accepts the infinite finitude of all existence. The third section – analysing the most performative interlude in the sequence, two apostrophes to the voice and a song by the voice – explores how the performance of the voice has become the performance of a ‘voix dansante’. It asks, what do the dynamism and the exteriority of the performance reveal about Bonnefoy’s conception of subjectivity? What does the transition from a performance that centres around sound to a performance that centres around dance tell us about the ‘theatre’ of self-presence? The final section of this chapter examines how this performance of voice and subjectivity is part of the poet’s larger vision of existence: a world of mists, scents, and sounds, an endlessly mobile and finite existence.

‘À l’écoute’: Listening to a Distant Voice

The poems of ‘La Voix lointaine’ begin with the memory of a child playing out on the road and a distant voice that calls out, as darkness falls. This voice calls the child back. It draws the listener towards a luminous threshold. In the first three poems of the sequence, the image of the threshold is repeated. The doorway that is evoked in the first poem, where

the light dances with the shadows, gives way to a simple oscillation in the second poem, as the poet listens to a voice that wavers between sound and sense. In the third poem, Bonnefoy evokes the dance that poetry itself stages between sound and sense and, strikingly, this poem ends with the image of a light dancing with a shadow. In each of these poems, the threshold – the interface between forces – is evoked as an oscillation, a wavering or flickering motion.

The first section of this chapter examines how the theatre of self-presence that Bonnefoy presents in ‘La Voix lointaine’ – a dialogic relationship with oneself – is permeated with a sense of being on the threshold. It analyses how the poet finds himself in dialogue with a voice or a presence to which he can never quite accede. He listens to a distant voice, a voice that always remains just out of earshot. The voice sings to the poet, her words hovering somewhere between sonority and sense, and he can never grasp the sense of her message. The poet is always upon the threshold, and yet, always at a distance from that which he seeks. He is in dialogue with a voice that is always inappropriately ‘other’. The opening lines of the first poem of the sequence awaken precisely this sensation of liminality:

Je l’écoutais, puis j’ai craint de ne plus
L’entendre, qui me parle ou qui se parle.
Voix lointaine, un enfant qui joue sur la route,
Mais la nuit est tombée, quelqu’un appelle

Là où la lampe brille, où la porte grince
En s’ouvrant davantage ; et ce rayon
Recolore le sable où dansait une ombre,
Rentre, chuchote-t-on, rentre, il est tard.

(Rentre, a-t-on chuchoté, et je n’ai su
Qui appelait ainsi, du fond des âges,
Quelle marâtre, sans mémoire ni visage,
Quel mal souffert avant même de naître.) (PC, 57)

The voice that calls out to the poet awakens a sense of utter uncertainty. The poet was listening to it, and then he was suddenly afraid that he would no longer hear it: ‘Je l’écoutais, puis j’ai craint de ne plus / L’entendre, qui me parle ou qui se parle’. Containing five verbs and no nouns, these first two lines move anxiously around this elusive presence, this absence of anything substantive or determinable. The direct object is even elided, ‘Je l’écoutais, puis j’ai craint de ne plus / L’entendre’, suppressing its gender and diminishing its presence upon the page. The poet has no way of knowing if this voice will continue. He cannot even be sure if it is talking to him or to itself: ‘qui me parle ou qui se parle’. The voice could be something received or something accidentally overheard. The poet could be an obedient or an intrusive listener. All these equivocations give rise to structural repetitions: ‘Je l’écoutais’, ‘L’entendre’, ‘qui me parle’, ‘qui se parle’. A labial alliteration runs from ‘puis’, to ‘parle’, to ‘plus’ and an internal rhyme on ‘puis’, ‘qui’, and ‘qui’ is later picked up in ‘nuit’. It is as if the poet is trying – using these sounds – to find his way back towards this voice.

The poet apostrophises the voice directly, ‘Voix lointaine’. Setting one image after another in apposition, Bonnefoy sketches a kind of dreamscape, a scene from childhood. A child plays out upon the road and, as darkness falls, someone calls: ‘Voix lointaine, un enfant qui joue sur la route, / Mais la nuit est tombée, quelqu’un appelle’. The words ‘quelqu’un appelle’ fall just before the stanzaic break and resonate across the interval. This voice calls out there, where the light shines, where the door squeaks as it opens wide on its hinges: ‘Là où la lampe brille, où la porte grince / En s’ouvrant davantage’. All these images – the voice which calls out, the light which shines out, the door which opens out – are beacons which promise to lead the poet homewards, back to a threshold that is all light, warmth, and openness. And the musicality of the poem too functions as a kind of siren song. The laterals of ‘quelqu’un appelle’ resonate across the stanzaic break and are then

taken up mellifluously in the words ‘Là où la lampe brille, où la’. They sing bitter-sweetly of a call, a light, that is nonetheless always ‘Là’. The soft rounded vowel /u/, that sounded previously in ‘écoutais’, ‘ou’, ‘joue’, ‘route’, sounds out again in ‘où’, ‘où’, and ‘s’ouvrant’. As the voice calls the child back, a series of vibrant /R/s – echoed in the words ‘rayon’ and ‘ombre’ – roll out from the back of the speaker’s throat: ‘Rentre, chuchote-ton, rentre, il est tard’.

As the child is drawn back towards this threshold, towards this dance of light and shadow, the poet very deliberately syncopates the semantic and metrical units of the decasyllables and hendecasyllables. A series of enjambments erode the metrical breaks at the line ends and a series of elisions override the grammatical breaks, the commas and the semi-colons: ‘quelqu’un appelle // Là où la lampe brille, où la porte grince / En s’ouvrant davantage ; et ce rayon / Recolore le sable où dansait une ombre’. Without pause for breath, the poem keeps moving restlessly onwards. At each of the potential medial caesurae, the ‘e’ is pushed into the next measure and elided: ‘Là où la lampe brille, où la porte grince / En s’ouvrant davantage ; et ce rayon / Recolore le sable où dansait une ombre’.⁹ The reader begins to sense a certain discrepancy between the semantics of the poem and its rhythm, for even as this voice draws us back towards this threshold, the rhythm moves always onwards, unable to find any kind of resting place. We are drawn back to the place from which the voice sounds out, and yet, at the very centre of the poem, the ‘e’ atone, this instance of pure voice, is repeatedly elided. The voice is calling us back

⁹ Of this elided ‘e’, Clive Scott writes, ‘If the articulated e is a real event in regular French verse, its cancelling by elision [...] is no less so. The elided e is not an enunciation which never existed in our consciousness but rather an enunciation which we thrust away, which is swallowed into the following vowel’ (Clive Scott, *A Question of Syllables* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 105).

towards some origin – some *locus or domus* – and the dynamics of the poem are repeatedly eliding this space and deferring our arrival.¹⁰

This rhythm perhaps prepares us for the stark reversal which occurs in the final stanza. Appearing in parentheses, delivered with a new air of critical detachment, the final stanza suggests that the call homewards might have been a cruel lure all along: ‘Rentre, a-t-on chuchoté, et je n’ai su / Qui appelait ainsi, du fond des âges’. The voice calls, not from memory, but from the depths of the ages, time immemorial. Breaking the spell that has been so carefully nurtured by the first two stanzas of the poem, the poet insists that he never knew who called, ‘Quelle marâtre, sans mémoire ni visage, / Quel mal souffert avant même de naître’. An entirely negative presence, this figure cannot be located or identified in any way. She is not the ‘true’ mother but the ‘marâtre’. ‘Sans mémoire ni visage’, she has no particular history and no palpable form. A ‘mal souffert avant même de naître’, she is a suffering that precedes even birth. A series of nasal alliterations – associated with the negative ‘je n’ai su’ – run through the final lines ‘marâtre’, ‘mémoire’, ‘mal’, ‘même’, and ‘naître’. This figure is the figure that looms in the human imagination, the evil witch or harpy of childhood fairytales. As she calls us homewards, we are called only towards an endless and anxious reaching, a cycle of desire and disappointment.

The first poem of the sequence presents a childhood memory of a call homewards and then the realisation that this call may be a cruel lure. The voice calls out. A light shines out. The poet is drawn back towards childhood, towards some origin or place of plenitude. From a distance, the poet, the child, listens to the voice. He stands in the shadows, his

¹⁰ One might suggest that, as many of these verses are hendecasyllables, a medial caesura is never expected in these lines and that we are generally being encouraged to read all these verses as *vers simples*. I would argue, however, that the first two lines of the poem are regular decasyllables and so generate the expectation of a caesura. The decasyllable gives us, as Scott writes, the ‘rights of expectation’. In these verses, carefully contriving a series of enjambments and elisions, Bonnefoy seems to want the reader to feel the elision of a caesura. He wants the reader to expect a resting place and to feel the loss of this resting place, as he or she is hurried onwards (Clive Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 24).

heart full of yearning, looking towards the light. This longing is, as Bonnefoy formulates it in his earlier collection of poetry, 'le leurre du seuil'. For the poet never gets back to that place, that origin or end. He remains always on the threshold, there where the light dances with the shadows. The dream quickly becomes a nightmare. By putting his faith in a false promise, the promise of a stable resting place, the poet commits himself to an endless suffering.¹¹

The second poem of the sequence begins with another act of listening and another kind of threshold. It begins with the words, 'Ou bien je l'entendais dans une autre salle'. The distant voice to which the poet listened in 'La Voix lointaine I' has now become 'ce chant' and the poet insists that this song is his 'bien unique'. As the poet describes this song, he is interested, above all, in the sonority of this voice.

Ou bien je l'entendais dans une autre salle.
Je ne savais rien d'elle sinon l'enfance.
Des années ont passé, c'est presque une vie
Qu'aura durée ce chant, mon bien unique.

Elle chantait, si c'est chanter, mais non,
C'était plutôt entre voix et langage

¹¹ I have not conducted a psychoanalytic reading of this poem, and yet, there are important psychoanalytic inflections here that should be noted: the figure of the child, the doubling of the figure of the *mère/marâtre*, the potentially duplicitous nature of the call homewards. As the distant voice calls this child back, it is possible to hear echoes of another drama: the child's severance from the mother as he or she enters the realm of the symbolic, what Lacan terms the 'mirror phase'. The child loses its sense of unity with the mother and the world, as he or she recognises the separateness of the '(m)other' and enters the realm of the symbolic. 'From this time on', as Elizabeth Grosz writes, 'lack, gap, splitting will be its mode of being', Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan, A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 35. The child, the adult, can never return to the satisfaction, the unity and plenitude, of earliest infancy. The child can never 'rentrer'.

An interest in the theme of language acquisition and alienation certainly runs throughout Bonnefoy's work. In an interview with Paul de Sinéty in 1994, Bonnefoy evokes 'la censure qui interdit à l'enfant de comprendre la déception qu'il y a dans son attachement à sa mère, censure d'autant plus grand que l'attachement a été plus grand et d'autant plus agitant qu'il sait que sa mère fut la première victime de l'aliénation dont il hérite' (IN, 243). As Bonnefoy uses the sonority of language and acts of listening to rethink 'la rapport de l'être parlant au langage', it is clear that the unconscious is one strand of thought that is of interest to the poet.

Une façon de laisser la parole
Errer, comme à l'avant incertain de soi,

Et parfois ce n'étaient pas même des mots,
Rien que le son dont des mots veulent naître,
Le son d'autant d'ombre que de lumière,
Ni déjà la musique ni plus le bruit. (PC, 58)

The poet could hear the voice but it was in another room. Neither present nor absent, it came from an 'other' space. Bonnefoy uses hendecasyllables in these opening lines – the 6 + 5 metre that Jérôme Thélot describes as an 'alexandrin boîteux' – to create a sense of falling short, of almost, but not quite, grasping this voice. The poet knows nothing about this voice, except that it is associated with childhood: 'Je ne savais rien d'elle sinon l'enfance'. It belongs somehow to childhood, and yet, it has murmured to the poet ever since: 'Des années ont passé, c'est presque une vie / Qu'aura durée ce chant, mon bien unique'. The whisper of 'La Voix lointaine I' has become 'ce chant'. The voice which threatened to deceive the poet, which threatened to be the voice of a 'marâtre', is now evoked as the poet's 'bien unique'.

As he attempts to describe this voice, the poet makes a series of equivocations: 'Elle chantait, si c'est chanter, mais non'. The voice sings, but not quite. The poet hesitates between affirmation and negation. We waver between one possibility and another and then the poet affirms that the voice itself is a wavering motion: 'C'était plutôt entre voix et langage / Une façon de laisser la parole / Errer, comme à l'avant incertain de soi'. 'Errer' means to go 'd'un côté et de l'autre sans but ni direction précise'.¹² Between voice and language, between sound and significance, the voice is allowed to wander. In the space between, it rambles 'comme à l'avant incertain de soi'. It wanders aimlessly, ahead of language, as if in a state of gestation. And sometimes there are no words at all, only sounds

¹² 'Errer' in *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* <<http://www.cnrtl.fr>> [accessed 11th July 2012].

out of which words seek to grow: ‘Et parfois ce n’étaient pas même des mots, / Rien que le son dont des mots veulent naître’. Bonnefoy describes these sounds by using a series of monosyllables and by cultivating a steady assonance on [o]: ‘pas même des mots, / Rien que le son dont des mots veulent naître’. The monosyllables fall away with the words ‘veulent naître’, as if to suggest the structures of language rising up out of pure sound.

This sound is, Bonnefoy suggests in the final two lines, an interplay of oppositions: ‘Le son d’autant d’ombre que de lumière, / Ni déjà la musique ni plus le bruit’. Like the threshold of the first poem of the sequence, this sound is a dance of shadow and light. Not yet music and no longer mere noise, it is in a transitional state, a state of becoming. Using a *coupe enjambante* once again to weaken the medial caesura, and allowing the articulated ‘e’ to diffuse across this boundary, Bonnefoy suggests the manner in which one opposition dissolves into the other: ‘Le son d’autant d’omb | re que de lumière, / Ni déjà la musi | que ni plus le bruit’. Moving between decasyllables and hendecasyllables all through the poem, between *le pair* and *l’impair*, Bonnefoy suggests that manner in which this voice hovers between poles – between lightness and dark, the formed and the unformed – in a semi-choate state.¹³

There are marked similarities between Bonnefoy’s evocation of this voice – this voice of shadow and light, of ‘l’entre-deux’ – and his early poem ‘À la Voix de Kathleen Ferrier’, published in *Hier régnant désert* in 1958. Apostrophising Ferrier’s voice – a voice of mist, smoke, and evening time – Bonnefoy lauds its capacity to hover between oppositions: ‘Ô lumière et néant de la lumière, ô larmes / Souriantes’ (P, 159). In a stanza that anticipates the imagery of ‘La Voix lointaine II’, Bonnefoy writes, ‘Je célèbre la voix mêlée de couleur grise / Qui hésite aux lointains du chant qui s’est perdu / Comme si au

¹³ In *Le Simple et le sens*, Michèle Finck writes, ‘La poésie itinérante d’Yves Bonnefoy inlassablement éprouve toutes les possibles demeures de l’être (l’exil, le « lieu des morts », l’utopique « vrai lieu ») pour consentir enfin au seul lieu poétique qui, puisque les dieux sont absents, est échu à la modernité : l’entre-deux’ (Finck, *Le Simple et le sens*, p. 445).

delà de toute forme pure / Tremblât un autre chant et le seul absolu' (P, 159). In 'À la Voix de Kathleen Ferrier', as in 'La Voix lointaine', Bonnefoy is interested in a voice that comes to us from the very hinterlands of language, in a voice that hesitates 'aux lointains du chant qui s'est perdu'. If this 'autre chant' is 'le seul absolu', it is absolute in its impurity, its liminality, its endless hesitation.

Bonnefoy associates this voice very explicitly with childhood: 'Je ne savais rien d'elle sinon l'enfance'. It seems reasonable to suggest that this semi-choate voice – now burgeoning, now regressing, wavering between sound and sense – bears some relation to the semi-choate voice of childhood babble. One might suggest that, as Bonnefoy used the sense of touch to explore the threshold between adulthood and 'infancy' in the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*, he is using the aural sense here – the act of listening, the sonority of the human voice – to explore this same threshold between speech and speechlessness. Bonnefoy seems to suggest that this threshold runs right through the human voice. Sound is that asignifying 'material' that carries the significations of language. As Nancy writes in 'Vox Clamans in deserto',

C'est la voix qu'on ne peut pas dire parce qu'elle est une précession de la parole, une parole infante qui se fait entendre en-deçà de tout parler, jusque dans le parler lui-même: car si elle est infiniment plus archaïque que lui, en revanche il n'y a pas de parole qui ne se fasse entendre par une voix.¹⁴

The voice to which Bonnefoy listens in 'La Voix lointaine II' hovers 'à l'avant incertain de soi'. It is 'une précession de la parole'. It is the babble that precedes language and gives rise to language.

The poet listens to a distant voice in 'La Voix lointaine I' and this voice calls him towards a threshold. He listens to this voice again in 'La Voix lointaine II', and yet, this time, the threshold, the sense of liminality, is inherent in the voice itself. The song – the

¹⁴ Nancy, *Le Poids d'une pensée* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1991), p. 21.

poet's 'seul bien' – hovers 'entre voix et langage'. It strays into the outer reaches of language, where coherence gives way to incoherence, where words give way to pure sound. And on this threshold, it hesitates. It dances between sound and signification, between shadow and light.

As we move from the second to the third poem of the sequence, Bonnefoy moves from the past to the present tense. From childhood to adulthood, the poet suggests, the same passion is sustained.

Et je l'aimais comme j'aime ce son
Au creux duquel rajeunirait le monde,
Ce son qui réunit quand les mots divisent,
Ce beau commencement quand tout finit.

Syllabe brève puis syllabe longue,
Hésitation de l'iambe, qui voudrait
Franchir le pas du souffle qui espère
Et accéder à ce qui signifie.

Telle cette lumière dans l'esprit
Qui brille quand on quitte, de nuit, sa chambre,
Une lampe cachée contre son cœur,
Pour retrouver une autre ombre dansante. (PC, 59)

The poet loved the semi-choate voice of childhood, the voice that hovered 'entre voix et langage', as he now loves the sonority of poetic language, 'ce son / Au creux duquel rajeunirait le monde'. In these lines, the standard formulation 'Au cœur de' becomes 'Au creux de'. Rejuvenation occurs, not at the heart or centre of sound, but, in its very hollow, in the diffuse and open space of resonance. This sound is engaged in a dialectical dance with words. Bonnefoy uses the two hemistichs of this hendecsyllable and decasyllable to enact this dance: 'Ce son qui réunit | quand les mots divisent, / Ce beau commencement | quand tout finit'. This sound reunites when words divide; it begins again when all else ends. The poem evokes what Bonnefoy describes in an interview in 2004 as, 'ce beau combat de la poésie contre le langage – contre et avec le langage' (IN, 427). In this 'beau

combat', sound works against language. Resisting the partitions and conclusions of signification, sound offers a means of rejuvenating our perception of the world.

Just as the semi-choate voice oscillates 'entre voix et langage' in 'La Voix lointaine II', Bonnefoy presents poetry as an oscillation between signification and sound in 'La Voix lointaine III'. Sound and signification are conceived, not as complementary forces, working together for maximum effect, but as opposing forces. In an essay published in 2000, Bonnefoy writes, 'Deux faces donc dans le mot : la notion qui porte la signification, le concept, et le son qui s'ouvre sur la présence' (SPV, 183). Rhythm, Bonnefoy insists, encourages sound to exist independently of sense: 'Qu'il y ait rythme, du fait des vers, rythme qui naît de la matérialité du son et nullement de son sens, et le son sera entendu' (SPV, 201). Sound then becomes a force that interrupts and subverts conceptual thought: '[le son] désaffecte chez le lecteur les points de vue conceptuels, il conteste leur prétention à monopoliser l'approche de ce qui est' (SPV, 201-2).

The second stanza of the poem, strikingly, is an address to a poetic foot, the iamb: 'Syllabe brève puis syllabe longue'. In this line, Bonnefoy allows an articulated 'e' to fall at each word end (but one), prolonging the preceding syllable each time; 'puis' falls just before the medial caesura and so it too carries a long stress. The poet thus manages to alternate long and short syllables, creating a rhythm that is remarkably close to the English iamb: 'Syllabe brève puis syllabe longue'. Bonnefoy describes this meter as a hesitation: 'Hésitation de l'iambe, qui voudrait / Franchir le pas du souffle qui espère / Et accéder à ce qui signifie'. The iamb hesitates between the steady rhythm of breath and the aspiration that would overreach this steady rhythm to 'accéder à ce qui signifie'. With the fall of a *coupe enjambante* at 'Franchir le pas du souff | le', the breath, the articulated 'e', is pushed into the next measure and the hemistich too overreaches itself. For Bonnefoy, the iamb hovers between the steadiness of breath and the lurch of aspiration. It wavers between a

simple, asignifying rhythmicity and a more aspirational force, a rhythm that would ‘accéder à ce qui signifie’.

Evoking poetry’s dance between sound and sense in the first stanza of this poem, and evoking the hesitation of the iamb in the second, Bonnefoy comes very close to Valéry’s definition of poetry as a ‘*hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens*’.¹⁵ As Giorgio Agamben writes, paraphrasing Valéry, ‘The poem tenaciously lingers and sustains itself in the tension and difference between sound and sense’.¹⁶ If Valéry and Bonnefoy both use the word ‘hésitation’, it is perhaps because, etymologically, it means ‘incertitude; embarras de langue, bégaiement’.¹⁷ The poem hesitates, stammers even, as the materiality of language makes itself felt, interrupting and suspending the steady flow of signification.¹⁸

¹⁵ Valéry, like Bonnefoy, treats sound and sense as two separate variables. He describes poetry as ‘le pendule poétique’, for it oscillates ‘entre deux points symétriques’. It oscillates between ‘les caractères sensibles du langage, le son, le rythme, les accents, le timbre, le mouvement’ and ‘toutes les valeurs significatives, les images, les idées’. Valéry writes, ‘Entre la Voix et la Pensée, entre la Pensée et la voix, entre la Présence et l’Absence, oscille le pendule poétique’ (Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, I, p. 1333).

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 112.

¹⁷ ‘Hésitation’, in *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* <<http://www.cnrtl.fr>> [accessed 11th July 2012].

¹⁸ The site of this affinity between Valéry and Bonnefoy – their treatment of sound and sense as two separate variables and their evocation of poetry as a kind of oscillation or hesitation between the two orders – is also the site of an important difference between the two poets. Whereas Valéry prizes the workings of signification and the activity of the intellect, Bonnefoy critiques and deconstructs these forces. There is an important dialectic in Valéry’s poetry, as Ned Bastet observes, between the insularity of the intellect, which ‘va vers le dedans pour y trouver un noyau plus résistant et immatériel que la masse mouvante qui le cerne’, and the expansiveness of the senses, ‘[cette] fuite hors de l’étroite personnalité définie, butant sur ses frontières, vers la plénitude anonyme de la sensation’. Valéry’s poetry rocks between these two evenly matched poles: intellect and sensation, ‘le Moi pur’ and ‘l’exaltation du primitif’, (Ned Bastet, *Valéry à l’extrême, Les au-delà de la raison* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 1999), pp. 22-5). Unlike Valéry, Bonnefoy has no illusions about achieving or signifying ‘le Moi pur’. The first poem of ‘La Voix lointaine’ suggests that there is nowhere to which we can go back: no stable resting place, no absolute interiority, no essential being. Indeed, the voice which calls us towards such a place is the voice of an evil harpy. Her call is a cruel lure.

In the final stanza of the poem, Bonnefoy compares this dance between signification and sound, this hesitation or stammering, to a dance that occurs in human consciousness. He writes, ‘Telle cette lumière dans l’esprit / Qui brille quand on quitte, de nuit, sa chambre, / Une lampe cachée contre son cœur, / Pour retrouver une autre ombre dansante’. As signification goes out to dance with sound, the light in the poet’s mind goes out ‘Pour retrouver une autre ombre dansante’. The intellect or consciousness, ‘cette lumière dans l’esprit’, goes out to dance with a shadow. It goes out desirously, but without seeking to grasp or take possession. It goes out to *dance* with all that withdraws into darkness and imperceptibility.

The dance that Bonnefoy evokes in the final stanza of the poem is a dance of desire and aspiration, a dance of human subjectivity. It is a dance of light and darkness, interiority and exteriority, the conscious and the unconscious, the linguistic and the non-linguistic. The image of the threshold, the flickering dance of light and shadow, resurges here again. And once again, this *limen* is not a means to accede to something or someone. Rather, Bonnefoy suggests that this dance of light and shadow is constitutive of human subjectivity. The self is always dancing with a force that cannot be mastered, with a dark, effusive, and inappropriable force. And the rhythm of poetry, Bonnefoy insists in ‘La Voix lointaine II’, comes very close to the rhythm of this ‘subjective’ dance. For poetic utterance continually suspends and subverts signification. Resonance continually overturns the definition and closure of the conceptual thought. Poetic language thus dances with all that is effusive, fleeting, and ‘other’. It dances with forces that it does not purport to master. The shadow remains a shadow. The ‘other’ remains ‘other’. And the light within us goes out endlessly ‘Pour retrouver une autre ombre dansante’.¹⁹

¹⁹ One might read the image of the shadow here as a figure for the unconscious. Certainly, in a 2006 interview, Bonnefoy refers quite explicitly to ‘une écoute de l’inconscient qui me semble [...] tout à fait nécessaire à la poésie’ (IN, 496). The figure of the shadow would seem to suggest the

The voice that calls in the opening poems of ‘La Voix lointaine’ draws us, not towards some *locus*, some point of origin or return, but towards a threshold. It draws us towards a threshold within utterance and within the experience of subjectivity: an unstable *limen* between signification and sonority, interiority and exteriority, light and darkness. As we listen to this voice, we hear signification melting into sound, sound melting into signification. In his book on listening *À l’écoute*, Nancy writes, ‘Être à l’écoute, c’est toujours être en bordure du sens, ou dans un sens de bord et d’extrémité, et comme si le son n’était précisément rien d’autre que ce bord, cette frange ou cette marge [...]’. The act of listening, Nancy suggests, is always an experience of being on the threshold. We feel this liminality in relation to meaning – we are always ‘en bordure du sens’ – and in relation to the self. Nancy writes, ‘Lorsqu’on est à l’écoute, on est aux aguets d’un sujet, ce (lui) qui s’identifie en résonnant de soi à soi, en soi et pour soi, hors de soi par conséquent, à la fois même et autre que soi.’²⁰ He continues,

Être à l’écoute, c’est donc entrer dans la tension et dans le guet d’un rapport à soi : *non pas*, il faut le souligner, un rapport à « moi » (sujet supposé donné) et pas non plus au « soi » de l’autre (le parleur, le musicien, lui aussi supposé donné avec sa subjectivité), mais le *rapport en soi*, si je peux dire, tel qu’il forme un « soi » ou un « à soi » en général et si quelque chose de tel arrive jamais au terme de sa

dark, undefined, and undisclosed nature of the unconscious. Comparing the dance that occurs between signification and sonority in poetic language to this dance with the shadow, Bonnefoy seems to be suggesting this ‘ombre’ is a force that cannot be signified, that cannot be mastered by any kind of conceptual discourse. It will not, one might suggest, be the object of any kind of analysis or psychoanalysis. Such a reading would suggest – like many of Bonnefoy’s critical writings – that Bonnefoy’s conception of the unconscious has more in common with Freud’s understanding of the fundamental drives than Lacan’s notion of an unconscious that is structured as a language. Malcom Bowie observes, ‘Whether the unconscious is thought of as the domain of fundamental drives, or as a dynamically maintained repository for memories that are inadmissible to consciousness, Freud clearly does not, at this moment of theoretical summation, want speech, or even a ghostly premonition of speech, to penetrate “down” into it’ (Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London, Fontana Press, 1991), p. 52). He adds, ‘the drives need to be silent, inscrutable, unavailable to mere talk’ (Bowie, *Lacan*, p. 53). Lacan, however, insists repeatedly, ‘l’inconscient est structuré comme un langage’ (Jacques Lacan, *Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 23).

²⁰ Nancy, *À l’écoute*, p. 25.

formation. C'est passer, par conséquent, sur le registre de la présence à soi, étant entendu que le « soi » n'est précisément rien de disponible (de substantiel et de subsistant) à quoi on puisse être « présent » mais juste la résonance d'un renvoi. Pour cette raison, l'écoute [...] peut et doit nous apparaître non pas comme une figure de l'accès au soi, mais comme la réalité de cet accès, une réalité par conséquent indissociablement « mienne » et « autre », « singulière » et « plurielle », tout autant que « matérielle » et « spirituelle » et que « signifiante » et « assignifiante ».²¹

The one who listens is on a threshold, 'dans la tension et dans le guet d'un rapport à soi'. This threshold does not lead to a more realised or contained 'subject' but, rather, listening – and the subjectivity to which it gives rise – is in itself an inherently liminal experience. It is an oscillation between interior and exterior, linguistic and non-linguistic, conscious and unconscious forces. The subject experiences 'une réalité par conséquent indissociablement « mienne » et « autre », « singulière » et « plurielle », tout autant que « matérielle » et « spirituelle » et que « signifiante » et « assignifiante »'.

The Subject of Negativity: 'Ces instants qui savent que n'est rien'

The experience of liminality explored in the opening poems – an experience of movement and instability – gives way to a different kind of limit experience in the central poems of 'La Voix lointaine'. In the fourth and fifth poems of the sequence a desire to 'accéder à ce qui signifie' dominates. The poet seeks to express his innermost emotions in 'La Voix lointaine IV'. In 'La Voix lointaine V', the poem becomes a quest to identify the 'other'. The voice sings a song in which she interrogates the traces of some 'other' who recently passed by. In both these poems, the poet puts his faith in the significations of language. The signification that he desires, however, continually evades him and the poet finds himself struggling at the very limits of language, feeling the lack of that which evades him,

²¹ Nancy, *À l'écoute*, pp. 30-1.

the lack of an essential ‘self’ or an essential ‘other’. This second section of my third chapter analyses how Bonnefoy dramatises this encounter with the limits of signification in ‘La Voix lointaine IV’ and ‘La Voix lointaine V’. Then it examines how, in the sixth poem of the sequence, Bonnefoy manages to transform this sensation of limitation and lack into a profound acceptance of the infinite finitude of existence.

Et la vie a passé, mais te garda
Vive mon illusion, de ces mains savantes
Qui trient parmi les souvenirs, qui en recousent
Presque invisiblement les déchirures.

Sauf : que faire de ce lambeau d’étoffe rouge ?
On le trouve dans sa mémoire quand on déplace
Les années, les images ; et, brusques, des larmes
Montent, et l’on se tait dans ses mots d’autrefois.

Parler, presque chanter, avoir rêvé
De plus même que la musique, puis se taire
Comme l’enfant qu’envahit le chagrin
Et qui se mord la lèvre, et se détourne. (PC, 60)

Whereas the first three poems of ‘La Voix lointaine’ have explored the beginnings of poetry, evoking childhood, inchoate sound, and rhythm, the fourth poem of the sequence moves very deliberately away from infancy, opening with the words ‘Et la vie a passé’. The poet takes stock of the passing of an entire life. And after so many years, the same voice persists: ‘Et la vie a passé, mais te garda / Vive mon illusion’. The poet’s illusion – with its ‘mains savantes’ – has kept this voice alive. After the sonorous and rhythmic images of the previous poems, this voice is now associated with a metonymic imagery of an invisible pair of hands at work within the poet’s consciousness. These hands ‘trient parmi les souvenirs’ and ‘en recousent / Presque invisiblement les déchirures’. Invisibly sorting through memories and stitching up wounds, they heal old wounds and renew the human psyche. The enjambments, falling across the *coupe*, this cleft in the verse, enact this stitching or healing process: ‘qui en recousent / Presque invisiblement les déchirures’.

The second stanza begins with the one-syllable word ‘Sauf’, which is followed by a colon. It dramatically announces the one important exception to this process of sorting and healing: ‘Sauf : que faire de ce lambeau d’étoffe rouge ?’²² Bonnefoy’s use of a rhetorical question here suggests the impossibility of resolving or answering this injury. The wound – like the question – remains open. The ‘lambeau d’étoffe rouge’ becomes a kind of substitutive image for an experience which is too painful to be voiced.²³ It is striking that, after three poems that evoke voice, sound, and rhythm, Bonnefoy uses the simplest of visual images to evoke the unspeakable. A series of enjambments evoke the turning over of memories, the rising of tears: ‘On le trouve dans sa mémoire quand on déplace / Les années, les images ; et, brusques, des larmes / Montent’. As soon as the poet unsettles the past, ‘on déplace / Les années, les images’, emotion begins to rise. The poet’s speechlessness is then evoked by the final, end-stopped line of this second stanza: ‘et l’on se tait dans ses mots d’autrefois’. Remembering the words of the past, the poet finds nothing to say.

²² The image of red fabric recurs throughout Bonnefoy’s *œuvre*, generally functioning as an image of femininity. Sometimes a lover is depicted, sometimes a mother. In *Pierre écrite*, ‘Le Sang, la note si’, Bonnefoy writes, ‘Et nous dormons un peu. La note si / Résonne très longtemps dans l’étoffe rouge (P, 226). In ‘L’arbre, la lampe’, he writes: ‘Le rouge de la robe illumine et disperse / Loin’ (P, 201). In *Dans le leurre du seuil*, the child’s mother takes apart and remakes a red dress. Naughton, associating this red fabric with the red garments of the female in Poussin’s *Moïse sauvé des eaux*, writes, ‘In Poussin’s painting of 1647, [...] Pharaoh’s daughter is dressed in the red robes Bonnefoy uses to evoke feminine presence in poems from *Pierre écrite* onward’ (Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy*, p. 157).

²³ Using the image of ‘ce lambeau d’étoffe rouge’, Bonnefoy makes reference to a very specific personal memory, a memory that nevertheless goes unspoken. The poem sees the return of what Bonnefoy describes in an interview as ‘[les] parcelles d’un passé qui est le mien propre: parcelles qui avaient été non tant refoulées qu’embroussaillées, recouvertes, fautes dans mon emploi des mots d’un plan convenable pour les dire (IN, 238). The poet is clearly interested in memories or emotions that well up from the unconscious but remain difficult, if not impossible, to articulate. In ‘La Maison natale’, another sequence of poems in *Les Planches courbes*, Bonnefoy evokes an incident from childhood – a game of cards with his father – and then writes, ‘J’aurai barré / Cent fois ces mots partout, en vers en prose, / Mais je ne puis / Faire qu’ils ne remontent dans ma parole’ (PC, 91).

The final stanza begins with a series of infinitives, evoking the practices or aspirations of poetry: ‘Parler, presque chanter, avoir rêvé / De plus même que la musique’. Bonnefoy uses the enjambment ‘avoir rêvé / De plus même que la musique’ to suggest the tremendous ambition, the ‘reach’ of poetry. And yet, the next enjambment enacts quite the opposite gesture: ‘puis se taire / Comme l’enfant qu’envahit le chagrin / Et qui se mord la lèvre, et se détourne’. The poet, cultivating a certain kind of utterance, a certain kind of song, dreamed of more even than music, and yet, he finds himself without words. He is compared once again to the infant, to the one who cannot speak. Yet, here, the infant is not the pre-linguistic child. It is the child who, overwhelmed by grief, falls silent: ‘[il] se mord la lèvre, et se détourne’. The poet lapses into inarticulacy and silence. This memory will not be signified and the poet, like a hurt child, bites his lip and turns away. Confronting the limits of signification, he finds himself in a position of lack. That which cannot be spoken, ‘ce lambeau d’étoffe rouge’, seems to represent an essential part of the self. And so the poet dwells wistfully at the limits of signification, nursing a sense of the inaccessible, the ineffable.

‘La Voix lointaine V’ explores another kind of reaching within language and another kind of encounter with the limits of signification. In this poem, the distant voice – what was once a mysterious, disembodied murmur – comes forwards and sings for the poet. She sings a song about a series of mysterious traces that appear in the sand. Interrogating these traces, she poses the same question over and over again, ‘Qui [...]?’ Asking questions that cannot be answered, questions that lead only to further questions, the voice circles endlessly around the unanswerable, the unspeakable.

Elle chantait, mais comme se parlant :
 Qui a tiré sa barque sur la rive,
 Qui a posé sa rame sur le sable,
 Qui est passé, que nous ne savons pas ?

Qui d'un pied nu aura laissé l'empreinte,
Qui a rendu iridescente l'eau,
Qui préserva la braise sous la cendre,
Qui dessina ce visage d'enfant ?

C'était un chant de rien que quelques notes,
Qui a voulu le chant dans la parole ?
– Nul n'a voulu, nul n'est venu ni parle,
Nul n'est passé, que nous ne sûmes pas. (PC, 61)

This voice was singing, as if it were talking to itself. This introspective murmur hovered somewhere between speech and song. It sang, 'Qui a tiré sa barque sur la rive, / Qui a posé sa rame sur le sable, / Qui est passé, que nous ne savons pas ?' The voice interrogates the traces of another human presence: traces of a boat pulled up on the bank, of an oar left upon the sand, signs that some stranger passed by. The voice – like the voice of Valéry's *La Jeune Parque* – murmurs the same question over and over again: 'Qui [...] ?' Who was it that left these traces? Who passed by? Who is this figure that we do not know? This self-reflexive murmur is turned perpetually outwards, towards this unidentified 'other'.

On his island, some solitary Robinson Crusoe scours the sand for traces of another presence.²⁴ Who is it, he wonders, that made landfall here? 'Qui d'un pied nu aura laissé l'empreinte, / Qui a rendu iridescente l'eau, / Qui préserva la braise sous la cendre, / Qui dessina ce visage d'enfant ?' These traces are all elementary articulations, elementary signs. At first, they are accidental traces of purely utilitarian acts. Then, they increase in complexity – iridescence in the water, embers stored beneath the ash – and, finally, the image of a child's face appears. This piece of artwork is perhaps a drawing in the sand. It

²⁴ Presenting this voice that interrogates a series of traces in the sand, Bonnefoy makes a subtle allusion to Valéry's preoccupation with the figure of Robinson Crusoe. Valéry uses the figure of Robinson to meditate upon the nature of the self in isolation, its self-reflexivity. His prose poem 'Robinson' ends with the words: 'Seul; Non-seul, Robinson'. In 'La Voix lointaine V', one clearly hears the echo of this poem: 'Tentation de Robinson. / Le pied marqué au sable lui fait croire à une femme. / Il imagine un Autre. Serait-ce un homme ou une femme ? / Robinson divisé – poème' (Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, II, p. 415).

is perhaps the first cave painting. The voice stumbles across this image of human love, of human creativity, and it asks, once again, ‘Qui [...]?’: ‘Qui dessina ce visage d’enfant?’ The song endlessly seeks some agent, some presence. The figure that it anticipates never manifests itself and so the questions continue endlessly.

In the third stanza of the poem, the song breaks off and the poet interjects with the words, ‘C’était un chant de rien que quelques notes, / Qui a voulu le chant dans la parole?’ As the voice questioned the tracks in the sand, the poet now questions the musicality of the human voice. The same question is posed endlessly: ‘Qui [...]?’ Who willed that there might be musicality in language? Who brought into being this voice which disturbs the universe? All these articulations, graphic or sonorous, generate a sense of lack. Functioning in the absence of any kind of discernible agent, they all lead the human imagination in search of some Other: ‘Qui est passé, que nous ne savons pas?’, ‘Qui a voulu le chant dans la parole?’ Our most elementary encounters with language, Bonnefoy suggests, give rise to these questions. They give rise to a quest for an absent and inaccessible other.

And yet, in the final lines of the poem, a voice speaks as if from nowhere, responding to all these questions with a litany of negatives: ‘– Nul n’a voulu, nul n’est venu ni parle, / Nul n’est passé, que nous ne sûmes pas’. These lines suggest that the world is the world that we know. The ones who came and spoke, the ones who passed by, are the ones that we know. No other force – no exterior or transcendental force – passed by. Paraphrasing these lines, it is tempting to make repeated affirmations, and yet, Bonnefoy has gone to great lengths to deliver an unrelenting series of negations. A succession of nasal and labial consonants cultivates a kind of music of the negative: ‘– Nul n’a voulu, nul n’est venu ni parle, / Nul n’est passé, que nous ne sûmes pas’. There is only the world that we know, Bonnefoy suggests, and this knowledge is something that we experience

negatively. We lack any exterior authority. The boundaries between the interior and the exterior, the known and the unknown have dissolved. The ‘other’ – whose identity we seek – is already amongst us. When we talk and sing of the world, we are talking and singing to ourselves: ‘ – Nul n’a voulu, nul n’est venu ni parle, / Nul n’est passé, que nous ne sûmes pas’.

In the final lines of ‘La Voix lointaine V’, a remarkable shift occurs. The poet refuses to linger wistfully at the limits of signification, reaching out towards some inaccessible ‘other’. This transformation continues through into ‘La Voix lointaine VI’, as the poet takes up this same litany of negatives: ‘Et nul n’a bu au verre que je pose / Ni pris du fruit qui était devant moi’. The disappointment of ‘La Voix lointaine IV’, in which the poet attempts to speak of certain memories and fails to do so, falls away. The endless, unsatisfied questioning of ‘La Voix lointaine V’, in which the poet interrogates the traces of a mysterious Other, also falls away. ‘La Voix lointaine VI’ celebrates the fact that no God arrives when we attend to its arrival. It is a paean to negativity. The poet realises that nothing *is* and, at this realisation, he feels an intense happiness.

Et nul n’a bu au verre que je pose
Ni pris du fruit qui était devant moi,
Un peu de vent fait remuer la poussière
D’herbes sèches, de graines, sur le chemin.

L’été : un éblouissement comme est la neige,
Celle qui vient légère et ne dure pas,
Et rien de nous n’en trouble la lumière
D’eau qui s’est condensée puis s’évapore.

D’où la sérénité, même l’allégresse
De ces instants qui savent que n’est rien.
Flocon la main qui avait pris le verre,
Autres flocons l’été, le ciel, les souvenirs. (PC, 62)

The poet offers up fruit and wine and the ritual goes unconsecrated. No one drinks from the glass and no one eats of the fruit. Like the questions posed in the previous poem, the

ritual is an expectant gesture, one that awaits an answer, a resolution. Here, there is no resolution: ‘Et nul n’a bu au verre que je pose / Ni pris du fruit qui était devant moi’. Nothing consecrates or legitimises our actions. The wind simply blows, stirring up the dust: ‘Un peu de vent fait remuer la poussière / D’herbes sèches, de graines, sur le chemin’. This movement, this stirring of dried grass and seeds is, Bonnefoy quietly suggests, as close as we come to a divine other. The wind at once carries elements of decomposition and regeneration, death and life. The dust turns over ‘sur le chemin’, as if to suggest that the only path is a cyclical or circular path, life returning to dust, dust giving birth to new life.²⁵

Steadily drawing oppositions together in a cyclical imagery, the second stanza evokes the world in terms of passing seasons and passing weather. The poet compares the bright light of summer to the bright light of snow: ‘L’été : un éblouissement comme est la neige’. Summer, like winter, is a passing bedazzlement. It is ‘Celle qui vient légère et ne dure pas’. It comes upon us gently, too bright to fully grasp, and then, it is gone. The light strikes the water, illuminating its particles as they move through endless cycles of condensation and evaporation. Nothing within us, Bonnefoy insists, has any effect upon this motion: ‘Et rien de nous n’en trouble la lumière / D’eau qui s’est condensée puis s’évapore’. Humanity does not control these cycles. Rather, like the dust carried by the wind, we are borne within them.

The poet surrenders to this endless movement and, in doing so, he feels a sense of serenity, of elation even. The final stanza of the poem begins, ‘D’où la sérénité, même l’allégresse / De ces instants qui savent que n’est rien’. There is calm, joy even, in the passing of the present moment, for these passing moments know that nothing *is*.

²⁵ No longer conceived in opposition to its transcendental Other, the world becomes a place in which oppositions are endlessly intertwined. Bonnefoy uses the image of the breeze, carrying dead leaves and seeds, to suggest the interdependence of life and death, beginning and ending.

Presenting ‘ces instants’ as the subject of the verb ‘savoir’, rather than any human consciousness, Bonnefoy suggests the diffuse and fleeting nature of all knowledge. The subject who knows is endlessly dispersed amidst ‘ces instants qui savent que n’est rien’. The poem ends with the words ‘Flocon la main qui avait pris le verre, / Autres flocons l’été, le ciel, les souvenirs’. The hand that lifts the glass is a snowflake. It does not transcend the finitude of existence but is subsumed by it. Internally, externally, the world is a series of ‘Flocons’: changing seasons, passing clouds, shifting emotional or intellectual states. The celebration of their passing, in each and every moment, is the only ritual we can observe.

In ‘La Voix lointaine IV’, unable to speak of certain memories, the poet turns away in silence and disappointment. In ‘La Voix lointaine V’, the voice that scours each set of traces in pursuit of some Other is always left wanting. The experience of selfhood that is dramatised in these poems is dominated by a sense of lack.²⁶ The poet reaches for the inaccessible, the ineffable. And Bonnefoy subtly suggests that language itself – traces in the sand, the articulations of a distant voice – creates this sense of deferral and anticipation. It creates a sense of absence that we, paradoxically, look to it to remedy. In the final lines of ‘La Voix lointaine V’, Bonnefoy rejects this economy of lack, with the words, ‘– Nul n’a voulu, nul n’est venu ni parle, / Nul n’est passé, que nous ne sûmes pas’. The opening lines of ‘La Voix lointaine VI’ repeat the same structure, ‘Et nul n’a bu au

²⁶ The image of the offering of fruit and wine would seem to suggest that what is at stake here, once again, is a sacrificial logic. Writing of the poetic quest for a higher sense, for a transcendental signifier, Nancy writes: ‘c’est toujours d’une logique sacrificielle qu’il s’agit, et de sacrifier la signification disponible pour l’avènement d’un sens supérieur. Il s’agit de consumer – les corps, les choses, ou les mots – pour subsumer et pour assumer un sens qui se résume en sa pure ineffable présentation, en son pur innommable’ (Nancy, ‘Nécessité du sens’, in *Yves Bonnefoy, Poésie, Peinture, Musique*, ed. Michèle Finck, p. 46). In ‘La Voix lointaine’, the poet scrutinises his emotions, scours the traces in the sand, and offers up fruit and wine. In each of these instances, he seeks ‘l’avènement d’un sens supérieur’. He reaches for the inaccessible, the ineffable, ‘un sens qui se résume en sa pure ineffable présentation, en son pur innommable’. In each of these instances, the poet is disappointed.

verre que je pose / Ni pris du fruit qui était devant moi'. The poet insists that there is nothing higher or more essential beyond the limits of language, beyond this world. There is only the world we know, in all its mystery, in all its impermanence, a play of light and dark, summer and winter, life and death.²⁷

And so the dust blows along the path; the bright light of summer and winter comes and goes; the poet feels the serenity, the elation, of 'Ces instants qui savent que n'est rien'. In 'Une écriture de notre temps', writing of Louis-René des Forêts' *Le Bavard*, Bonnefoy asks,

Le malheur de la parole, la crise d'identité qu'il révèle chez qui l'éprouve, n'est-ce pas, autrement dit, ce qui advient lorsque l'on refuse – et c'est bien l'orgueil, car cela procède des rêves de souveraineté de la personne – de se laisser envahir, et transmuter par une identité supérieure, celle qui unit à soi-même, dans l'immédiat, le tout de l'univers comme tel, celle qui fait de nous l'un des ses parts, simplement – mais nous comble alors d'une évidence, une musique ?²⁸

'Le malheur de la parole', Bonnefoy suggests, is the desire for transcendence, 'des rêves de souveraineté de la personne', what Bonnefoy describes elsewhere as 'le rêve de surnature que fait pour soi la personne humaine' (SPV, 184). These dreams generate only dissatisfaction: the disappointment of 'La Voix lointaine IV' and the restless questioning of 'La Voix lointaine V'. They create a sense of limitation and lack. And yet, as Bonnefoy suggests in the poems of 'La Voix lointaine', what contentment, what elation, there is

²⁷ Bonnefoy's deconstruction of this economy of lack has interesting implications for a psychoanalytic reading of the poems. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth poems of the sequence, Bonnefoy insists that what lies beyond the limits of signification should not be reified as Other. Similarly, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe observe that in Lacan's work 'the splitting of the subject comes to it from the big Other, from the law of the symbolic which constitutes it, by dividing it and thus inscribing it within an economy of lack. In this way the true subject of subjectivity is identified as Other and at the same time the discourse of psychoanalysis which masters and theorises this negative identity is authenticated and given its authority' (James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 49). One might suggest that Bonnefoy similarly, in 'La Voix lointaine', resists the inscription of the 'other' in the symbolic, and particularly, in an economy of lack. Much like Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's *Le Titre de la lettre*, the poems of 'La Voix lointaine' could be seen to offer a subtle critique of the Lacanian inscription of the unconscious within a discourse of lack.

²⁸ Yves Bonnefoy, *La Vérité de parole* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1988), p. 143.

when we finally abandon these dreams. We allow ourselves to be part of the passing of all existence, the coming and going of all things. The present moment ‘nous comble alors d’une évidence, une musique’. The image of sound, a piece of music, returns once again. Its resonance becomes emblematic of the plenitude of existence appreciated in all its transience.²⁹ Reverberating through the self, it serves as an image of openness. As Nancy writes, ‘Écouter, c’est entrer dans cette spatialité par laquelle, *en même temps*, je suis pénétré ; car elle s’ouvre en moi tout autant qu’autour de moi [...]’.³⁰ Through this open space, the poet celebrates the passing of every finite thing: ‘l’été, le ciel, les souvenirs’. Experiences, memories, and emotions come and go, like snowflakes, like passing sounds.

The Dancing Voice: ‘[Un] sujet en battement’

Whilst the poet’s attention drifts away from this distant voice in the sixth poem of the sequence, the voice resurges in ‘La Voix lointaine VII’. And as in so many of Bonnefoy’s poems, the poet – having surrendered to the flux of existence, to the endless passing of the present moment – is now free to embrace a new performative space. Moving into the present tense in ‘La Voix lointaine VII’, the poet apostrophises a ‘voix dansante’. The poetic performance, previously so dominated by sound, is now increasingly dominated by dance. The poet is increasingly concerned with the voice’s momentum, with its movement through time and space. He urges the voice in ‘La Voix lointaine VII’ and ‘La Voix lointaine VIII’ not to stop. He apostrophises a ‘voix proche’, coaxing it outside into the

²⁹ In *Le Bavard*, the novel to which Bonnefoy refers here, the protagonist, who is seemingly trapped in an endless chain of false *témoignages*, suddenly hears a piece of music, the voices of a choir of children, ‘claire comme une nuit de gel’. Hearing this sound, the protagonist is momentarily free of the never-ending chain of significations. Musing on this scene, Bonnefoy writes, ‘*Il y a peut-être un monde. Comme il y a, nous venons de l’apercevoir, une raison à sa perte. Et il y a peut-être une chance d’en retrouver le chemin dans ces mots mêmes qui sont la cause autant que le lieu de la syncope de l’être dans la parole*’ (VP, 144).

³⁰ Nancy, *À l’écoute*, p. 33.

light where it can dance with 'l'ombre de [son] corps'. When the voice finally sings 'La Voix lointaine IX', she narrates the steps of a dance.

Across these poems, the voice of human subjectivity – a voice which is so often considered to be the essence of interiority³¹ – becomes an exteriorised act, a dance. It is presented as a dance of light and darkness, being and non-being. The subject dances with a shadow, with a force that is 'an unmasterable excess'.³² As she dances, the subject is simultaneously grounded and ungrounded. The dance brings her continually in and out of being. The dance is thus a movement that precedes and exceeds any kind of figuration of the subject. It is a movement that will not be reduced to any kind of foundation, essence, or identity. Now let us turn to the first of these three highly performative poems:

Ne cesse pas, voix dansante, parole
De toujours murmurée, âme des mots
Qui et colore et dissipe les choses
Les soirs d'été où il n'est plus de nuit.

Voix qui porte de l'être dans l'apparence,
Qui les mêle comme flocons de même neige,
Voix qui presque s'est tue, lorsque le rêve
Demanda trop et crut presque obtenir.

Et qui jouera à clore nos paupières
En se pressant riante contre nous,
Puis nous verrons ces signes sur le sable
Qu'égratigna en dansant son pied nu. (PC, 63)

Appealing to the voice not to stop, the poet's only concern is that this voice might preserve its momentum. He addresses the voice using a series of different epithets, set in apposition:

³¹ In *La Voix et le phénomène*, Derrida presents the phenomenological conception of voice as an experience of pure interiority, 'Mes paroles sont « vives » parce qu'elles semblent ne pas me quitter : ne pas tomber hors de moi, hors de mon souffle, dans un éloignement visible ; ne pas cesser de m'appartenir, d'être à ma disposition, « sans accessoire ». Ainsi en tout cas se donne le phénomène de la voix, la voix phénoménologique' (Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), p. 85).

³² James uses this term to describe Nancy's thinking of the unconscious, the subject's continual exposure to 'an unmasterable excess' (James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 62).

‘voix dansante, parole / De toujours murmurée, âme des mots / Qui et colore et dissipe les choses’. This ‘voix dansante’ is an essentially mobile – vibrant, resonant, wavering – phenomenon. A ‘parole / De toujours murmurée’, it hovers once again somewhere between sound and sense. This dynamic and murmured voice, this dance and this music, Bonnefoy suggests, is the ‘âme des mots / Qui et colore et dissipe les choses’. This voice does not simply represent or signify the things of the world. It colours and disperses them; it makes them resonate intensely for a moment and then this resonance passes. The ‘âme des mots’ – far from being some essence, some ideal – is a resonance and a movement, a force that rises and then dissipates.

The poet urges the voice not to stop, ‘Ne cesse pas, voix dansante’, and the poetic syntax, running from *enjambments* at the line-ends to elisions at the medial caesura, urges us continually onwards: ‘parole / De toujours murmurée, âme des mots / Qui et colore et dissipe les choses / Les soirs d’été où il n’est plus de nuit’. The final lines of the stanza run into one long enjambment. These lines suggest that it is the voice’s restless dance that animates and dissipates the things of the world. Its endless wavering dissolves conceptual oppositions, ‘Les soirs d’été où il n’est plus de nuit’. It produces, to borrow Verlaine’s famous term, a kind of ‘chanson grise’.³³

In the second stanza, taking up the apostrophe to the voice once again, the poet addresses this ‘Voix qui porte de l’être dans l’apparence’. This voice is the assertion of being itself amidst the representations of language. It is, as Bonnefoy writes in an essay, ‘un fragment parmi d’autres de l’aspect sonore de la présence du monde’ (SPV, 181). Here

³³ Verlaine writes in his ‘Art poétique’, ‘Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise / Ou l’Indécis au Précis se joint’. One can hear the influence of Verlaine’s musicality across the poems of ‘La Voix lointaine’, in particular in Bonnefoy’s use of the *impair* to evoke sound and musicality. As Verlaine writes in this same poem, ‘De la musique avant toute chose, / Et pour cela préfère l’Impair / Plus vague et plus soluble dans l’air, / Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose’ (Paul Verlaine, ‘Art poétique’, *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1989), I, p. 326).

again, a steady recurrence of the articulated ‘e’ dramatises the presence of this voice:

‘Voix qui porte de l’être dans l’apparence, / Qui les mêle comme flocons de même neige’.

After the *coupe enjambante*, the final ‘e’ of ‘l’être’ is pushed into the next measure: ‘Voix qui porte de l’êt | re dans l’apparence’. This ‘e’, ‘a moment in the syllabic chain which is pure vocalisation’, as Clive Scott writes, makes its insurgence ‘dans l’apparence’.³⁴ This is the voice in which being and appearance, sonority and signification, combine: ‘Qui les mêle com | me flocons de même neige’. They surge forth together, inextricably mixed. And yet, this voice is also the voice ‘qui presque s’est tue, lorsque le rêve / Demanda trop et crut presque obtenir’. Using the final end-stopped line of the stanza, Bonnefoy suggests the teleological, and almost fatal, nature of this dream. The apostrophe draws to a close, as if this desire for appropriation, for closure, has ended the voice’s wavering dance.

And yet, as we move into the third stanza, the very apostrophe that seemed to draw to a close is taken up once again. Without reiterating the apostrophic address, Bonnefoy continues: ‘Et qui jouera à clore nos paupières / En se pressant riante contre nous’. This is a voice that will seduce its listeners. A heavily alliterative language, repeating vibrant and labial consonants, /R / and /p/, suggests its sensuality, its seductiveness. As the voice presses laughingly against us, a nasal assonance steadily builds, culminating in the apparition of the nasal consonant in the word ‘nous’: ‘En se pressant riante contre nous’. As in so many of the poems, the articulated ‘e’ diffuses across the *coupe enjambante* and suggests the diffuse and yet pervasive nature of the voice: ‘Et qui jouera à clo | re nos paupières / En se pressant rian | te contre nous’. Moving against us, the voice is seducing us physically. Everything becomes sensual, dynamic, and rhythmic. We close our eyes, giving ourselves over to this moment. And then, a set of signs appear in the sand, tracks of the figure’s dancing feet: ‘Puis nous verrons ces signes sur le sable / Qu’égratigna en

³⁴ Clive Scott, *A Question of Syllables*, p. 90.

dansant son pied nu'. These signs are no sooner visible than they are erased again. The dance will continue onwards, over the same patch of sand. The /R/ of 'verrons' resurges in 'égratigna'. The sibilant alliteration of 'ces signes sur le sable' resurges in 'en dansant son pied nu'. Meaning is made and unmade. The signs which are offered to us are no more than a glimpse. They rise up out of the movements of the world and are immediately subsumed by these movements.

'La Voix lointaine VII' begins with an apostrophe to a 'voix dansante', a 'parole / De toujours murmurée'. This voice at once represents the world and resonates out into the world. It mixes sound and signification 'comme flocons de même neige'. As Nancy writes, 'le sens ne se contente de faire sens (ou d'être *logos*), mais en outre résonne'.³⁵ Being and appearance, sound and signification surge forth together. And so, when the will to signify overtakes the voice completely, the voice almost dies. And yet, it is in this moment too that the physical presence of the human voice rises up again, reminding us that the dance between sound and signification always continues. By the final stanza of the poem, the voice is dancing with us. Closing our eyes, we move with the voice. The sound comes in waves, and meanings come in waves too. They are glimpsed and then erased, glimpsed and then erased. We allow ourselves to be swayed, back and forth, back and forth, between sound and signification. There is no realm of signification and no experience of subjectivity, the poet suggests, that is not subject to this dance. The sense of the self, like the sense of everything else, is a 'sens résonant, sens dont le *sensé* est censé se trouver dans la résonance, et ne se trouver qu'en elle', to use Nancy's formulation.³⁶

The poet reiterates the appeal to the voice not to stop in the opening lines of the next poem of the sequence, 'La Voix lointaine VIII'. It is as if, from poem to poem, the poet is always trying to keep this voice in motion. In 'La Voix lointaine VIII', however,

³⁵ Nancy, *À l'écoute*, p. 19.

³⁶ Nancy, *À l'écoute*, p. 21.

rather than the sonorous and murmuring imagery of ‘La Voix lointaine VII’, the imagery is one of light and darkness. The dance of light and shadow evoked in ‘La Voix lointaine I’, ‘II’, and ‘III’ resurges again here. There is still enough light, the poet insists, addressing the voice, for it to return outside ‘Pour jouer avec l’ombre de ton corps’.

Ne cesse pas, voix proche, il fait jour encore,
Si belle est même la lumière, comme jamais.
Reviens dehors, petite vie dansante. Si le désir
De danser, même seule, t’enveloppe,

Vois, tu as sur le sable assez de lumière
Pour jouer avec l’ombre de ton corps
Et même, sans plus craindre, offrir tes mains
Au rire qui s’enténèbre dans les arbres.

Ô musique, ô rumeur de tant d’autres mondes,
N’est-ce pas là ce que tu désirais
Le soir qu’Amour te fit, comme il fut dit,
Le cœur serré dans la salle descendre ? (PC, 64)

Like the previous apostrophe, the poem begins by addressing the voice directly and by urging it not to stop: ‘Ne cesse pas, voix proche’. The ‘Voix lointaine’ of the sequence title has now become a ‘voix proche’. And rather than trying to draw this voice closer, the poet now coaxes it outside. He draws it out towards the light: ‘il fait jour encore, / Si belle est même la lumière, comme jamais. / Reviens dehors, petite vie dansante’. A profusion of ‘e’s suggests the radiance of the light: ‘Si belle est même la lumière, comme jamais’. This ‘petite vie dansante’ is a burst of energy, a force which dances out into the world and expends itself. Yet, like the mute ‘e’s of ‘petite vie dansante’, this force must be coaxed into motion, coaxed out into the open. The rhythm of these opening lines is also searching and improvisatory. We move from an eleven-, to a thirteen-, to a fifteen-syllable line as the

poet attempts to draw this voice out a little longer each time. One line is read as a *vers simple*, another as a *vers composé*, as the rhythm too is gently coaxed into being.³⁷

In the opening poems of the sequence, Bonnefoy used the motif of listening to explore the self-reflexivity of voice and the dialogic nature of subjectivity. Now, in ‘La Voix lointaine VIII’, he uses dance to explore this interplay of interior and exterior forces. The poet urges the voice, ‘Si le désir / De danser, même seule, t’enveloppe, // Vois, tu as sur le sable assez de lumière / Pour jouer avec l’ombre de ton corps’. The voice can dance, even if she finds herself alone, for there is still enough light outside ‘Pour jouer avec l’ombre de ton corps’. There is enough light for a dance between forces: light and darkness, the disclosed and the undisclosed, the substantial and the insubstantial. Dancing with itself, the voice nonetheless dances with all that is exterior and ‘other’. The rhythm once again suggests that this dance is ceaseless. As the decasyllables and hendecasyllables are once again driven by enjambments, and as the medial caesuras are continually eroded, there is no available resting place: ‘Si le désir / De danser, même seu | le, t’enveloppe, // Vois, tu as sur le sable assez de lumière / Pour jouer avec l’omb | re de ton corps’. The sentence dances onwards. Enjambments run into elisions or *coupes enjambantes*: ‘Et même, sans plus craindre, offrir tes mains / Au rire qui s’enténèb | re dans les arbres’. The ‘e’ atone, at times half-articulated, at times elided, trembles indeterminately between presence and absence. And the poet encourages the voice to keep hovering or trembling, to keep opening itself up the ‘other’. He encourages her to abandon her fear and to extend her hands to the laughter that darkens in the trees.

This image – ‘[le] rire qui s’enténèbre dans les arbres’ – combines the shadow imagery of this poem with the sonorous imagery of previous poems. The poet urges the

³⁷ In many imparisyllabic verses, Clive Scott observes, ‘Rhythm itself has become a *devinette*, as the reader strains to pick out the rhythmical contours, to hear a design, to discover an authority, both formal and authorial. The poem becomes a space occupied by many rhythms half-realised, by structural divisions whose status is never resolved’ (Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse*, p. 24).

voice to dance with this laughter and to extend her hands to this dark force. As we have observed in previous chapters, Bonnefoy frequently uses laughter as an image of the effusive, the inappropriable. The laughter ‘qui s’enténèbre’ – that darkens or becomes shadowy – is slipping away from all that is predictable or familiar. It is drifting towards the unknown, towards nothingness. Bonnefoy urges the voice to dance with this shadow, with this force that manifests itself darkly and cannot be mastered.³⁸

In the final stanza of the poem, there is a marked shift in tone. The poet now apostrophises music, as he addressed the ‘voix lointaine’ or the ‘voix dansante’ all across the sequence. Using the vocative ‘Ô’, Bonnefoy marks this address as a moment of heightened intensity: ‘Ô musique, ô rumeur de tant d’autres mondes’. Evoking music as a ‘rumeur de tant d’autres mondes’, Bonnefoy gestures towards the sensation of other worlds, the promise of transcendence that music often gives us. The poet asks music ‘N’est-ce pas là ce que tu désirais / Le soir qu’Amour te fit, comme il fut dit, / Le cœur serré dans la salle descendre ?’ The grandiloquence of the vocative, ‘Ô’, the use of the capital letter to designate ‘l’Amour’, and the formulation ‘comme il fut dit’ would all seem to support a mythical reading of this final stanza. A transcendental music is sent down, its heart full of mortal anguish, to perform a dance of light and shadow. Bonnefoy is perhaps gesturing towards the figure of Apollo, the god of light, who is also the god of music. Just as the advent of the sun god gives way to the rhythm of light and darkness in ‘La Terre’, so a transcendental music gives way to the rhythm of light and shadow, being and nothingness in ‘La Voix lointaine’. Music descends and is drawn into the dance. And

³⁸ Throughout ‘La Voix lointaine’, Bonnefoy can be seen to align the act of listening to a distant voice – a voice in which sonority or resonance comes to prominence – and the act of listening to the unconscious. In ‘La Voix lointaine VIII’, these two strands of imagery come together in the image of ‘[le] rire qui s’enténèbre dans les arbres’. The resonance of this laughter exceeds signification. Darkening, becoming a shadow, this laughter would also seem to exceed the limits of consciousness. And whether we conceive of this shadow as a figure for the endlessly diffuse and shifting resonance of voice, or as an image of the unconscious, what is important in ‘La Voix lointaine VIII’ is that the voice is urged to dance with forces that cannot be mastered.

Bonnefoy asks, is that not what music – for all its apparent transcendence – was seeking after all?

As we move into the ninth poem of the sequence, the voice steps forward and performs. She sings for the poet and he cites her song in full. The voice sings about herself. She sings about the very nature of her being. Almost every phrase in this simple, almost rudimentary, song begins with the word ‘Je’. This subject pronoun appears ten times in all. And as the voice sings, she dances. Like a child performing a playground rhyme, she sings a song that narrates the steps of her dance.

Elle chantait : « Je suis, je ne suis pas,
Je tiens la main d’une autre que je suis,
Je danse parmi mes ombres, l’une se tourne
Vers moi, elle est riante, elle est sans visage.

Je danse avec mes ombres sur le chemin,
Je ne trouve qu’en elles ma joie d’être,
Je sais pourtant qu’avant l’aube le fer
Déchirera l’étoffe de la danse.

Et je me tourne alors vers cette plus gauche,
Cette plus hésitante et comme étonnée
Qui se tient en retrait, dans la musique :
Vois, ce n’est que pour toi que je ris et danse. » (PC, 65)

The voice sings as she dances and the steps of her dance are a series of contradictions, assertions and counter-assertions, turns and counter-turns. It is as if Rimbaud’s famous axiom – ‘Je est un autre’ – has been worked into the steps of a dance: ‘Je suis, je ne suis pas, / Je tiens la main d’une autre que je suis’. The voice at once follows and does not follow. She is lead by an ‘other’ that she follows. And equally, the poet puns, the voice is and it is not. She holds the hand of an ‘other’ that she herself is. The voice dances with the ‘other’, following and being followed, trembling between existence and non-existence. She figures and unfigures herself, grounds and ungrounds herself. In an earlier poem in *Les Planches courbes*, Bonnefoy writes: ‘Presque de même poids / Être, ne pas être’ (PC, 37).

This voice – this ‘je’ – is a dance of forces. She is a dance of the selfsame and the other, being and nothingness. Using homophony, conflating the first-person present tense of the verbs ‘suivre’ and ‘être’, Bonnefoy conflates the dynamics of the dance and the dynamics of being. Being, in other words, is envisaged as a dance.

The voice dances with ‘un autre’. She dances amidst her shadows. One of these shadows turns to her: ‘l’une se tourne / Vers moi, elle est riante, elle est sans visage’. Like the ‘marâtre’ of the first poem, the shadow is ‘sans visage’. It has no discernible features. It is a blankness, an absence of form. The shadow laughs as it turns, echoing the darkening laughter of the previous poem. The words ‘autre’ and ‘ombres’ are all allowed to diffuse over the medial caesura in a *coupe enjambante*: ‘Je tiens la main d’une aut | re que je suis, / Je danse parmi mes omb | res’. And whilst, with the articulation of so many mute ‘e’s, these shadows seem to loom large in the third line, ‘Je danse parmi mes ombres, l’une se tourne / Vers moi’, as soon as the voice turns to face the figure, the ‘e’s are all elided: ‘elle est riante, elle est sans visage’. The shadow no sooner presents itself, than it is already melting away.

As the shadow turns, the line of verse runs into an enjambment. The turn of the dance coincides with the turn of the line, the *versus*: ‘l’une se tourne / Vers moi, elle est riante, elle est sans visage’. The word ‘tourne’ falls just before the *versus* and the word ‘Vers’ falls just after. Etymologically, ‘le vers’ is the line which turns: in Latin, *versus* designates ‘le retournement de la charrue au bout du champ’ (to use Nancy’s words).³⁹

Allowing the turn of the dance to become the turn of the poem, Bonnefoy draws attention

³⁹ Nancy comments, ‘Je ne me lasse pas d’exploiter cette mine qu’est l’*étymon* et la pensée du *vers*. Elle m’enchanté parce qu’elle donne tout à penser : la suspension du cours, l’inversion, le retour (vers quoi ?), le passage à la limite (le bout du champ), le rythme des aller-retour, le labour...’ (Jean-Luc Nancy and Emmanuel Laugier, ‘Penser la poésie, avec Jean-Luc Nancy’, in *L’Animal. Littératures, arts & philosophies*, 14-15 (2003) <http://remue.net/cont/Laugier_Nancy.html> [accessed 15 July 2011] (para. 17 of 36)). Agamben also describes the *versus* as the ‘essential trait of verse’ (Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, p. 111).

to this fundamental feature of the poem's own movement, its continual 'retournement'.⁴⁰ He reminds us that the poem too is a 'voix dansante'. And as the shadow turns towards the dancing figure, the poem moves into a series of lighter, more ethereal hendecasyllables, all organised as 6 + 5. The *coupe enjambante* is allowed to fall once again at the word 'ombres' and, then again, on its subject pronoun 'elles': 'Je danse avec mes omb | res sur le chemin, / Je ne trouve qu'en el | les ma joie d'être'. The final 'e's of 'ombres' and 'elles' drift onwards and the voice insists that the very joy of being lies in dancing with these diffusive shadows: 'Je ne trouve qu'en elles ma joie d'être'.

And yet, as the voice dances, an awareness of time encroaches. After these light and shadowy *vers impairs* with their *coupes enjambantes*, the third line of this second stanza moves back into the defined rhythm of the decasyllable: 'Je sais pourtant qu'avant l'aube le fer / Déchirera l'étoffe de la danse'. A caesura now sounds out after the fourth syllable – 'Je sais pourtant' – and the lines present a *memento mori*: the sun will rise, the shadows will disperse, and the dance will come to an end. Using the image of tearing the fabric of the dance, Bonnefoy is perhaps making a subtle allusion to the three Parcae, the mythical females who spin, measure, and cut the thread of each individual destiny. Reading the metre of this final line as 4 + 6, a tremendous emphasis is placed upon the verb 'Déchirera'. It is also tempting to read the line as 6 + 4, to produce yet another *coupe enjambante*, dissolving the integrity of the word 'l'étoffe' and suggesting that it is no more substantial than the 'ombres'. The dance, like the shadows, will dissipate with time.

As the shadow turned towards the voice in the first stanza, the voice turns towards the shadow in the third. She turns to this one who is gauche and hesitant, who seems almost stunned: 'Et je me tourne alors vers cette plus gauche, / Cette plus hésitante et

⁴⁰ The rhythm of these lines already places a great deal of emphasis on the *versus*. Certainly, all across 'La Voix lointaine', the repeated use of elisions or *coupes enjambantes*, weakening the medial caesura, encourages the reader to deliver these decasyllables and hendecasyllables as *vers simples*. The whole line thus orients itself towards the final turning point, the *versus*.

comme étonnée / Qui se tient en retrait, dans la musique'. The 'je' turns to this most reticent of presences, the one who withdraws into the music, and she says, 'Vois, ce n'est que pour toi que je ris et danse'. She laughs and dances only for the one who retreats, for the one who hesitates and stammers, who darkens and melts away. And Bonnefoy puns here again, '[Voix], ce n'est que pour toi que je ris et danse'. The voice, the 'je', dances only for this diffuse and retiring presence: voice itself.

In 'La Voix lointaine VI', Bonnefoy celebrated the present moment in which everything moves and nothing *is*. Now, in the ninth poem of the sequence, the poet dramatises the voice's dance. He dramatises the exteriority of its movements, its rhythms. This dance is never a solitary dance.⁴¹ It is always a dance between forces: being and nothingness, the material and the immaterial, activity and passivity, light and darkness. The voice dances for its own shadow. It dances for '[le] rire qui s'enténèbre dans les arbres', for 'cette plus gauche, / Cette plus hésitante et comme étonnée / Qui se tient en retrait, dans la musique'. The voice laughs and dances for all that melts into imperceptibility and darkness, for all that diffuses and dissipates as pure resonance. And as the voice dances, she is and she is not. She is figured and unfigured, founded and founded. Hovering between existence and non-existence, she is an inchoate force: a force that endlessly comes into being but never *is*. She sings, 'Je suis, je ne suis pas, / Je tiens la main d'une autre que je suis, / Je danse parmi mes ombres'. The voice laughs and dances for the dancing shadow that she is, for the dancing shadow that everything is.⁴²

In 'La Voix lointaine IX', Bonnefoy presents a movement that precedes and exceeds the figuration of any kind of subject: a movement that brings the subject

⁴¹ The dance, the music, has been brought down, from its hopes of transcendence, its hopes of absoluteness, into the company of the world.

⁴² There is, as James writes, in reference to Lacan's thinking of the other, 'a constant dis-appropriation or dispossession of the subject by the Other' (James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 60). And yet, Bonnefoy is at pains to suggest that this dance with the 'other' is not something that can be inscribed within the order of signification, within the symbolic.

continually into and out of being, a syncopation of being and nothingness, interiority and exteriority, light and dark, articulacy and inarticulacy. Bonnefoy presents what Nancy refers to, in his book on dance, *Allitérations. Conversations sur la danse*, as a ‘sujet en battement’.⁴³ Nancy writes, ‘« Soi » n’est rien d’autre que ce double mouvement dont on pourrait dire quelquefois qu’il part de rien et qu’il ne revient vers rien, mais que ce battement fait ce que l’on appelle un sujet’.⁴⁴ The ‘je’ dances only for the shadow, the diffuse resonance. She dances only for the force of ‘ungrounding’ or ‘unfiguring’. This continual interruption, this continual suspension, is the force of her becoming. As Nancy writes,

ce battement constitutif, ce que l’on appelle un sujet – un sujet qui n’existe que dans le battement – disparaît aussi à chaque moment où il a lieu. Il n’en finit pas, d’une certaine manière. [...] Il y a quelque chose qui devrait entretenir sans fin ce mouvement parce que c’est ce mouvement, ce battement qui est le sujet, qui fait un sujet’.⁴⁵

This movement, ‘ce battement constitutif’, never accedes to a more stable or essential realisation of self. It gives rise only to further movement. Nancy writes, ‘Il n’en finit pas’. The dance continues and the subject persists.

The poetic performance is the product of the same movement. As Nancy writes, ‘Élan et saut, ou bien bond, voilà le dansant de tout travail, de toute pensée, j’aimerais même dire la *praxis* de toute *poiésis*’.⁴⁶ Across the three highly performative poems, Bonnefoy invokes a voice and he encourages it to dance. He sends it out in search of

⁴³ Jean-Luc Nancy, Mathilde Monnier, *Allitérations. Conversations sur la danse* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), p. 95.

⁴⁴ Nancy continues, ‘Je préfère ne pas parler de clivage, de toutes ces choses coupantes, castratrices, qui conviennent à certains lexiques et registres de pensée psychanalytique avec lesquels je ne discute pas pour l’instant. Je n’en critique pas la légitimité, mais je préfère partir de la danse avec tout ce que l’on voudra d’ouverture, d’espace, d’écartement’ (Nancy, Monnier, *Allitérations*, pp. 94-5).

⁴⁵ Nancy, Monnier, *Allitérations*, p. 95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

‘l’inchoatif de son élan’, to use Nancy’s formulation.⁴⁷ In ‘La Voix lointaine IX’, this dancing voice performs. She sings a song about dance, about the dynamics of voice, or song, or being itself. And as she does so, she beats a rhythm. The line dances forwards and then turns, dancing ‘le rythme des aller-retour’.⁴⁸ The dance draws attention to this turn, this *versus*, what Nancy describes as the ‘dévers et revers du sens’.⁴⁹ And the voice tells us that she dances only for her own shadow, her own resonance, ‘[le] rire qui s’enténèbre dans les arbres’. She dances for all that exceeds signification, the hesitant and stammering force of her own becoming. The sense of the voice is the sense of the dance, the sense of the prosodic dance. It is, as Nancy writes, ‘Un sens tourné, plié et déplié vers les ouvertures des sens. Un sens dépliant les sens, dépliant ou déliant le sens, absolument’.⁵⁰

‘Leur son n’est plus qu’un bruit, et le bruit cesse’

After the performances of the past three poems, all of which coax the voice outwards, urging it to sing and to dance, the final two poems of ‘La Voix lointaine’ are reflections on the passing of this motion. ‘La Voix lointaine X’ returns to the image of a fleeting shadow and compares this shadow to a mist, a mist into which clouds, trees, and water all dissolve. Then, in the final poem of the sequence, ‘La Voix lointaine XI’, the poet reaches out to the mysterious figure – the anonymous female – who has accompanied him ever since childhood. The poet finally moves close to her, seemingly now having some kind of hold

⁴⁷ Nancy’s vocabulary here, ‘l’inchoatif de son élan’, is very clearly influenced by Pierre Alféri’s notion of poetry as ‘la profération d’un élan’. Nancy makes direct reference to Alféri’s *Chercher une phrase* at one point in the text. I will return to this citation later in my chapter (Nancy, Monnier, *Allitérations*, pp. 79-80).

⁴⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy and Emmanuel Laugier, ‘Penser la poésie, avec Jean-Luc Nancy’, in *L’Animal. Littératures, arts & philosophies*, 14-15 (2003) < http://remue.net/cont/Laugier_Nancy.html > [accessed 15 July 2011] (para. 17 of 36)).

⁴⁹ Nancy, ‘Nécessite du sens’, *Yves Bonnefoy, Poésie, peinture, musique*, ed. Michèle Finck, p. 49.

⁵⁰ This quotation is drawn from Nancy’s text, which is written to be performed and to be accompanied by a dance (Nancy, Monnier, *Allitérations*, p. 150).

on her. The sequence ends with a series of rhetorical questions that probe the identity of this female – in the manner of Valéry’s ‘La Jeune Parque’ – and which, in the very same gesture, manage to insinuate that these questions are redundant. We have the answers to these questions, Bonnefoy suggests, if only we will listen to the sound of our own voices. As the poet writes in another sequence of poems in *Les Planches courbes* ‘Que ce monde demeure!’, ‘nos voix, / Qui se prennent au rien / L’une de l’autre soient / Notre suffisance’ (PC, 31).

Now let us turn to ‘La Voix lointaine X’.

Et ombre elle était bien, une fantasque
Découpe du langage sur le ciel,
Ainsi nuées et arbres quand ils mêlent
Leurs fumées dans l’eau calme, et c’est le soir.

Ombre mais le seul bien qui soit au monde
Puisqu’elle puise à toute chose simple
L’eau qui déborde, avec l’odeur des feuilles,
Du broc posé sur les dalles sonores. (PC, 66)

The first line of the poem reiterates what has been said in so many of the preceding poems. The ‘other’ is a shadow: ‘Et ombre elle était bien’. Then, cutting in with another sentence, setting it in apposition to this one, Bonnefoy adds: ‘une fantasque / Découpe du langage sur le ciel’. A whimsical or capricious female casts the shifting forms of language across the sky. Bonnefoy’s use of this adjectival noun, ‘une fantasque’, suggests that this female figure is not any kind of tangible being or substance but rather a quality that informs all being. She is capriciousness itself, the contingency or unpredictability of existence. She shows us language, streaked across the sky, ‘Ainsi nuées et arbres quand ils mêlent / Leurs fumées dans l’eau calme, et c’est le soir’. Language drifts and disperses, like clouds and trees dissolving into the mist. Using an imagery that is suggestive of Democritean atomism, Bonnefoy evokes water becoming mist and then becoming water again. The enjambment falls after the words ‘quand ils mêlent’, as one vaporous haze mixes with

another. And here again an elision swallows up the caesura and the words drift diaphanously onwards, 'Leurs fumées dans l'eau calme, et c'est le soir'. Language drifts by, a series of resonances and fleeting shadows, and time passes.

The voice is no more than a shadow and yet it is 'le seul bien qui soit au monde'. The poet's use of the subjunctive to speculate about the nature of this 'ombre' suggests that nothing can be stated about it with any certainty. This shadow may be the world's only good '[p]uisqu'elle puise à toute chose simple'. Using the verb 'puiser', Bonnefoy picks up on the water imagery of the first stanza. An internal rhyme between the conjunctive pronoun and the verb, '[p]uisqu'elle puise', suggests that a kind of deliquescent logic is in play here. The shadow draws on all simple things: 'L'eau qui déborde, avec l'odeur des feuilles, / Du broc posé sur les dalles sonores'. Bonnefoy aligns a watery, an atomistic, and a sonorous image and each of these images is *débordant*. The water overflows as the pitcher is set down on 'les dalles sonores', as the sound of the jar striking against the stone rings out, as the poet senses 'l'odeur des feuilles'. Bonnefoy evokes a moment of presence, of plenitude, that spills over into the next moment and spills away. Using a classical imagery of the well and the pitcher, of water drawn and water dispersed, Bonnefoy suggests that this shadow, this voice, is the spring or the life source of existence. It is a source which cannot be reduced to any kind of origin or essence. The overflowing water, the scent of the leaves, and the sound of the jug on the flags are all simple precisely because they cannot be reduced or transposed in any way. They all disseminate outwards, dispersing through the earth or through the air.

As the 'voix dansante' passes by, the poet meditates upon the nature of this fleeting 'substance', this fleeting shadow. He compares it to the mist of water, the scent of leaves, and the resonance of a sound. And as Bonnefoy presents this atomistic imagery of clouds, mists, and sound, fleeting motions and fleeting presences, we realise that the poet's vision

of a dynamic subject (a subject that, dancing with its own voice, its own shadow, figures and unfigures itself) is part of a wider vision of a dynamic universe. Similarly, Nancy writes:

S'il s'agit du rapport d'un sujet à un monde, il faut aussi se dire que rien ne pourrait avoir lieu si le monde n'était pas lui-même déjà en train de danser. L'espace que le danseur ouvre comme espace de son auto-interprétation ou, mieux encore, de son « *ipse*-interprétation » – interprétation de ce soi-même, de cette « *mêmeté* » avec soi qui jamais ne peut arriver –, cet espace, cet espace-temps, doit déjà être animé de mouvement et de possibilités de mouvement, de flexions.⁵¹

Nancy meditates upon the dynamic nature of subjectivity and he insists that this dynamism is only possible – the subject only moves, dances with itself – because the world itself in 'déjà en train de danser'.⁵² In 'La Voix lointaine X', Bonnefoy similarly envisions the dancing subject, the dancing shadow, as part of a world 'animé de mouvement et de possibilités de mouvement'. Clouds, mists, scents, and sounds come and go. This is a world of fleeting shadows and passing voices. Everything is moving and metamorphosing. As Nancy writes, 'Un monde n'est pas seulement une structure, un univers, mais un ensemble de mouvements, de corps qui se rencontrent, s'écartent, se plient, s'attirent et se repoussent aussi'.⁵³

The final poem of the sequence begins – like 'La Voix lointaine V' and 'La Voix lointaine IX' – with the words: 'Elle chantait'. Beginning each of these poems with these words, with the recollection of this female's singing voice, Bonnefoy suggests that song forms the backdrop to all these poems. He suggests that song precedes the poem and gives rise to it.

Elle chantait, et j'ai eu dans ses mots
De quoi presque finir ma longue guerre

⁵¹ Nancy, Monnier, *Allitérations*, p. 96.

⁵² Such a vision of the world, Nancy goes on to suggest, is proposed by Democritus, when he envisions existence as an atomistic flux, a flux in which only the *clinamen*, the unpredictable swerve, generates matter (Nancy, Monnier, *Allitérations*, p. 97).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Quand je venais près d'elle, je touchais
Ses mains, je regardais ses doigts défaire

Ce fil qui a ses nœuds dans l'invisible.
Était-elle dehors à jouer, une simple
Servante enfant qui a charge du monde ?
Était-elle la Parque, qui aurait moins

À mettre à mort qu'à mener sous des arbres
Où, souriante à qui serait près d'elle :
« Écoute, dirait-elle, les mots se taisent
Leur son n'est plus qu'un bruit, et le bruit cesse » ? (PC, 67)

In the first stanza of this poem, the poet suggests that he has finally taken possession of something within this voice that will enable him to bring his long struggle to an end: 'Elle chantait, et j'ai eu dans ses mots / De quoi presque finir ma longue guerre'. The poet has been struggling to hear this distant voice, to accede to this dark and shadowy 'other'. This poet signals a move towards resolution, and yet, that which the poet is in possession of remains unspecified, 'quoi', and the closure that he hopes to realise will be at most partial, 'presque finir'.⁵⁴ Still the poet moves towards this most elusive figure and he touches her hands: 'je touchais / Ses mains'. The act of touch occurs across the *coupe*, as so often in the poems of *Début et fin de la neige*. It occurs across an interval. And at the very moment that the poet performs this act of touch, he sees this figure's fingers undo a thread: 'je regardais ses doigts défaire // Ce fil qui a ses nœuds dans l'invisible'. This line runs into yet another enjambment, over the stanzaic break, and the verb 'défaire' falls just before the *coupe*. The knot and the stanza break in the same instance.

This thread 'qui a ses nœuds dans l'invisible' is perhaps the thread of destiny – the thread of the three Parcae – by which our lives are spun, measured, and cut. It is perhaps

⁵⁴ The first chapter of this thesis examined the theme and the rhythm of 'l'inachevable' in Bonnefoy's 'La Terre', in *Dans le leurre du seuil*. In 'Les Nuées', another section of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, Bonnefoy writes, 'Ici, la tâche que je ne sais finir. Ici, les mots / Que je ne dirai pas' (P, 311).

the thread of conceptual thought, the architecture by which we would take possession of the world and hold it fast. In his essay ‘Il reste à faire le négatif’, Bonnefoy refers to ‘un de ces nœuds de parole à quoi on se voue quand on veut avoir et non être’ (E, 247). Undoing this thread, Bonnefoy’s ‘Parque’ suggests that there is no measurement for existence. She suggests that nothing can be possessed. She undoes this conceptual knot, allowing the thread to fall, just as the *coupe* falls, just as the line which signifies breaks. The *coupe* becomes what Nancy describes as a ‘Passage à la ligne qui est comme à l’écoute, ou à l’affût, d’une autre nécessité : celle de défaire le sens’.⁵⁵ For a moment, as the line breaks, we cast off the entire weight of conceptual thought.

The poem builds towards a resolution, only to reveal the fundamental irresolution of all things. The poet approaches the figure and watches her undo the thread that would bind the world, that would create some kind of coherence. And he asks: ‘Était-elle dehors à jouer, une simple / Servante enfant qui a charge du monde ?’ Is the Parca nothing more than a little servant girl at play? Is the terribly powerful and calculating figure of mythology – the one who measures and cuts the thread of each life – simply a powerless and innocent being? The servant child is not a god but a creature; she is not in authority but in servitude. Playing outside, she is like the ‘petite vie dansante’ which dances ‘dehors’, ‘sur le sable’. The sequence returns, in the final poem, to the image with which it opened, ‘un enfant qui joue sur la route’. Is it not so, Bonnefoy speculates, that there is neither mastery nor design to the universe but only nescience and play?

The poem ends with one further question. It runs from the last line of the second stanza through to the end of the poem: ‘Était-elle la Parque, qui aurait moins // À mettre à mort qu’à mener sous des arbres / Où, souriante à qui serait près d’elle : / « Écoute, dirait-elle, les mots se taisent / Leur son n’est plus qu’un bruit, et le bruit cesse » ?’ Bonnefoy

⁵⁵ Nancy, ‘Nécessité du sens’, in *Yves Bonnefoy. Poésie, peinture, musique*, ed. Michèle Finck, p. 48.

asks, 'Était-elle la Parque ?', only to present a vision of the Parca which is the very antithesis of the mythological Parca. Rather than putting us to death, this figure simply leads us beneath the trees: 'qui aurait moins // À mettre à mort qu'à mener sous des arbres'. She leads us from the light into the shadows. As the poet evokes this movement, the lines run from one enjambment to another, across the stanzaic break and across line ends. The alliterations – now nasal, now sibilant – ease our passage onwards: 'qui aurait moins // À mettre à mort qu'à mener sous des arbres / Où, souriante à qui serait près d'elle'. The Parca is a benevolent figure who smiles at one who walks beside her. The calculated end of mythology – spun, measured, and cut by the three Fates – has simply become a gentle passing.

And when, beneath the trees, we draw close to the Parca, she urges us to listen. She reminds us that our words resonate outwards and then fall silent: '« Écoute, dirait-elle, les mots se taisent / Leur son n'est plus qu'un bruit, et le bruit cesse » ?' Bonnefoy allows the *coupe* to fall after the verb 'se taisent', enacting the expiration of sound. Our words are only noise, passing sounds. And the Parca suggests that, if we would listen, language itself might begin to function as a *memento mori*.⁵⁶ Language might become suggestive of the transience of all things: 'Leur son n'est plus qu'un bruit, et le bruit cesse'. With these words the poem falls silent. It dramatises its own passing, the expiration of voice.

Transforming the traditional Parca into a figure who simply passes by, a figure more like to 'le passant' of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, Bonnefoy offers a gentle corrective to a preoccupation with abstraction and closure that he associates with Valéry's poetry.

Bonnefoy's early essay on Valéry, published in 1963, famously concluded,

⁵⁶ In a similar fashion, in one of the beautiful poems of *Les Planches courbes*, 'Passant, ce sont des mots', Bonnefoy tries to make language itself function as a *memento mori*. He urges that we do not read the letters inscribed on a tombstone but listen to them instead. He urges us to listen to the buzzing sound of the bee that slips past these words and then he urges, 'Puis sache un bruit plus faible encore, et que ce soit / Le murmure sans fin de toutes nos ombres' (PC, 40).

Dans sa langue sans *e* muet – cette faille entre les concepts, cette intuition de la substance, cette chance extraordinaire du français – cet intellect identifie la forme à l'épure, au geste maigre de la danseuse, à l'hypothèse spéculative, sans avoir su qu'il n'y a de forme que pour la pierre, c'est-à-dire voûtée sur la rupture et la nuit. Nous avons à oublier Valéry. (IM, 105)

Far from forgetting Valéry, the poems of 'La Voix lointaine' offer a corrective to the 'hypothèse spéculative' that always seeks to accede to a higher form, a higher principle. Bonnefoy returns precisely to the 'scene of the crime', to Valéry's fascination with the 'geste maigre de la danseuse'. And, in a language resonant with the *e muet*, Bonnefoy insists upon this movement, not as an abstract or idealised movement, but as the consummately terrestrial and infinitely finite movement of all things, the movement that renders all form inchoate.

When Bonnefoy asks if this voice is the voice of the Parca – a Parca who neither spins, nor measures, nor cuts – or if she is a 'simple servante enfante', these questions very deliberately subvert a traditional line of metaphysical questioning, a line of questioning that, for Bonnefoy, defines *La Jeune Parque*: 'Qui pleure là, sinon le vent simple, à cette heure / Seule, avec diamants extrêmes ?'⁵⁷ Rather than reaching towards some inaccessible being, rather than pursuing an object that will leave us always wanting, these questions simply imply that we have known the answers all along. The voice that we hear is the voice of one of us, one without power or knowledge, a 'simple servante enfante'. The 'other' is here among us. It is carried within my voice, even as I speak. It is the resonance that carries and disperses my words, that grounds and ungrounds the significations of language. Listen, it says, 'les mots se taisent / Leur son n'est plus qu'un bruit, et le bruit cesse'. The world is without design, measure, or end. Nothing is, for everything passes. We are all passing voices.

⁵⁷ Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, I, p. 17.

Conclusion

The poems of 'La Voix lointaine' challenge traditional conceptions of the interiority of voice and of subjectivity; they challenge traditional conceptions of subjectivity as a base that can be identified and delimited by language. Across the poems of 'La Voix lointaine', Bonnefoy dramatises the act of listening to a distant voice, a voice that comes from beyond the limits of memory or experience. This voice hovers between signification and sonority. It has much in common with the semi-choate voice of childhood babble; it has much in common with the poetic voice which cultivates the sonority of language and challenges the hegemony of conceptual thought. The act of listening becomes the act of wavering between sound and signification. The experience of self-presence becomes an endlessly liminal experience.

The poems of 'La Voix lointaine' contain countless images of that which lies beyond the order of signification: '[la] marâtre, sans mémoire ni visage'; '[le] lambeau d'étoffe rouge'; '[le] rire qui s'enténèbre dans les arbres'; 'cette plus gauche, / Cette plus hésitante et comme étonnée / Qui se tient en retrait, dans la musique' and, of course, 'l'ombre'. When the poet ceases, in the central poems of the sequence, to struggle against the limits of signification, when he accepts that everything passes and nothing *is*, he urges the voice to dance with its shadow. He urges the voice to dance with a 'nothing', with a diffuse resonance, a fleeting gesture, an unconscious stirring. And the voice tells us that she dances only for this 'nothing', this dynamic which cannot be appropriated or signified. Voice becomes an experience of 'la syncope de l'être dans la parole', as Bonnefoy writes in his essay on *des Forêts* (VP, 144). It becomes a dance of signification and sound, light and shadow, being and nothingness, the conscious and the unconscious. Significations

come and go, are glimpsed and erased, like patterns upon the sand. The dance grounds and ungrounds, figures and unfigures the subject. This movement precedes and exceeds the foundation or articulation of any kind of stable subject.

The motion of subjectivity is thus a prospective and exploratory dance. The forms that this motion produces are always inchoate forms. In *Allitérations. Conversations sur la danse*, Nancy writes,

[...] ce dont « j'ai envie », au fond, au plus profond, ce n'est pas d'un « sujet », d'un thème ou d'une question. C'est du mouvement de commencer, c'est du geste d'approcher, de chercher un phrase (je pense à ce beau livre de Pierre Alferi, *Chercher une phrase*), c'est d'une entrée en cadence et en attente, d'une mise en suspens au bord de l'imprévisible. [...] On échappe complètement au « voir » et au « prévoir », on ferme les yeux, on bouge à l'aveuglette, à tâtons, on fait un pas... La danse est encore exemplaire : on fait un pas, et le premier pas se fait dans un vide, ou dans un déséquilibre.⁵⁸

The movement of the voice is a movement out into the world, a movement into the unknown. By dramatising the voice's dance, its physicality and its exteriority, Bonnefoy is also dramatising its self-creating or self-perpetuating – its performative – motion. The voice, like the subject, does not move towards something that is already there, towards some pre-destined end – this certainly is Bonnefoy's quarrel with Valéry's fondness for closure. The voice moves and, in moving, comes into being. It is, like Nancy's description of dance, '*Une attention sans intention*'.⁵⁹ The dancing body – to return to a quotation by Nancy cited earlier – 'ne devient pas ce qu'il est, il devient ce qu'il espace [...]. Il ne fait signe que vers cette extension mobile'.⁶⁰ Nancy ends this text, a text written to be performed and accompanied by a dance, with the words: 'Le sens de la danse est de faire, ici même, entrer dans la danse'.⁶¹ The dance into which we enter is of course the dance of

⁵⁸ Nancy, Monnier, *Allitérations*, p. 80.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 145.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 150.

the whole world, the movement of all things. As Bonnefoy writes in *Dans le leurre du seuil*, 'Nous / Parmi les bruits, / Nous / L'un d'eux' (P, 266).

Chapter Four: The Performance of Being, 'L'Heure présente'

This thesis has explored Bonnefoy's preoccupation with the performativity of the poetic gesture – a preoccupation that is a response to the negativity, the infinite finitude of existence – in Bonnefoy's later poetry. This preoccupation with theatricality intensifies in Bonnefoy's most recent collections of poetry. These two collections, published remarkably late in the poet's career, when Bonnefoy was eighty-six and eighty-nine years old respectively, and constituting some of the poet's finest work, are *La Longue Chaîne de l'ancre*, 2008, and *L'Heure présente*, 2011. The poet's increasingly theatrical inclination makes itself immediately felt in *La Longue Chaîne de l'ancre*. The collection begins with a long poem entitled 'Le Désordre', a meditation upon form and flux which is prefaced by a stage direction. It is to be performed, the poet indicates, by a group of men and women, 'une quinzaine', 'qui lentement se déplace': 'Tour à tour l'un d'eux se séparera des autres, fera quelques pas, parlera si c'est là parler, puis il reviendra dans le groupe' (LC, 9).¹ A series of prose poems about childhood follows, bearing the title 'Le Théâtre des enfants' (LC, 49). A long poem, a meditation on Saint Augustine's *De Trinitate*, is staged as an address from the tomb and is entitled 'Passant, veux-tu savoir ?' (LC, 97). In all of these poems, Bonnefoy is consistently interested in the performance of being: the performance of the individual and the community; childhood performances of language acquisition,

¹ It is interesting to note that 'Le Désordre' is written in exactly the same form as the poems of *Dans le leurre du seuil*. It is a long poem, interrupted at intervals by dotted lines. Given this unique formal parallel between these two texts, one could read the poems of *Dans le leurre du seuil* retrospectively, meditating upon the relationship between the form of the poetic text published in 1975 and the form of the stage direction issued in 2008. Certainly, this cluster of people that circulates slowly, sending forth one speaker at a time, has much in common with the principles of apposition, co-existence, and consent that were shown to be at work all through 'La Terre' in the first chapter of this thesis.

play, and world-making; the existential decisions that we make as adults and the sense that these decisions grant to human existence.

In *L'Heure présente*, the poet's interest in the relationship between theatricality and ontology manifests itself again in two prose poems about the staging of *Hamlet*. In 'Première ébauche d'une mise en scène d'*Hamlet*' and '*Hamlet* en montagne', Bonnefoy envisages a performance of *Hamlet* that takes place across a mountainside. The actors are interspersed amidst the audience, performing at various intervals on mountain paths, 'pour que l'action ainsi fragmentée soit au même degré de densité que ce piétinement qui n'a plus d'origine et va avancer sans fin' (HP, 75). The ontological uncertainty experienced by Hamlet, as he sees the demise of the stable structures of a previous order, is thus experienced by each spectator as he or she wanders tentatively across a mountainside. Hamlet, Bonnefoy suggests, has become 'every man'. Every man has become Hamlet. In a wilderness, in an open and unstructured space, we are each required to act, to make decisions, and to make a path. There is no longer any seat for a spectator. There is no longer any 'outside' from which we can watch the action unfold. We are all engaged in 'ce piétinement qui n'a plus d'origine et va avancer sans fin' (HP, 75). We are all simultaneously spectators and performers.

The final chapter of this thesis examines 'L'Heure présente', the title poem of *L'Heure présente*, a sequence of three poems in which the poet explores the relationship between form and finitude. The chapter examines the theatrical nature of this meditation on form and finitude. It investigates how the poet, assuming an historical and then a personal perspective, dramatises what I describe as the passing of form.² In 'L'Heure présente I' and 'L'Heure présente II', the passing of form is experienced as an instability, a

² Bonnefoy dramatises the historical 'passing' of form, the passing of an era in which humanity placed its faith in absolute or stable forms. Bonnefoy also suggests that this passing – this movement – is an inherent feature of all form. All form is dissolving and burgeoning. All form is passing.

negativity that awakens a profound sense of ontological uncertainty. In the final poem of the sequence, however, it is this very passing that allows the poet to embrace the openness of ‘L’Heure présente’ and to affirm the possibility of being.

In ‘L’Heure présente I’, a flash of lightning, a traditional manifestation of the divine, falls, breaks, and is dispossessed of itself. As this form falls, a god withdraws, symbols of faith evaporate, and a system of belief disintegrates. Bonnefoy dramatises not only the passing of an absolute or ideal form but the historical process unleashed by this passing, the disintegration of an onto-theology.³ A procession of figures goes by – a chronology from the sixteenth century to the present day – dramatising the steady erosion of the value of the individual human life. When this procession finally ends, the poet finds himself confronting a dark, leaden, and somnolent landscape. He confronts ‘L’Heure présente’: a moment in which humanity, with nothing to stir it from a state of indifference, has succumbed to a sense of its own non-being.

The poet confronts the ontological uncertainty of the present hour. He confronts the groundlessness and flux of individual human existence. Each memory is ‘un rêve, une fumée’. Each image, slipping past and away, is experienced as nothing other than illusion. And finally, in the last poem of the sequence, the poet embraces the freedom of ‘L’Heure présente’. He embraces the openness of the present hour and our capacity for action amidst this openness. Bonnefoy hints at this capacity for action in the title of the sequence itself. The word ‘présente’ can be read, not simply as an adjective, but also as a verb. The hour *presents*. The present moment is an ongoing action, a force that unfurls. Bonnefoy uses the transitive verb ‘présenter’ intransitively, ‘L’Heure présente’. The title thus has the force of suspense. The hour presents. It does not present an identifiable object or phenomenon. It does not present itself (as if it were some kind of self-contained and deliverable presence).

³ I use the term onto-theology to refer to an ontology – a fixed structure of belief about the meaning of existence – that exists within a religious context, a theology.

‘L’Heure présente’: the hour presents something that is always yet to be delivered, yet to be known.

It is this gesture of presentation that Bonnefoy focuses upon in the final poem of the sequence. The poet utters a series of nouns. He listens to a word. He draws two words together. They rub together and awaken ‘Dans un peu de soleil’. Bonnefoy investigates the performativity of language, the force of the linguistic act. These words awaken a certain way of seeing or hearing, a certain relationship to the physical world, and a certain kind of light. The poet insists, ‘[les mots] veulent faire’. Words are always making, always bringing forms into being. These forms are not a static representation of being, but, rather, being itself, endlessly coming into and going out of being, endlessly affirming itself ‘dans même ce qui n’est pas’ (HP, 94). The poet perceives that the endless passing of form – a passing that he lamented in the opening poem of the sequence – gives rise to an endless rebirth. It is this passing that allows the poet to experience, to celebrate, what Nancy describes as ‘la forme en tant que force’, ‘la forme naissante’.⁴

‘L’Heure présente’ dramatises the demands of the present moment. Our historical moment has seen the demise of our belief in our ability to capture or to crystallise reality, to offer something up from the flux. Having witnessed this passing, ‘L’Heure présente’ asks us to be faithful to the very movement by which the present moment unfurls and passes, the movement by which ‘L’Heure *présente*’. The present hour asks, not for an offering, but for what Nancy describes as ‘l’offrande d’une offrande’. It asks for a poetic act, for a performance that knows itself to be consummately finite, a mere gesture. The sequence as a whole – from its dramatisation of the passing of form, to its dramatisation of the performative capabilities of language – presents such a performance. It offers up

⁴ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin* (Paris: Galilée, 2009), p. 52, p. 33.

nothing other than the passing and the birth of form, a poetic act conscious of its own finitude, a simple gesture of presentation.

‘L’Heure présente I’: ‘l’onde de non-être qui s’élargit’

‘L’Heure présente’ – a poem about darkness and light, the metaphysical and the physical – opens with a flash of lightning. An immense fork of light cuts through a dark sky. It reaches down like a god and takes the earth in its hands. And yet, as the form unfurls, it begins to fall and to break. ‘L’Heure présente’ opens with a performance – a cosmic drama – in which sky and earth, light and darkness, form and formlessness are the central protagonists. And these first four stanzas function as a kind of prologue, offering a performance in miniature of ‘L’Heure présente’ as a whole. Using the traditionally divine image of the flash of lightning, Zeus’s thunderbolt, they enact the drama at the heart of the western tradition’s ontological crisis: the crisis of form. The lightning – the form that seemed to be, for a moment, divine or absolute – falls and breaks. As it manifests itself, it destroys itself. As it illuminates the sky, it retreats into nothingness.

In ‘L’Heure présente I’, the drama that unfolds in the sky – the light that flashes and absents itself – is then shown to unfold across a tradition. The poet addresses a theologian, urging him to see that his god has withdrawn and that the symbols and the central myth of his theology have evaporated. The poet addresses a procession of female figures: the weeping or bloodied classical figures of Baroque Italian painting, the tragic heroines of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Othello*, the female to whom Baudelaire refers enigmatically as J.G.F., and, finally, an anonymous sacrificial victim. Bonnefoy uses the procession, as Shakespeare uses the procession of kings in *Macbeth*, to dramatise the progression or the passing of a tradition. A succession of weeping, bloodied, or dying

females dramatises the onset of a cultural malaise: a rising tide of ontological uncertainty, of violence, bloodshed, and brutality. The uncertainty intensifies, until finally, the poet confronts the discarded body of the ‘insignificant’ individual, the female who lies face down in a mass grave. The procession ends, and the poet suddenly confronts the present hour, his own historical epoch. It is night time. There is no levity, no light. He sees a world of unrelieved, impenetrable matter. Humanity and language, deprived of any sense of purpose or any kind of belief, lie sleeping.

The history that ‘L’Heure présente I’ presents is the history of the passing of form: a god withdraws; religious symbols evaporate; a theology disintegrates. The transcendental or the absolute form reveals itself to be an illusion. And Bonnefoy’s highly theatrical poetic performances are undoubtedly a response to this passing of form. The poet aligns the performance of the lightning with the performance of history. He insists upon the finitude of all dynamics. His poem – like the lightning, like the tradition – is a burst of energy, a burst of light, that will unfurl, fall, and expend itself.

Now, let us turn to the opening stanzas of ‘L’Heure présente I’:

Regarde !

Un éclair envahit le ciel, ce soir encore,
Il prend la terre dans ses mains, mais il hésite,
Presque il s’immobilise. S’est-il cru

Une phrase, une signature, non, il chancelle,
Nous le voyons qui tombe, illuminant,
Dans les bras l’un de l’autre,
Sommeil et mort.

L’éclair, une illusion,
Même l’éclair.

Une illusion, la forme
Qui se déploie, un rêve
Qui enlace la forme, et va tomber
Avec elle, brisée,

Dépossédée de soi, à ces confins,
Là-bas, de notre nuit d'ici,
L'heure présente. (HP, 81)

Like so many of Bonnefoy's poems, the first poem of 'L'Heure présente' begins with an imperative. The poet urges us to look, for a spectacle is unfolding before us: 'Regarde ! / Un éclair envahit le ciel, ce soir encore'. Bonnefoy's use of the verb 'envahir' suggests that this flash of lightning bursts from some other realm into this one. Personifying the lightning, he presents it as a quasi-divine figure. A god is reaching down to take the earth in his hands: 'Il prend la terre dans ses mains'. He takes hold of the earth, 'mais il hésite, / Presque il s'immobilise'. Using one verb after another in quick succession, allowing the enjambment to fall across the stanzaic break, Bonnefoy conveys something of the volatility of this dynamic. The poet wonders whether the lightning thought itself a phrase or a signature, and the question is no sooner raised than answered: 'S'est-il cru // Une phrase, une signature, non, il chancelle'. No, the lightning is not the purveyor of some kind of meaning nor the testimony to some kind of presence, for it breaks into an unstable, wavering motion, 'il chancelle'. The lightning wavers and falls. It exposes its own contingency and finitude: 'Nous le voyons qui tombe, illuminant, / Dans les bras l'un de l'autre, / Sommeil et mort'. As it falls, it illuminates sleep and death, two figures who lie together, wrapped in each other's arms like lovers, sharing a sleep that comes close to death, a death that comes close to sleep.⁵

The lightning falls and the stanza breaks. A short fragment of text, a six-syllable and a four-syllable line, makes its incursion into the empty space: 'L'éclair, une illusion, / Même l'éclair'. The flash of lightning, the poet suggests, using this appositional

⁵ Nancy writes: 'Comme la mort le sommeil, car le corps s'y allonge seul. Y est seul étendu. Seul étendu y est, y, là, ici comme nulle part. Nulle autre part qu'un corps pesant posé, jeté, laissé par terre. Comme le sommeil la mort : corps déposé' (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Tombe de sommeil* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), p. 75).

formulation, is an illusion. This atmospheric event is a ‘fausse apparence, représentation trompeuse, mirage’.⁶ The poet breaks into another new stanza, repeating this appositional structure, ‘Une illusion, la forme / Qui se déploie, un rêve / Qui enlace la forme’. The form that unfurls itself across the sky and across the page is an illusion. The dream that wraps itself around this form – the dream of permanence or fixity – is also an illusion. For the form falls and the dream ‘va tomber / Avec elle’. Each of these lines enacts this unfurling and falling, opening a new clause before the line end and flowing into a series of enjambments. Form emerges ‘brisée, / Dépossédée de soi’. It is not only broken but dispossessed of itself. It has exhausted itself, ‘à ces confins, / Là-bas, de notre nuit d’ici, / L’heure présente’. Form dissolves in the darkness of the present moment, in the formlessness of this present moment of unfurling, ‘notre nuit d’ici, / L’heure présente’.

As the lightning falls and breaks, as form unfurls itself and exhausts itself, revealing itself to be an illusion, the poet urges, ‘Regarde, vois’. He appeals not only for an act of looking but an act of seeing. This appeal is directed towards a theologian: ‘Regarde, vois. / Regarde, théologien’. Addressing this figure, the poet is addressing theology itself. He is addressing an entire tradition and system of belief. Over the next five stanzas, he urges the theologian to see the passing of the gods.

Regarde, vois.
 Regarde, théologien,
 Ne crois-tu pas que Dieu
 Se soit lassé d’être ?

Tu imagines
 Qu’il ne peut en finir, étant infini,
 Avec soi
 Mais tu sais qu’aucun sacrifice, à ses autels,
 Ni même le sacrifice de son fils,
 N’éveille plus son désir.

⁶ ‘Illusion’, in *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* <<http://www.cnrtl.fr>> [accessed 17th May 2012].

Se tourne-t-il
Vers celle qui dormait auprès de lui,
L'âme du monde,
Touchera-t-il son bras, sa hanche nue,
Il ne la réveillera pas.

Descendra-t-il
Dans ses jardins, de terrasse en terrasse,
S'arrêtant, quelquefois,
Comme ces bêtes
Qui s'immobilisent d'un coup
Pour un bruit, une ombre,
Il n'écouterà pas
Le bruissement du ciel. Ni davantage
Le cri du désespoir. Pas même
Le hurlement de la bête égorgée,
Pas même
Les notes hésitantes du pipeau
D'un berger attardé sous le dernier hêtre.

Se sont évaporés
Le bœuf et l'âne
Et cet agneau qui n'est qu'étonnement.
Les constellations, nous disait-on,
Auraient étincelé dans cette paille. (HP, 81-83)

Having watched the lightning fall, break, and disappear, the poet asks the theologian: 'Ne crois-tu pas que Dieu / Se soit lassé d'être ?' Bonnefoy – much like Hölderlin when he speaks of the withdrawal of the gods – does not debate the existence or the non-existence of God.⁷ He is interested, rather, in the finite nature of this god. He is interested in his passing, his withdrawal. He asks, do you not believe that your god has grown tired of being? The theologian imagines his God to be infinite, along with the human self, the soul. And yet, no sacrificial act, not even the sacrifice of his son, can awaken his God's desire: 'aucun sacrifice, à ses autels, / Ni même le sacrifice de son fils, / N'éveille plus son désir'.

⁷ In 'Brot und Wein', Hölderlin writes, 'Though the gods are living, / Over our heads they live, up in a different world / [...] Little they seem to care whether we live or do not' (Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems* (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. 35).

There is no way of transcending the finitude of existence and awakening God's desire. God has grown indifferent to the world.⁸

In the stanzas that follow, staging a series of highly theatrical scenes, the poet imagines a god making contact with the world. He imagines him turning to 'celle qui dormait auprès de lui, / L'âme du monde'. Bonnefoy puts forward this vision – the male god turning to his sleeping female lover, the earth – as a hypothesis. Should this god turn towards the world, 'Touchera-t-il son bras, sa hanche nue, / Il ne la réveillera pas'. As God has grown indifferent to our sacrifices, the world itself has grown indifferent to God.⁹ Finally, the poet imagines the God coming down into the world and moving through it like a wild animal: 'Descendra-t-il / Dans ses jardins, de terrasse en terrasse, / S'arrêtant, quelquefois, / Comme ces bêtes / Qui s'immobilisent d'un coup / Pour un bruit, une ombre'. Bonnefoy imagines a God that starts like a wild animal at every noise and shadow. Traditionally, Pan is the god that is said to be present in the world when leaves rustle or shadows dance, when a *frisson* of feeling runs through the world and we find ourselves gripped by an unaccountable fear.¹⁰ And yet, the poet speculates, should Pan come down into the world, 'Il n'écouterà pas / Le bruissement du ciel. Ni davantage / Le cri du désespoir. Pas même / Le hurlement de la bête égorgée'. He will not hear the murmur, the rustling, of the earth. He will not hear the most agonising of cries, nor even the benighted shepherd – the last poet – as he plays a few tremulous notes on his pan pipes.

⁸ Once again, Bonnefoy insists that the logic of sacrifice, a desire to transcend the finite of existence, will no longer suffice.

⁹ Strikingly, as the trope of the two sleeping lovers recurs, the theme of sleep and death recurs. The poet is interested in a life force which has grown tired of being and which cannot be awakened, a life force which hovers somewhere between 'Sommeil et mort'.

¹⁰ Etymologically, the word 'panic' denotes the sensation of fear that arises from the intuition of Pan's presence: 'Originally and chiefly used allusively with reference to a feeling of sudden terror, which was attributed by the ancient Greeks to the influence of the god Pan' ('panic', in *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 15 July 2012]).

Bonnefoy presents a god who is no longer alive to the world, who has retreated into insensibility and indifference, much like the gods evoked by Epicurus.¹¹ As he has grown tired of being, the symbols of the tradition too have faded away: ‘Se sont évaporés / Le bœuf et l’âne / Et cet agneau qui n’est qu’étonnement’. The symbols of the nativity, the ox, the ass, and the sacrificial lamb, have all evaporated. The nativity myth itself – the myth of the god who comes into the world as an infant, the myth of another sacrificial victim and another nascent theology coming up over the horizon – has evaporated. The old order has become a half-remembered story: ‘Les constellations, nous disait-on, / Auraient étincelé dans cette paille’. The divine light would have sparkled in the straw of the humble stable floor; the highest order would have been reflected in the lowest. The reality of this light and this order is now – as the poet’s use of the perfect conditional tense suggests – distant and uncertain.

As the poet reflects on the light that would have shone, he sees a female figure, Venus, leaning over the dying Adonis. She is lamenting the death of her lover, the death of a god. Then, the poet sees Niobe, then Judith, and Danaé. Over the next four stanzas, as the poet invokes a diverse series of females, a long procession of women makes its way gently towards us.¹²

Et vois, là, c’est Vénus
 Penchée sur Adonis mourant. Et cette autre image,
 C’est Niobé, all tears. Je vois Judith
 Se redresser, sanglante. Je vois, dans la pluie d’or,
 Danaé, ses cheveux épars. Mon amie, est-ce voir
 Quand le peintre n’a eu entre ses mains
 Que des corps dont les yeux se ferment ? Je vous touche,
 Épaules nues, reflets dans la pénombre,

¹¹ Nancy writes, ‘Derrière la voûte se tiennent les dieux d’Épicure – encore lui – indifférents et insensibles, même à eux-mêmes, sans images, donc et privé de sens’ (Nancy, *Au fond des images*, pp. 18-9).

¹² As suggested in my reading of ‘La Terre’ in the first chapter, Bonnefoy’s use of imperatives and deictics, formulations such as ‘Je crie, Regarde, / La Lumière / Vivait là’ or ‘Et vois, là, c’est Vénus’, dramatise the advent or the arrival of a phenomenon.

Fûtes-vous l'or que répandait un dieu ?

Et te nommes-tu Ophélie,
Tu éclates de rire. Ta robe s'ouvre,
L'eau noire te pénètre, des courants
T'emportent. Tu te penches sur lui,
Le prince fou, écartant ses cheveux
Que colle la sueur de sa fièvre, tu touches
Ses tempes de tes lèvres. L'eau rapide
Couvre ses quelques mots, disperse les tiens,
Ô trahie,
Te nommes-tu Desdémone ?
Willows, willows...

Et te nomme-t-il J.G.F.
Es-tu « son Électre lointaine »,
Écoute bien :
La maladie et la mort font des cendres
De tout le feu qui pour nous flamboya.

Et te nommes-tu... ? Pas de nom
Pour toi, de tous les temps,
De tous les pays, qui tombes,
Mains liées dans le dos, nuque brisée,
Voix bafouée, la bouche
Déjà pleine de terre. Pas de nom,
Pas de résurrection pour toi non plus.
Et pas même de mots, pas même les nôtres,
Puisque les mots se cabrent
Devant ce que celui qui cherche à dire
Ne saurait éprouver, ne peut revivre. (HP, 83-5)

The poet sees Venus first, leaning over the dying Adonis, witnessing the agony of a dying god: 'Et vois, là, c'est Vénus / Penchée sur Adonis mourant'. Then, he points to the figure of the weeping Niobé: 'Et cette autre image, / C'est Niobé, all tears'. The poet is not pointing to Niobé herself but to 'cette autre image'. This is, he subtly suggests, not a procession of deities or presences, but a procession of images. Niobe goes by 'all tears', the epithet from *Hamlet* reminding us that she is the residue of a literary as well as a mythical tradition. And then, the poet sees Judith rising up, bespattered with the blood of

the beheaded Holofernes, and then Danaé, as Zeus descends upon her, in a shower of golden light: ‘Je vois Judith / Se redresser, sanglante. Je vois, dans la pluie d’or, / Danaé, ses cheveux épars’. The poet sees this procession of suffering, impassioned, or avenging women. They slip past in a stream of deliquescent images: tears, blood, ‘la pluie d’or’. As each short sentence begins at the medial caesura and then overflows the line end, one image flows into another. We see Venus reborn as Niobe, Niobe as Judith, Judith as Danaé. We see all of these females – like the male gods of the tradition, Adonis, Pan, Christ – as versions of one another. They flow past, dramatising the process of imagining and reimagining that produces the tradition.

These classical female figures are a series of painted images (as the next few lines of the poem confirm). Bonnefoy is thinking, it seems likely, of the classical imagery of Baroque art at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century: Rubens’ *The Death of Adonis*, Gentileschi’s *Danae*, Caravaggio’s or Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith*, Bloemaert’s *Niobe Weeping for her Children*. As these figures go by, the poet turns to another female, a friend and perhaps a painter, and he asks, ‘Mon amie, est-ce voir / Quand le peintre n’a eu entre ses mains / Que des corps dont les yeux se ferment ?’ Turning perhaps to Artemisia Gentileschi, whose paintings of Venus, Judith, and Danae feature all these women with their eyes closed,¹³ the poet asks: is it really an act of seeing that the painter performs when all the bodies that she depicts have their eyes closed? Bonnefoy interrogates a fundamental ambivalence within these paintings. We see these bodies – Bonnefoy repeatedly draws our attention towards the act of looking, ‘Et vois, là, c’est Vénus’, ‘Je vois Judith’ – and yet, we are looking upon a gaze that is no longer active. These are bodies that are no longer alert to the world, like the God that Bonnefoy evoked in previous stanzas. Bonnefoy continues, ‘Je vous touche / Épaules nues, reflète

¹³ The above mentioned paintings, by Caravaggio, Gentileschi, Rubens, and Bloemaert, also feature their central protagonists with their eyes closed.

dans la pénombre, / Fûtes-vous l'or que répandait un dieu ?' These naked shoulders, portions of luminous white flesh gleaming out against the darkness, seem almost palpable. The poet touches them. And yet, they are only 'reflets dans la pénombre'. Bonnefoy asks, 'Fûtes-vous l'or que répandait un dieu ?' The poet wonders, are you palpable flesh or the dissemination of a divine light, 'la pluie d'or'? Are you mortal flesh or the physical manifestation of a divine essence? In these paintings, the poet can see the beginnings of the struggle between two different orders of representation. He can see two different kinds of flesh, two different kinds of light.¹⁴

Another female begins to make her way across the stage. It is a character from the Elizabethan stage, from late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century England. The poet asks, 'Et te nommes-tu Ophélie'. Are you Shakespeare's Ophelia, the one betrayed by her lover and driven mad with grief? Ophelia appears, as she does in Millais' painting, submerged in the river: 'Tu éclates de rire. Ta robe s'ouvre, / L'eau noire te pénètre, des courants / T'emportent'. Her death is evoked as a kind of sexual union: her dress opens and black water penetrates her. A series of short clauses, accompanied by a repeated *coupe enjambante* at the medial caesura, suggests the swiftness with which these forces conspire

¹⁴ For Bonnefoy, the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century – the time when Italian Baroque painting flourished, Caravaggio and all that followed in his wake – is the time when the tradition first begins to seriously tremble with a sense of ontological uncertainty. As Bonnefoy writes, 'la première manifestation vraiment sans retour de [la] crise [...] eut lieu' (TP, 72). Strikingly, Nancy's reading of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Cleopatra* in 'Souveraine en peinture' explores how the beginnings of a profound ambivalence, the beginnings of a juncture between two traditions and two visions of the world, makes itself felt in the naked body of the last sovereign queen of Egypt. Her body stages, Nancy writes, 'une confrontation violente, poignante jusqu'au déchirement, entre deux mondes, entre deux ordres de représentation, entre deux époques du monde, deux états de la souveraineté et aussi deux femmes en une' (Nancy, 'Souveraine en peinture' (*Cléopâtre dans le miroir de l'art occidental*, ed. Claude Ritschard and Allison Morehead (Milan: 5 Continents Éditions, 2004), p. 65). Nancy continues, 'Dans Cléopâtre, une antiquité immémoriale – celle des plus illustres souverains d'un monde plus ancien que le monde méditerranéen – brille en s'éclipsant d'un éclat par lequel se fixe toujours le moment où un monde cède à un autre mais de telle manière que le premier incruste son départ dans le second' (Nancy, 'Souveraine en peinture', *Cléopâtre dans le miroir de l'art occidental*, p. 65).

against her, until finally an enjambment spills from one line to the next and the currents carry her away: ‘Tu éclates de rire. Ta robe s’ouvre, / L’eau noire te pénètre, des courants / T’emportent’. Ophelia’s union with the water is simultaneously a union with Hamlet: ‘Tu te penches sur lui, / Le prince fou, écartant ses cheveux / Que colle la sueur de sa fièvre, tu touches / Ses tempes de tes lèvres’. She leans over the mad prince, pushing the hair back from his brow and kissing his temples, and another series of enjambments suggests the unrestrained nature of her acts. As she embraces him, ‘L’eau rapide / Couvre ses quelques mots, disperse les tiens’. The rapidly moving current covers Hamlet’s words; it renders them obscure and troubled, setting them beyond Ophelia’s reach. This current disperses Ophelia’s words completely; it obliterates them. The poet cries out, without breaking for a new sentence, as if unable to stem the flow, ‘Ô trahie, / Te nommes-tu Desdémone ? / Willows, willows...’. The figure of Ophelia gives way to the figure of Desdemona, murdered at the hands of her beloved Othello. Desdemona slips past, murmuring the chorus of her lament, ‘Willows, willows...’.¹⁵ She sings for one who – like herself, like Ophelia – loves and is betrayed by the one she loves.

A current engulfs Hamlet’s words and disperses Ophelia’s. It sweeps both Ophelia and Desdemona to their deaths. Hamlet destroys Ophelia, Bonnefoy writes, because ‘[il] ne trouve [...] en toute attitude ou parole, y compris les façons de jeunes filles, qu’opacité ou mensonge’.¹⁶ Othello destroys Desdemona because he becomes convinced ‘qu’amour

¹⁵ Bonnefoy clearly sees Ophelia and Desdemona as analogous figures. The imagery of Desdemona’s song reflects the imagery of Ophelia’s death: ‘The poor soul sat singing by a sycamore tree. / Sing all a green willow: / Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee, / Sing willow, willow, willow: / The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur’d her moans; / Sing willow, willow, willow; / Her salt tears fell from her, and soften’d the stones’ (*Othello*, Act IV, Scene III, 43-9).

¹⁶ Yves Bonnefoy, *Théâtre et poésie. Shakespeare et Yeats* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1998), p. 72.

que femme promet n'est qu'illusion'.¹⁷ Bonnefoy describes *Hamlet* and *Othello* as 'ce triomphe du doute sur l'évidence' (LD, 162). The dark water that creeps up all through this stanza, sweeping Ophelia and Desdemona to their deaths, 'L'eau noire', 'L'eau rapide', is doubt itself. It is what Bonnefoy describes elsewhere as 'l'onde de non-être qui s'élargit' (SSB, 294). Bonnefoy apostrophises the one who is destroyed by this 'eau rapide' in 'L'Heure présente I'. He greets Ophelia, Desdemona – the two are almost interchangeable at this point – with the words, 'Ô trahie'. He greets the one who is betrayed not only by the lover she trusts but by the world she trusts. He turns with compassion, with a solicitous and caring gesture, towards the one who has a simple faith in being and who is destroyed by a rising tide of suspicion.¹⁸

Shakespeare's tragic heroines slip away and another female figure comes forward. The poet asks, 'Et te-nomme-t-il J.G.F. / Es-tu « son Électre lointaine »'. The poet sees J.G.F., the one to whom Baudelaire's *Les Paradis artificiels* are dedicated, enigmatically,

¹⁷ Yves Bonnefoy, 'La Tête penchée de Desdémone', introduction to William Shakespeare, *Othello* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 31.

¹⁸ Through this procession of females, Bonnefoy dramatises a crisis that begins to make itself felt in Baroque Italian painting and that comes to fruition in Shakespeare's plays, also written at the end of the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In his essay 'Readiness, Ripeness: *Hamlet*, *Lear*', Bonnefoy states, 'Qu'on remonte dans le passé de la société occidentale, et on rencontrera à un moment ou un autre, sur tous les plans où elle a pris forme et surtout conscience de soi, une profonde fracture dont la ligne sépare une époque d'avant, qui a les caractères de l'archaïsme, et ce qu'on peut dire déjà les temps modernes. « Avant » – c'est quand une pensée du tout, de l'unité, et de celle-ci comme vie, comme présence, réglait tous les rapports qu'on pouvait entretenir avec les réalités particulières. [...] Mais un jour vint où [...] L'ordre se fragmenta, la terre de signes et des promesses se retrouva la nature, la vie matière, le rapport de la personne à soi une énigme, et le destin une solitude. C'est la faille que je disais, dont les tassements ultimes ne se sont pas encore produits' (TP, 69-70). Bonnefoy continues, 'la première manifestation vraiment sans retour de cette crise [...] eut lieu [...] en divers moments de la fin du XVI^e siècle ou du début du XVII^e : ce qui correspond en Angleterre aux années où Shakespeare écrivit ses pièces. La ligne de fracture qui a rompu l'horizon de l'intemporel, et voue l'histoire du monde à son devenir toujours plus incertain et précipité, passe, c'est évidemment une de ses causes, par *Hamlet*, et je dirais même en plein milieu de cette œuvre' (TP, 70). He concludes, 'En bref, *Hamlet* est bien, profondément, spécifiquement, la problématique d'une conscience qui s'éveille à cette condition la veille encore inconnue et imprévisible : un monde déstructuré, des vérités désormais partielles, concurrentes, contradictoires, de la signification tant qu'on veut, et vite bien trop, mais rien qui rassemblera à un sacré, à du sens' (TP, 74).

in 1860. Baudelaire evokes her as ‘son Électre lointaine’, setting himself up as ‘un autre Oreste’. Bonnefoy refers lightly, allusively, to this dedication, ‘cette page fondamentale’ (SSB, 286). Then, he urges J.G.F. to listen well. He cites two lines from ‘Le Portrait’, also written in 1860, the time when Jeanne Duval was suffering from hemiplegia: ‘La maladie et la mort font des cendres / De tout le feu qui pour nous flamboya’. Sickness and death destroy all. They reduce all that we love and share to nothingness. Baudelaire addresses himself, in devotion, to one whom he tenderly protects beneath the initials J.G.F. And Baudelaire simultaneously, as he witnesses sickness and death, the destruction of being, allows himself to become what Bonnefoy describes as ‘le témoin du néant’ (SSB, 297).¹⁹

As one final figure moves forward, the poet would offer a greeting, but he can find no name: ‘Et te nommes-tu... ? Pas de nom / Pour toi, de tous les temps, / De tous les pays’. This figure has no name, no gender even. He or she is the anonymous victim ‘de tous les temps, / De tous les pays’. This person has been brutally murdered and each past

¹⁹ As Bonnefoy suggests in his essay ‘Le poète et « le flot mouvant des multitudes »’, Baudelaire’s address to J.G.F. is indicative of the two major currents within Baudelaire’s work. The dedication is ‘simplement et totalement l’attestation d’un être par un autre être’ (SSB, 287), and yet, the dedication also appears ‘sous un même signe de maladie et de mort’ (SSB, 286). Baudelaire’s address to J.G.F. is tinged with remorse. Bonnefoy suggests that Baudelaire names J.G.F. ‘« son Électre lointaine »’, for he is ‘un autre Oreste’, ‘le fils qui a tué ses parents’, (SSB, 287). Bonnefoy writes, ‘l’épouvante de Baudelaire, eh bien c’est surtout de découvrir, en cette occasion, qu’il est de ceux par la faute desquels cette nuit tombe. Le remords de la dédicace à J.G.F., d’être l’Oreste qui tue en déniait l’être, il peut l’éprouver en présence non seulement de sa mère mais de l’humanité tout entière, pour avoir préféré à l’attestation d’autrui la poursuite de sa chimère, mettre tout son or dans la beauté des correspondances. L’art, cette sorte d’art, ruine l’être. Quand Baudelaire erre, dandy, dans la foule, afin de jouir de la vie des autres au lieu d’en affronter le regard, il collabore au désastre’ (SSB, 291-2).

In the same sentence in which Baudelaire refers to ‘une Électre lointaine’, he describes himself as ‘un promeneur sombre et solitaire, plongé dans le flot mouvant des multitudes’ (Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 400). The image of the crowd plays a similar role in Bonnefoy’s essay to the image of the ‘eau rapide’ that carries Ophelia away. Bonnefoy describes the old men in ‘Les Sept Vieillards’ as ‘ces spectres qui signifie pour Baudelaire la foule contemporaine, soudain comprise comme non-être en puissance’ (SSB, 291). Bonnefoy writes, ‘La foule du siècle de Baudelaire est certes ce « Styx bourbeux et plombé », d’un de ses poèmes, ces tourbillons que « nul œil du Ciel ne pénètre »’ (SSB, 292). Bonnefoy’s procession of females, staging ‘l’onde de non-être qui s’élargit’, is clearly influenced by this thinking of the crowd (SSB, 294).

participle records a different kind of destruction: ‘Mains liées dans le dos, nuque brisée, / Voix bafouée, la bouche / Déjà pleine de terre’. Every part of the human body, the human spirit, has been damaged and disregarded. Even her mouth is stuffed full of clay. This anonymous victim resembles the sacrificial victim of prehistory, one who has been offered up to the earth. And yet, he or she is equally the twentieth-century victim of the Holocaust, this mass-mechanical ‘sacrifice’. This death is a death from which nothing can be redeemed: ‘Pas de nom / Pour toi. Pas de résurrection pour toi non plus. / Et pas même des mots, pas même les nôtres’.²⁰ Nothing persists, not even a name. There is no afterlife. Nothing can be said, not even by the poet, ‘Puisque les mots se cabrent / Devant ce que celui qui cherche à dire / Ne saurait éprouver, ne peut revivre’. Words baulk at the prospect. We cannot relive that which we would not know how to feel.

One female after another is invoked by the poet. Each one comes forward and passes by. Bonnefoy’s procession is reminiscent – like Shakespeare’s procession of kings – of Dante’s descent into the underworld to greet the dead, the ghosts of the foregoing tradition. Going forward to meet each individual, uttering her name, acknowledging her suffering, Bonnefoy gently insists upon the value of each individual human life. And yet, as each of these females go by, from Venus, to Ophelia, to J.G.F., to the one without a name, the value of the individual human life is increasingly degraded. We witness ‘le courant qui entraîne l’humanité dans le gouffre du non-vouloir, du non-exister, du non-être’ (SSB, 307). The procession ends with a nameless figure in a mass grave. An ‘insignificant’ individual dies inconsequentially and the disintegration of the previous tradition, the previous onto-theology, is complete. Her death is not mourned as Ophelia’s

²⁰ Nancy, meditating upon the sacrificial nature of the Holocaust, insists too that it is a sacrifice from which nothing is redeemed: ‘Une interprétation sacrificielle des camps est donc sans doute possible, voire nécessaire, mais elle ne l’est qu’à la condition paradoxale de se renverser elle-même en son contraire (d’Holocaust en Shoah) : ce sacrifice ne mène à rien, il ne conduit à aucun accès’ (Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 94).

and Desdemona's deaths were mourned. There is no lament, no sad song, no tragedy. There is, Bonnefoy insists, nothing that can be said. Nothing can be said of the human life that is without value, without significance.

The procession ends and the poet is suddenly jolted back to the present moment. He has been absorbed in this passing show of history, and now, something startles him. Something has fallen on the ground before him and he asks, 'Qu'est-ce que cela, sur le chemin ?' The poet turns to face our current situation, the reality of the present moment, 'L'Heure présente'.

Qu'est-ce que cela, sur le chemin ?
C'est tombé des arbres, je ramasse,
La matière est luisante, j'ai mon couteau,
Je déchire la bogue,
Je tente d'entamer le bois du fruit
Mais la lame dérape. Ce qui est
À jamais se refuse. Dois-je jeter
L'amande impénétrée avec la bogue ?

Lourde
Sous ses enluminures de ciel noir,
La page dans le livre. On veut en soulever
Ne serait-ce qu'un angle, voir au-delà
Dans l'espace des autres pages. Mais la liasse
De ces autres fait masse. Elle semble collée
Par une eau de la fin du monde. De la tourbe
Pour rien qu'un dernier feu ? Devons-nous croire
Que le signe qui prit au flanc des choses
Comme un éclair, et y étincela,
N'aura été que mains jointes en vain,
Rêves, enfièvrement de rien que des rêves,
Momie parée pour rien, sous sa chape de pierre ?

Il fait nuit. Dans les chambres
Les corps sont nus. Parfois un mouvement
Pour rien, inachevé,
Prend un dormeur que tourmente son rêve
Vais-je toucher cette épaule, cette autre,
Solliciter que des yeux s'ouvrent, s'élargissent,
Que des corps ressuscitent, comme on a cru

Que ce fut, une fois ? Crier,
Reviens, Claude, reviens, Enzo, d'entre les morts ?
J'écris des noms, personne ne se réveille.

Et si mêlés nos mots
Les uns aux autres ! Ils ne se séparent pas.
Dorment-ils
Dans les bras l'un de l'autre ? Rien ne semble
Battre dans cette artère que je touche
Au creux de leur épaule. Je pense au jour
Où, dans l'étonnement
Du ciel et de la terre s'approchant
L'un de l'autre, se confondant,
Devenant l'horizon puis le chemin,
Bois contre bois frotté se fit flamme.

Et parfois l'un de nous tressaille, se retourne
Sur sa couche, il reprend
Ses yeux à sa chimère. Mais le miroir
Qui dormait près de lui ne s'éveille pas.
Reflète-t-il le cyprès, les étoiles,
Le beau visage de la jeune femme endormie
Sur la chaleur de son bras replié,
Non, si je le détache de la cloison
Et l'approche des choses du jour qui point,
Ce que je tiens, c'est un morceau de houille,
Les reflets n'y remuent que de la nuit. (HP, 85-7)

An almond falls across the poet's path and he stoops to pick it up. Its shell is 'luisante'.

Attracted to this light, the poet takes out his knife. He removes the husk and attempts to cut through 'le bois du fruit'. The blade, however, skids away. The poet cannot break open this 'matière [...] luisante'. He cannot extract the kernel. The poet writes, 'Ce qui est / À jamais se refuse'. The material substance of the world will not yield itself to us; it will not be cracked open like a nut. And so, the poet wonders, 'Dois-je jeter / L'amande impénétrée avec la bogue ?' Is there nothing that separates the nut from the husk? Is there no longer

any hierarchy of values? Are all things, to use Mallarmé's formulation, 'de vaines formes de la matière'?²¹ Is there really nothing higher, or deeper, or more essential to be accessed?

The page in the book too is heavy: 'Lourde / Sous ses enluminures de ciel noir, / La page dans le livre'. Where once there was colour and light, there is now only darkness. The page affords a vision of a 'ciel noir'. As the poet gazes at these 'enluminures de ciel noir', he tries to lift the corner of the page, even a little, to see the following pages, 'On veut en soulever / Ne serait-ce qu'un angle, voir au-delà / Dans l'espace des autres pages'. He tries to delve further into the book, to pursue some kind of narrative or idea. He tries to reach beyond, and yet, all that he encounters is an impenetrable mass: 'la liasse / De ces autres fait masse'. A sibilant alliteration, 'soulever', 'serait-ce', 'l'espace', 'liasse', 'masse', accompanied by the series of enjambments, suggests that everything is flowing together. The book has become – as the internal rhyme on 'liasse' and 'masse' suggests – a dead weight. The bundle of pages seems to be stuck together: 'Elle semble collée / Par une eau de la fin du monde'. They have been saturated by an apocalyptic water, the 'eau noire', the 'eau rapide' that swept over Ophelia. Everything has congealed into an unrelieved materiality and there is no longer any way of delving deeper or reaching farther. The poet can only scratch helplessly at the surface of things.

Is the book, the poet wonders, 'De la tourbe / Pour rien qu'un dernier feu ?' Using another apocalyptic image, the poet asks, is it all only fuel for one last fire? Are we to believe that language, the flash of lightning that caught 'au flanc des choses' and sparkled there, 'N'aura été que mains jointes en vain, / Rêves, enfièvrement de rien que des rêves, / Momie parée pour rien, sous sa chape de pierre ?' Language is now compared to the flash of lightning, the flash of light that momentarily illuminates the forms of the material world. The poet asks, are we to believe that this illumination was only a vain hope, a vain

²¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, letter to Henri Cazalis, 28th April 1866, in *Correspondance I*, ed. Henri Mondor and Jean-Pierre Richard (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 207.

prayer? Is ‘la forme / Qui se déploie’, as Bonnefoy writes in the opening stanzas in which he evokes the lightning, ‘Une illusion’? Were we only dreaming, tossing feverishly amidst ‘Words, words, words’ like Hamlet?²² Were all our constructions, our edifices, only a ‘Momie parée pour rien, sous sa chape de pierre’? Were they all for nothing and are they now – already – only relics?

The poet finds himself in a dark and heavy world. Nothing separates the human body from the clay, the fruit from the husk, the words from the material substance of the book. The poet doubts whether the light of language, ‘l’éclair’, was ever anything more than a dream. The next stanza begins with the words, ‘Il fait nuit’. The present hour is a nocturnal hour, and naked bodies are stretched out in bedrooms, fast asleep: ‘Dans les chambres / Les corps sont nus. Parfois un mouvement / Pour rien, inachevé, / Prend un dormeur que tourmente son rêve’. These dreaming bodies are seized by a movement that is ‘pour rien’ and ‘inachevé’. This movement is without end, in both senses of the word: it serves no purpose and it trails off, unfinished. Humanity, Bonnefoy suggests, has drifted into a state of half-being or non-being. This is the state of torpor that Bonnefoy discusses in relation to Poe’s short story, translated by Baudelaire, ‘The Man of the Crowd’. The narrator of this story, having followed an old man through the streets all night, ‘entrevoit que ce vieillard *perambulans in noctem*, c’est le néant, l’être humain comme néant, l’intrusion dans la société d’une façon d’accepter de ne pas être qui risque d’entraîner dans son gouffre l’idée même d’humanité’ (SSB, 307). Similarly, Bonnefoy’s sleeping bodies, that toss and turn ‘Pour rien’, show us a humanity that has grown tired of being, that has accepted ‘de ne pas être’. As Bonnefoy writes in *Les Planches courbes*, ‘Le sommeil se

²² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Philip Brockbank (London: Octopus Books LTD., 1980), p. 895.

fait indifférence' (PC, 76). Humanity, like the god at the beginning of the poem, has grown unresponsive to the world.²³

The poet longs to awaken these sleeping bodies. He now imagines – like the god at the beginning of the poem – reaching out to touch an arm, a shoulder, 'Vais-je toucher cette épaule, cette autre, / Solliciter que des yeux s'ouvrent, s'élargissent, / Que des corps ressuscitent, comme on a cru / Que ce fut, une fois' ? He imagines stirring these bodies, causing their eyes to open and to grow wide in amazement. The poet uses a sibilant alliteration and a series of articulated mute 'e's in each of these verbs, and they too seem to open wide, to awaken even, 'Solliciter que des yeux s'ouvrent, s'élargissent, / Que des corps ressuscitent'. The act of awakening becomes an act of resuscitation. The poet contemplates crying out to the dead, shouting 'Reviens, Claude, reviens, Enzo, d'entre les morts'. A caesura falls after each name in this *alexandrin trimètre*, granting each one tremendous resonance.²⁴ The stanza ends with the words 'Je crie des noms, personne ne se réveille'. The world is not roused from its torpor.

Language too has been overtaken by this somnolence: 'Et si mêlés nos mots / Les uns aux autres ! Ils ne se séparent pas'. One word is always inextricably linked to another, and another, and so, no single word – no single meaning – can transcend this endless exchange: 'Ils ne se séparent pas'. As if the words too were bodies, the poet asks: 'Dorment-ils / Dans les bras l'un de l'autre ?' Once again, reaching out to touch a shoulder, the poet examines these 'bodies' of words: 'Rien ne semble / Battre dans cette artère que je touche / Au creux de leur épaule'. There is no pulse, no sign of life. And yet,

²³ Strikingly, Bonnefoy insists that Poe's story is 'un des premiers grands témoignages qu'un écrivain ait laissé sur l'avènement de la multitude moderne' (SSB, 307). It is 'ce défi de l'heure nouvelle' (SSB, 307).

²⁴ The name Claude is in fact followed by a *coupe lyrique*, granting it even greater resonance. 'Claude' is perhaps Claude Lorrain, the great painter of light, one who could perhaps break this darkness. Or, these two figures are perhaps two of Bonnefoy's recently deceased friends, the poet Claude Esteban and the Italian publisher Enzo Crea.

facing this death-like inertia, the poet is seized by a different, more hopeful vision. The poet thinks of the act that produced the first fire: ‘Je pense au jour / Où, dans l’étonnement / Du ciel et de la terre s’approchant / L’un de l’autre, se confondant, / Devenant l’horizon puis le chemin, / Bois contre bois frotté se fit flamme’. The poet thinks, not of the Promethean myth, but of the act that gave rise to the Promethean myth: ‘Bois contre bois frotté se fit flamme’. Fire, which seemed to exist only in the sky, was generated for the first time on earth: ‘dans l’étonnement / Du ciel et de la terre s’approchant / L’un de l’autre, se confondant’. The transcendental and the terrestrial are drawn together; they rub up against one another, forming a new horizon, offering a new way of being, ‘Devenant l’horizon puis le chemin’. The poet – as he confronts the somnolence and confusion of language, words wrapped around words, sleeping ‘Dans les bras l’un de l’autre’ – has this realisation: two words, rubbed together, might yet produce a flame. Light need not be received or stolen. Light might be made.

This light seems as though it might be awakened in the final stanza when the sleeper trembles and turns over: ‘Et parfois l’un de nous tressaille, se retourne / Sur sa couche’. There is almost a moment of alertness, of awakening, but the mirror that sleeps beside this figure does not awaken: ‘Mais le miroir / Qui dormait près de lui ne s’éveille pas’. The sleeper ‘reprend / Ses yeux à sa chimère’. Confronting the somnolence and darkness of the present hour, Bonnefoy suggests, the mirror will only reflect somnolence and darkness: ‘si je le détache de la cloison / Et l’approche des choses du jour qui point, / Ce que je tiens, c’est un morceau de houille, / Les reflets n’y remuent que de la nuit’. The mirror, held up to ‘[l]es choses du jour qui point’, does not reflect the burgeoning light. It does not reflect the faint outline of forms that are only beginning to emerge. This burgeoning light, Bonnefoy subtly suggests, asks not for an act of representation but for a

performative act. Like the flame evoked in the previous stanza, ‘Bois contre bois frotté se fit flamme’, it asks to be brought into being.

‘L’Heure présente I’ dramatises the passing of form – the movement by which form falls, breaks, and is dispossessed of itself – and it dramatises the consequences of this ‘passing’ across an entire tradition: the withdrawal of God, the evaporation of the symbols of a theology, the disintegration of an ontology. As a procession of weeping women goes by, the poet sees, from the sixteenth century to the present day, the steady degradation of the value of the individual life, ‘l’onde de non-être qui s’élargit’ (SSB, 294). In the present hour, the poet looks out over a dark and sleeping world and he perceives a humanity that has lost its faith in being.

‘L’Heure présente II’: ‘Rêve, fumée, / Ce ciel des nuits d’alors’

Whilst ‘L’Heure présente I’ dramatises a historical process (the passing of a transcendental or absolute form, the withdrawal of the divine, and the disintegration of an ontology),

‘L’Heure présente II’ presents a series of personal recollections. The second poem of the sequence is a reflection on the passage of a life and the transience of experience.

Everything that the poet seemed to possess has now become a memory, an image. As these memories surge up and pass by, the poet is acutely aware of the illusoriness of all experience. In the final stanza, Bonnefoy reflects upon how traditional conceptions of the poetic act relate to this transience. He watches the figure of the poet as he attempts to assemble something from amidst the flux and to offer it up.

J’ai ramassé le fruit, j’ouvre l’amande.
Dans la parole
La dérive rapide de la nuée.

Illusion,

L'âtre qui brûlait clair le soir, te souviens-tu,
Dans la maison que nous avons aimée.
Ce petit bois,
Ces boules du papier froissé, ce pique-feu,
Cette flamme soudaine, presque un éclair,
Un rêve, comme nous ?

Et souviens-toi
Du chien empoisonné ! Il griffait de ses cris
Le ciel, la terre. Mon amie,
Hier encore
Nous allions jusqu'à ces barrières, là-bas,
Par ces creux où de l'eau brille dans l'herbe.

Hier, nous passions
Près de la grange vide. Une chevêche
S'envolait de dessous le toit. Je crie son nom,
Mais rien ne bouge sur ce mur que la lune éclaire.
Pas d'yeux de bête effrayée.

Illusion l'amandier, toutes ses fleurs
Comme des feux parmi d'autres étoiles.
Rêve, fumée,
Ce ciel des nuits d'alors, de tant de grappes ?
L'agneau ? Rien qu'à jamais
Le couteau et le sang. Notre ravin,
Rien que le bruit d'une eau qui croît parfois
Puis presque cesse. (HP, 88-9)

In the first lines of 'L'Heure présente II', the poet opens the almond with which he struggled in the previous poem: 'J'ai ramassé le fruit, j'ouvre l'amande'. The poet accedes to the centre of this fruit, and yet, the image of the almond immediately gives way to an image of endless drifting: 'Dans la parole / La dérive rapide de la nuée'. In speech, Bonnefoy suggests, there is only divagation, the endless drifting of clouds. Moving from a decasyllable, to a four-syllable line, to a hendecasyllable, Bonnefoy suggests the contingent nature of these vagaries. We stray endlessly and there is no possibility of acceding to a centre or of taking possession of an essence. The poet who would accede to

the heart of the almond once again finds himself diverted. He finds himself amidst language, amidst ‘La dérive rapide de la nuée’.

As the poet was struck by the illusoriness of the flash of light in the opening stanzas of ‘L’Heure présente I’, he is now struck by the illusoriness of memory. Using the same appositional device as in the opening stanzas of the first poem, Bonnefoy writes: ‘Illusion, / L’âtre qui brûlait clair le soir, te souviens-tu, / Dans la maison que nous avons aimée’. The hearth that burned brightly, evening after evening, was an illusion. This fire burned ‘Dans la maison que nous avons aimée’. The hearth and the home, these stable structures, were the cherished centre of a relationship, a shared existence. With care, the poet assembled items to light a fire. A labial alliteration, running from word to word, reinforces the materiality of these items: ‘Ce petit bois, / Ces boules du papier froissé, ce pique-feu’. And then, amongst these objects, a flame flared: ‘Cette flamme soudaine, presque un éclair’. It burned so brightly, it was ‘presque un éclair’. And yet, just as the lightning spends itself, this flame burns brightly and burns away. And the poet wonders, using another appositional device, was all of this ‘Un rêve, comme nous ?’ Were all these apparently stable forms – and were we too – only an illusion? Nothing remains of the fire, nor the kindling and firewood, nor the hearth and home. It has all been consumed, and the poet is left with only memories and imaginings, with an acute sense of the transience and the illusoriness of all existence.

This vision of love and happiness gives way to a vision of suffering and death: ‘Et souviens-toi / Du chien empoisonné ! Il griffait de ses cris / Le ciel, la terre’. This image echoes the image of the poisoned dog that appears in the opening stanzas of *Dans le leurre du seuil*.²⁵ It also echoes the image of ‘Le hurlement de la bête égorgée’, the screeches that are not heard by any god, in the previous poem. The dog’s dying cries appealed to heaven

²⁵ In *Dans le leurre du seuil*, Bonnefoy writes, ‘Un chien peut-être empoisonné griffait / L’amère terre nocturne’ (P, 256).

and earth. And yet, yesterday again, the poet and his companion went back to this place and passed ‘Près de la grange vide’. This empty storehouse – after the image of the fire in the hearth, a beloved home – is an image of desolation and desertion. A little owl flies out from under the roof and the poet calls out its name, ‘Mais rien ne bouge sur ce mur que la lune éclaire. / Pas d’yeux de bête effrayée’. Here, where the dog suffered and cried, there is now nothing, ‘Pas d’yeux de bête effrayée’. This scene – brightly lit, perfectly manifest – bears no trace of the dog’s suffering, just as it bears no trace of the lovers’ happiness. It is untouched by our passing.

And like the fire in the hearth, the almond tree was also an illusion: ‘Illusion l’amandier, toutes ses fleurs / Comme des feux parmi d’autres étoiles’. Aligning images of blossom, fires, and stars, Bonnefoy allows everything to become a kind of fire. The almond blossom – this symbol of rebirth – burns brightly and burns away. The stanza now builds into a litany of appositional structures. Avoiding using a verb in each of these formulations, the poet does not affirm that these images *have been*. Rather, each image simply unfolds, one alongside another, without any kind of continuity or causality, and then slips away. Using another set of appositions, Bonnefoy asks, ‘Rêve, fumée, / Ce ciel des nuits d’alors, de tant de grappes ?’ Were those skies on those evenings, so full of clusters of light, only a ‘Rêve’, a ‘fumée’? And ‘L’agneau ?’ The lamb – ‘cet agneau qui n’est qu’étonnement’ in ‘L’Heure présente I’ – is the innocent and sacred young life. Is the lamb too, the poet asks, only a ‘Rêve’, a ‘fumée’? Is the traditional symbol of sacrifice and of redemption a ‘Rêve’, a ‘fumée’? The poet responds, ‘Rien qu’à jamais / Le couteau et le sang’. There is nothing but death and destruction, an endless sacrifice without any kind of redemption. As Nancy writes, ‘l’existence, en son essence, est sacrifice’.²⁶ The image of spilling blood gives way to an image of flowing water: ‘Notre ravin, / Rien que le bruit

²⁶ Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 101.

d'une eau qui croît parfois / Puis presque cesse'. There is nothing but the roar of the torrent. We experience the fullness of a swelling motion, and the paucity of a dwindling motion, and yet, we are always falling. Existence rushes onwards and rushes away.²⁷

As the poet muses upon the passing of his own existence, he sees everything in its essential finitude; he sees everything in motion. Then, in the final stanza of the poem, an important shift occurs. Bonnefoy reflects upon the poet's relationship to this transience and this flux. Bonnefoy watches the archetypal figure of the poet – the man with the golden brain, the man with the bouquet of flowers – as he tries to contend with this flux. He watches one who is determined, in spite of the flux, to offer something up.

Personne
Dans le bruit du torrent. Personne
Dans la lumière. L'homme
Là-bas, à la cervelle d'or,
Qui titube sur le trottoir, ses doigts sanglants
Crispés sur des raclures de l'esprit,
Qu'offrait-il, quel bouquet ? Je veux ces fleurs,
Les dégager du papier qui les couvre,
Cette page rougie, car j'aperçois,
Dans le don qu'il faisait, déjà mourant,
Les abîmes du ciel et de la terre,
Les images que forment les nuées
Et des corolles, l'homme, la femme,
Dont la couleur me semble restée vive,
Mais tout cela, c'est dans le caniveau,
Il a jeté l'offrande refusée,
Ne vais-je ramasser que du flétri,
De l'insensé, une odeur âcre, fade ?

²⁷ The formulation 'Rien que' recurs with great frequency in Bonnefoy's poetry. Existence is constantly being affirmed as 'Rien que [...]'. In 'Eau et pain', *L'Heure présente*, Bonnefoy evokes 'des bergers / Avec rien, à la nuit, que leurs appels' (HP, 30). In 'Le Jardin', he writes, 'rien que ciel et terre / Se penchent, t'aimant bien, sur ton rêve de toi' (HP, 17). 'L'Enfant du second jour' begins 'Le dieu qui errait là, au premier matin, / Qu'aurait-il espéré de la parole ? / Il ne fit rien que ramasser des pierres' (HP, 22). Bonnefoy often uses this formulation to affirm an infinitely finite existence, an existence in which the experience of negativity is 'fundamental'. In a similar fashion, in *Une pensée finie*, Nancy writes: '« Rien » n'est pas un abîme ouvert au-dehors. « Rien » affirme la finitude, et ce « rien », aussitôt, ramène l'existence à elle-même, et à rien d'autre' (Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 103).

Roses, roses ? N'existent
Que roses déchirées, pas de rose en soi,
Pas de corolle à soutenir un monde. (HP, 89-90)

Having repeated the negative formulation 'Rien que' twice at the end of this stanza,

Bonnefoy opens the final stanza of the poem with two more negative formulations:

'Personne / Dans le bruit du torrent. Personne / Dans la lumière'. There is no one in the roar of the torrent and no one in the light. No one sits upstream of this motion; no one

transcends the flux. The poet sees only one individual, staggering along the pavement:

'L'homme / Là-bas, à la cervelle d'or, / Qui titube sur le trottoir, ses doigts sanglants /

Crispés sur des raclures de l'esprit, / Qu'offrait-il, quel bouquet ?' He sees the man with the golden brain, with his precious and all-important intellect, struggling just to keep his feet on the ground. His fingers are bleeding from clenching 'des raclures de l'esprit', from scratching and scraping at the last dredges – the detritus even – of the human intellect. As

in Daudet's story, the man with the golden brain tears endlessly away at his own precious gift, his intellect.²⁸ The poet asks, 'Qu'offrait-il, quel bouquet ?' With this image of an

offering of a bouquet of flowers, a detail that does not feature in Daudet's story, the man with the golden brain begins to resemble Baudelaire, the poet who suffered intensely, who chose 'que la mort grandisse en lui comme une conscience' (I, 35), as Bonnefoy writes, so

that he might offer up 'ces fleurs malades', *Les Fleurs du mal*.²⁹ Daudet's self-

consuming, self-sacrificing character becomes the figure of the modern poet, the one who

²⁸ This is the figure from Daudet's story, 'La Légende de l'homme à la cervelle d'or', the story of a man who is born with a golden brain and who gradually spends his gift, until he finally stands, with bloodied hands, 'avec des raclures d'or au bout des ongles' (Alphonse Daudet, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1986), I, p. 328.

²⁹ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 3.

staggers along the pavement, at his wits' end, trying to assemble a simple bunch of flowers.³⁰

The poet wants this offering. He wants to lift the flowers up from the paper, from the bloodied page upon which they have been inscribed, stained by 'ses doigts sanglants': 'Je veux ces fleurs, / Les dégager du papier qui les couvre, / Cette page rougie'. For the poet perceives, in this offering, the negativity of existence, 'Les abîmes du ciel et de la terre / Les images que forment les nuées'. He perceives the finitude of the poet himself, the one who 'déjà mourant' offers these flowers up. And he perceives the vitality too of these forms: 'des corolles, l'homme, la femme, / Dont la couleur me semble restée vive'. The poet – staggering, bleeding, 'déjà mourant' – offers up two forms 'Dont la couleur me semble restée vive'. He sacrifices himself so that a form might retain some vitality.

And yet, as the hope afforded by the sacrificial lamb – 'L'agneau ?' – resulted only in an endless destruction, 'Rien qu'à jamais / Le couteau et le sang', the poet's sacrificial ideal too results only in devastation. Bonnefoy writes, 'Mais tout cela, c'est dans le caniveau, / Il a jeté l'offrande refusée'. '[T]out cela' – the vitality and the colour of 'des corolles', the belief in an ideal that might transcend the finitude of existence, in the act of sacrifice – all of that is in the gutter. The poet discards the refused offering altogether. He

³⁰ Bonnefoy is perhaps playing upon the image of gold, as he does in 'L'Heure présente III', drawing a connection between the image of the man with the golden brain and Baudelaire's famous line of verse: 'Tu m'as donné ta boue, et j'en ai fait de l'or' (Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 192). This is in many ways an archetypal twentieth-century figure who reflects many different artists. This figure who scrapes over 'des raclures de l'esprit' calls to mind Artaud, the one who writes, 'Ce que vous avez pris pour mes œuvres n'étaient que les déchets de moi-même, ces raclures de l'âme que l'homme normal n'accueille pas' (Antonin Artaud, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), I, p. 114). There is perhaps also an echo of Bataille's writings here: he is the thinker preoccupied with the image of bleeding fingers. He writes in 'Notre Dame de Reims' of works that 'on ne saurait les écrire qu'avec des mains saignantes' (Georges Bataille, *La Place de la Concorde*, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 33-4). He is also the thinker preoccupied with a thinking of ritual sacrifice, particularly, the nature of the artistic offering. See Georges Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

makes, as Bataille writes of Rimbaud, ‘un sacrifice où tout est victime’.³¹ He sacrifices the offering itself. He suggests that existence is always already offered up. It is, as Nancy write, ‘insacrifiable’. We experience, as Nancy writes, ‘l’inappropriation comme son mode le plus propre d’appropriation, et en vérité comme le mode unique de toute appropriation’.³² The lamb is endlessly sacrificed, and nothing is ever redeemed from the flux. As Nancy urges us simultaneously to think ‘l’existence, en son essence, est sacrifice’ and ‘l’existence n’est pas sacrificable’.³³

The poet asks, in despair: ‘Ne vais-je ramasser que du flétri, / De l’insensé, une odeur âcre, fade ?’ Is nothing to be redeemed from the passage of time? Can the poet only assemble faded and senseless things, a sharp and sickly odour of decay?³⁴ The poet asks, ‘Roses, roses ?’ What of the beauty of the rose? What of the ideal form? What of the flower that Mallarmé described as ‘l’absente de tous bouquets’?³⁵ Bonnefoy responds,

³¹ Bataille, *L’Expérience intérieure*, p. 175.

³² Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 102.

³³ Using these two formulations, Nancy suggests that existence is not ‘sacrifiable’ because it is always already offered up (Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 101). Nancy writes, ‘La finitude n’est pas un « moment » dans un procès et dans une économie. L’existence finie n’a pas à faire jaillir son sens par un éclat destructeur de sa finitude. Non seulement elle n’a pas à le faire, mais en un sens elle ne peut même pas le faire : la « finitude », pensée rigoureusement [...] signifie que l’existence n’est pas sacrificable’ (Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 101).

³⁴ This image is once again redolent of Baudelaire’s poetry, what Bonnefoy describes in an essay as ‘l’odeur fade des fleurs qui ont flétri dans un vase, ou celle de lotions éventées dans des flacons débouchés’ (SSB, 301).

³⁵ Mallarmé, ‘Crise de vers’, *Œuvres complètes*, II, p. 213. Bonnefoy’s sonnet ‘Je te donne ces vers’, which appears in *L’Heure présente*, is written with Mallarmé’s ‘l’absente de tous bouquets’ in mind. In this sonnet, time once again exerts its salutary influence upon the poet. The poet who would sacrifice the finitude and contingency of existence for an ideal discovers that the only true offering is the passing form itself, ‘un bouquet [qu’il n’a] qu’une heure’. Bonnefoy writes,

D’aucuns disent, perdus dans leur rêve, « une fleur »,
Mais c’est ne pas savoir que les mots tranchent,
S’ils croient le désigner, dans ce qu’ils nomment,
Transmutant toute fleur en idée de fleur.

Cisaillée la vraie fleur se fait métaphore,
Cette sève qui coule, c’est le temps
Qui s’achève de se déprendre de son rêve.

‘N’existent / Que roses déchirées, pas de rose en soi, / Pas de corolle à soutenir un monde’.

The poem returns to the theme with which the sequence as a whole began: the loss of a transcendental or ideal form. There is no ‘rose en soi’ and no ‘corolle à soutenir un monde’. There are only torn and transient roses. Nothing of these contingent and ever-changing forms can be abstracted or preserved. There is no form to uphold or to contain the world. No form transcends the finitude of existence, the endless passing – the endless sacrificing – of all forms.

‘L’Heure présente III’: ‘la forme naissante’

The final poem of ‘L’Heure présente’ begins with the words ‘Et pourtant’. This final poem counters the darkness and somnolence – ‘l’onde de non-être’ – of ‘L’Heure présente I’. It counters the poet’s despair at his failure to redeem a transcendental form from the flux in the final stanzas of ‘L’Heure présente II’. The final poem insists that, although the forms of the world are fleeting and illusory, although we cannot accede to any kind of absolute, the linguistic act nonetheless continues to produce a transformative light. Something happens when we use language and this happening transforms the physical world. Sometimes, the world seems to be distilled to an ‘or pur’. Sometimes, a pathway of light cuts through the dark waters of the unconscious. The light that is awakened by language continues to offer us a beauty, a way of knowing, even a truth. Something of these three ideals survives – beauty, knowledge, truth – even though they no longer have any kind of transcendental or absolute form. They survive, Bonnefoy suggests, as a kind of light, a way of happening, a force.

Qui veut avoir, parfois, la visite se doit
D’aimer dans un bouquet qu’il n’ait qu’une heure,
La beauté n’est offrande qu’à ce prix. (HP, 12)

In ‘L’Heure présente III’, Bonnefoy investigates the nature of the light that language awakens. This is a light that asks always to be brought into being, to be given form. It moves endlessly, never crystallising into any one form. Gesturing repeatedly towards the horizon, Bonnefoy insists that the sun that is setting is also the sun that is rising. We might call it dusk or dawn, we might impose a beginning or an ending, but the light keeps bringing form into and out of being. It keeps ‘othering’ all our constructions. And the horizon of language, the horizon of sense, Bonnefoy suggests, functions in a similar manner. The poetic act is the burgeoning of a form that is always ‘à venir’. The poet seeks to open himself up, as Nancy writes in *Le Plaisir au dessin*, to ‘un être de pouvoir, un *energeia* de *dynamis*, pour le dire avec les mots d’Aristote, la réalité de l’élan, de la naissance, du commencement’.³⁶ The poet who lamented the passing of form in the first poem of the sequence now celebrates the birth of form, the birth of ‘cette forme en train de se former’, ‘la forme *en tant que force*’, to use two of Nancy’s formulations.³⁷ This thinking of form is a response to ‘L’Heure présente’. It is a response to a historical era that has seen the passing of form. It is a response also to the present moment, the moment that is always unfurling and always ‘à venir’, the hour that *presents*.

In the first stanza of ‘L’Heure présente III’, the poet is concerned with the performativity of language. He utters a series of words and meditates upon the moment of illumination that ensues. In the second stanza, he listens to a word and perceives a vision. He draws two words together and perceives that, as they come into contact, they awaken ‘Dans un peu de soleil’.

Et pourtant, je puis dire
 Le mot chevêche ou le mot safre ou le mot ciel
 Ou le mot espérance,
 Et voici que, levant les yeux, je vois ces arbres

³⁶ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 49.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22, p. 52.

Qu'embrase sur la route un soleil du soir.
C'est un feu de grande douceur, ses braises claires
Ont transmuté le feuillage en lumière,
Et ici, c'est le pré, là-bas des cimes,
Et leurs mains se rejoignent, leurs corps se cherchent
Avec cette évidence, silencieuse,
Qu'il faut bien que l'on nomme de la beauté.
Je regarde ces arbres toute une heure,
Est-ce là du visible, à peine, puisque
La visibilité se fait or pur
Alors pourtant qu'alentour la nuit tombe.

J'écoute un mot, je cherche à voir ce qu'il désigne,
Et il me semble, irrépressiblement,
Que cette chose se recolore, que des yeux
Se rouvrent, étonnés,
Dans le rêve de pierre de l'esprit.
Les mots sont-ils porteurs de plus que nous,
En savent-ils plus que nous, cherchent-ils
Au bord d'une eau du fond de notre sommeil,
Noire autant que rapide, refusée,
Le gué d'une lumière ? Et celle-ci
A-t-elle sens, sur une voie tout autre,
Certes, que l'espérance d'hier encore ?
J'écoute un mot, le rapproche d'un autre,
Ce dormeur et cette dormeuse se réveillent
Dans un peu de soleil, leurs mains se touchent,
Est-ce que ce n'est là que du désir,
Le même rêve à changer de visage ?
L'éclair qui troue en vain le ciel d'ici ?

Mais véridique est la peinture de paysage,
Véridique la fleur
Du genêt, au désert,
Véridique la voix qui l'a nommée
Dans nos mots exterminateurs, sur des pentes tristes,
Et vois, sur le chemin,
Ces deux-là qui s'éloignent.
Il s'arrêtent, soudain,
Se tournent l'un vers l'autre. S'affrontent-ils,
S'insultent-ils, vont-ils s'entre-déchirer, par angoisse
D'être l'illusion qu'ils se savent être ?
Mais non, ils semblent regarder le ciel du soir,
Où un soleil enfant paraît, sa tête immense

Haute déjà sur le vieil horizon.

Et c'est vrai que les arbres que j'ai vu
Se faire incandescence continuent,
Guère loin d'eux, à être ce rayon
D'on ne sait d'où venu, qui ne s'efface
Qu'en affinant, de son dernier instant,
Les grains d'un or qu'on dirait sans matière. (HP, 91-93)

The opening lines of 'L'Heure présente III' insist upon the moment of awakening that occurs when the poet utters a series of nouns: 'Et pourtant, je puis dire / Le mot chevêche ou le mot safre ou le mot ciel / Ou le mot espérance'. The poet can say each of these ordinary words – he can evoke the little owl, this local sandstone, the sky, or even hope itself³⁸ – and these acts of reference cause him to lift his gaze and see a change in the physical world: 'Et voici que, levant les yeux, je vois ces arbres / Qu'embrase sur la route un soleil du soir'. Suddenly, the trees along the roadside are ablaze in the evening sunlight. This light is a fire – 'un feu de grande douceur' – that catches and transforms the entire landscape. Using the verb 'transmuter', Bonnefoy presents this transformation as an alchemical process: 'ses braises claires / Ont transmuté le feuillage en lumière'. The leaves of the trees have turned to pure light. Suddenly animated, the meadows and the peaks of the trees are reaching for one another, like two desirous bodies: 'Et ici, c'est le pré, là-bas des cimes, / Et leurs mains se rejoignent, leurs corps se cherchent'. This transformation occurs 'Avec cette évidence, silencieuse, / Qu'il faut bien que l'on nomme de la beauté'.

³⁸ The first two nouns are highly specific: the 'chevêche' is a particular species of owl, the little owl; the word 'safre' is patois for 'sandstone' in the region in which Bonnefoy owned 'La maison que nous avons tant aimée'. 'Le safre', Bonnefoy writes, 'c'est plus ou moins le grès, ce que l'italien ou l'anglais nomment de façon plus parlante l'*arenaria*, le *sandstone*, mais dans le patois d'où il me venait, c'était quelque chose de bien plus vague et de presque insaisissable, tantôt la dureté du fer et tantôt une substance géline, tantôt une matière fragmentée en éclats dispersés dans l'herbe et tantôt des volumes bien dessinés, même des sphères, avec ceci en plus que parfois la surface en était couverte de mousse et parfois portait des entailles, comme alors une page d'une écriture inconnue' (SSB, 373-4). Moving from the particular to the general, the poet then utters 'le mot ciel / Ou le mot espérance'.

The alchemical process gives rise to an aesthetic principle, a conception of 'la beauté'.³⁹

And even though the poet watches this scene for a whole hour, he doubts whether that which he is seeing is actually visible: 'Je regarde ces arbres tout une heure, / Est-ce là du visible, à peine, puisque / La visibilité se fait or pur / Alors pourtant qu'alentour la nuit tombe'. All that is visible is being gradually distilled to a pure gold: 'La visibilité se fait or pur'. The darkness, steadily falling all around, is reducing everything to a golden light.

A similar vision is presented by the second stanza. The poet now listens to a word and tries to see what it designates: 'J'écoute un mot, je cherche à voir ce qu'il désigne'. As the sound transforms itself into a vision, the object itself starts to colour and to take shape. A form arises as if of its own accord, 'irrépressiblement', and the poet's eyes open wide with astonishment 'Dans le rêve de pierre de l'esprit'. This 'rêve de pierre' – a citation from Baudelaire's 'La Beauté' in which Beauty declares, 'Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre' – is the dream of a permanent form, a dream of immortal beauty.⁴⁰ The poet glimpses, once again, something like a transcendental aesthetic ideal.⁴¹ Amazed by

³⁹ Bonnefoy's use of alchemical imagery, alongside a conception of 'la beauté', to evoke this light awakened by language is suggestive of Baudelaire's vision of the poet as 'un parfait chimiste'. In 'Baudelaire contre Rubens', Bonnefoy writes, 'Le « parfait chimiste », d'abord, c'est spécifiquement le poète, celui qui recueille dans le vaisseau de son imagination active les données confuses, énigmatiques, de l'apparence parce qu'il veut les dégager de la boue de l'existence vécue et en extraire l'or d'une beauté supérieure' (SSB, 56-7).

⁴⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 21.

⁴¹ Bonnefoy writes a version of Baudelaire's 'La Beauté' in *L'Heure présente*, criticising the escapist and wishful nature of the aesthetic dream. Bonnefoy begins his version with the question, 'Suis-je belle, ô mortels, / Comme un rêve de pierre ?' (HP, 58). Bonnefoy believes the aesthetic impulse within Baudelaire's poetry, 'son rêve de la rédemption de la forme' (SSB, 57), to be a lesser impulse, a misguided dream. The desire for beauty, Bonnefoy insists, gives way in Baudelaire's most important texts to a more ethical impulse, 'l'attestation de l'autrui' (SSB, 292). Of *Fusées*, for example, Bonnefoy writes, 'Ce que montre cette page de *Fusées*, évidemment capitale, c'est la soudaineté avec laquelle la pensée baudelairienne de l'Idéal, cruelle comme elle est par nature à l'encontre des êtres tels qu'ils existent, a fait place à la compassion, à l'expérience d'une solidarité essentielle ; et elle révèle aussi que ce renversement de valeurs substitue ce que l'on peut dire une ontologie à une autre. Avant dans l'esprit du poète, c'était l'Idée, l'Idée seule, qui avait être, réalité, avec pour caractère de se situer hors du temps : « Je suis belle, ô mortels, comme un rêve de pierre », lui faisait dire un poème. [...] Maintenant, [...] ce sont ces corps mortels

this vision, the poet wonders whether language knows more than us, whether words actually project beyond our reach: ‘Les mots sont-ils porteurs de plus que nous, / En savent-ils plus que nous, cherchent-ils / Au bord d’une eau du fond de notre sommeil, / Noire autant que rapide, refusée, / Le gué d’une lumière ?’ He imagines words probing at the limits of a dark and swiftly moving water, ‘une eau du fond de notre sommeil’. They seek to ford this water, to make some kind of passageway of light, ‘Le gué d’une lumière’. The poet anxiously wonders whether this liminal sense is different from traditional conceptions of sense. Does this particular light make sense ‘sur une voie tout autre, / Certes, que l’espérance d’hier encore ?’

The poet dramatises one further linguistic act, one further scene of illumination: ‘J’écoute un mot, le rapproche d’un autre’. The poet draws two words into proximity with one another. ‘Ce dormeur et cette dormeuse’, they are sleeping bodies, like the bodies of ‘L’Heure présente I’. Stirring one another from their sleep, touching one another, they awaken ‘Dans un peu de soleil’. As they come to life, generating a new light, the poet wonders once again if this light is simply the product of same old metaphysical desire, the desire for transmutation or transcendence: ‘Est-ce que ce n’est là que du désir, / Le même rêve à changer de visage ? / L’éclair qui troue en vain le ciel d’ici ?’ Is this light another transcendental dream that flashes ‘en vain’, that will – like the lightning in the first poem – withdraw even as it presents itself? Is the moment of illumination, the burgeoning of form always ‘Le même rêve à changer de visage ?’

And yet, no sooner does the poet voice this concern, than he insists that certain acts of creation are ‘véridique[s]’, scrupulously accurate or truthful. The poet singles out

et même déjà vieillis qui, dans l’épaisseur de la nuit terrestre, s’affirment’ (SSB, 175). Bonnefoy’s meditation on beauty in this poem is also clearly part of a meditation upon how the poet can, like Baudelaire, ‘substitue[r] ce que l’on peut dire une ontologie à une autre’.

landscape painting and – gesturing towards Leopardi’s ‘Il Fiore del Deserto’⁴² – the poetic act: ‘Mais véridique est la peinture de paysage, / Véridique la fleur / Du genêt, au désert, / Véridique la voix qui l’a nommée’. He points towards what seems to be a landscape painting, two figures who, as they walk away, pause and turn to face one another. Bonnefoy asks, ‘S’affrontent-ils, / S’insultent-ils, vont-ils s’entre-déchirer, par angoisse / D’être l’illusion qu’ils se savent être ? Non’. Rather than despairing at their illusoriness, their non-being, rather than attacking and destroying one another, the two figures ‘semblent regarder le ciel du soir, / Où un soleil enfant paraît, sa tête immense / Haute déjà sur le vieil horizon’. They look towards the evening sky where a young sun, ‘un soleil enfant’ – rather than a setting sun – makes itself visible. The large and round form of its childish head is already rising high upon the horizon. Looking at this ambivalent form, the two figures do not despair of their own illusoriness. They perceive that the transitional movement by which form is endlessly coming into and going out of being is ‘véridique’. Reassured, the couple accept the transience of existence and the illusoriness of all forms.⁴³

The poet insists upon the truthfulness of the act of painting or the poetic act. He points towards this image of the rising and setting sun, and then, in the fourth stanza, he returns to the image of the golden light evoked by the first stanza. The stanza opens with the words, ‘Et c’est vrai’. It is *true* that the trees continue to glow incandescent with a mysterious light ‘D’on ne sait d’où venu’. This light disappears as it distils itself to a pure gold: ‘[elle] ne s’efface / Qu’en affinant, de son dernier instant, / Les grains d’un or qu’on dirait sans matière’. As the light gradually withdraws, becoming more and more attenuated, the poet is touched by ‘un or pur’. Bonnefoy presents this process of

⁴² Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2010), p. 286.

⁴³ We come close once again here to Roger Pearson’s understanding of the therapeutic nature of Mallarmé’s *drame solaire* (Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, p. 20). And yet, here, once again, it is not that the *drame solaire* grants a glimpse of a transcendental pattern, but, rather, the sun is shown to be simultaneously rising and falling. All form is shown to be simultaneously coming into and going out of being.

dissipation as an alchemical process. And that which is distilled is not some immutable essence or higher form, but an insubstantial substance, ‘un or qu’on dirait sans matière’.

Touched by this light, by its beauty, sense, and truth in these opening stanzas, the poet has been touched only by the force by which it passes, by which it absents itself.⁴⁴

In the opening stanzas of ‘L’Heure présente I’, the lightning – this divine light, this absolute form – falls and breaks. Now, in the opening stanzas of ‘L’Heure présente III’, a light distils the world to ‘un or pur’ only as it retreats, as it disappears. Bonnefoy repeatedly dramatises the movement by which a metaphysical light or an absolute form ‘se vide de lui-même’, as Nancy writes.⁴⁵ And as he embraces this dissipation, the light starts to burgeon once again. This light that has been rising up within language, now addresses the poet directly. Issuing a series of imperatives, urging the poet to bring it into being, it articulates the force of its becoming. Each of these appeals and commands articulates the desirous and the unappeasable nature of this force. This force asks to be given form and yet will never be satisfied by any fixed form. As Bonnefoy witnesses the dissipation of an alchemical gold and the voiding of a metaphysical light, forms start to emerge that

⁴⁴ As has been observed in previous chapters, Nancy also refuses the traditional conception of beauty, sense, or truth as an identifiable or appropriable form or essence. And yet, Nancy, like Bonnefoy, continues to use these words. Beauty and truth in Nancy’s work are used to designate a certain force of presentation or manifestation. Consider, for example, Nancy’s use of ‘la beauté’ and ‘la vérité’ in the following extract from *Le Plaisir au dessin*: ‘Le propre, la propriété du propre n’est pas appropriable [...] (l’« être » n’y est pas un état, mais une transitivity, l’acte de s’envoyer vers soi). Il n’y a nul « assez » pour aucune propriété, et sa vérité, qui est sa manifestation, doit toujours se revenir à se montrer inachevable – transformation infinie ouverte en toute forme, par toute forme belle : la beauté est dans le rapport à l’infinité. Elle expose l’extension infinie d’une forme finie’ (Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 128). Nancy presents truth as a ‘manifestation’ that is ‘inachevable’ and beauty as an exposition of ‘l’extension infinie d’une forme finie’. Nancy’s conceptions of beauty and truth – like Bonnefoy’s meditations on the light – are governed by the transitivity and the inappropriability of existence. Nancy insists at once upon the finite nature of form and the infinite nature of its ‘presencing’. This ‘transformation infinie ouverte en toute forme’ is its expression of truth or beauty.

⁴⁵ Nancy, *La Déclosion* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), p. 100.

privilege, as Nancy writes, ‘le moment de la force formatrice plus que celui de l’œuvre formée, et celui du plaisir désirant plus que celui du plaisir assouvi’.⁴⁶

Regardez-moi,
Dit ce qui monte en eux du fond du langage,
Oubliez qui vous êtes pour que je sois,
Faites de moi ce que je cherche à être,
Renoncez votre rêve pour le mien,
Aimez-moi, donnez-moi forme, visage
De vos mains d’ombre et de lumière. Le ciel du soir
Est, peut-être, une rose. Rose à venir
Par vos travaux d’horticulteurs dans les nuées,
Rose d’arbres, de fleuves, de chemins,
De lits défaits, de mains simples, cherchant
D’autres mains, à l’aveugle. Rose des mots
Qu’une dit à une autre, par rien encore
Que le frémissement de la paume, des doigts.
Le ciel change. La rose sans pourquoi,
C’est vous, dans les jardins de sa couleur.
Regardez, écoutez ! Le moindre mot
A dans sa profondeur une musique,
Le phonème est corolle, la voix, c’est l’être
Qui peut fleurir, dans même ce qui n’est pas.

Et tard, ayant pitié
Des images. Voyez que Danaé
Se redresse sur sa couche, même sachant
Qu’illusoire est le dieu. Et qu’Ophélie
Emporte dans ses yeux le ciel, la terre,
Comme une certitude, bien que se noie
Leur double feu dans sa totale nuit.
Devant nous, mes amis, est-ce le soir
Ou une sorte d’aube informe ? Du soleil
Tout de même, au profond de ces glaires rouges. (HP, 93-4)

This light that rises up from the depths of language speaks. Issuing a series of imperatives, it urges us to look at it, ‘Regardez-moi’. It urges us to forget ourselves, offering ourselves up as vehicles so that it might come into being. It urges us to renounce our dreams, so that we might pursue its dream instead: ‘Oubliez qui vous êtes pour que je sois, / Faites de moi

⁴⁶ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 67.

ce que je cherche à être, / Renoncez votre rêve pour le mien'. The exteriority of this voice and the passivity that it seems to demand, however, are dependent on a certain kind of interiority and activity. This force can only come into being if we bring it into being. The voice urges us, 'Faites de moi ce que je cherche à être'. It appeals, 'Aimez-moi, donnez-moi forme, visage / De vos mains d'ombre et de lumière'. The image of hands of shadow and light once again suggests the interplay of oppositions that brings this force into being. Our hands give this force form, guided by internal and external forces, knowing and not knowing, conscious and unconscious of that which is being brought into being.

And the light goes forward desirously, always wanting. This desire is beginning to take shape as the poet ventures the words, 'Le ciel du soir / Est, peut-être, une rose'. Once again, Bonnefoy uses the image of a rose to suggest an ideal form. The setting sun, this red halo of light above the horizon, is perhaps a rose. And yet here, using the Mallarméan 'peut-être', Bonnefoy presents this ideal form as a hypothesis, a provisional form. The evening sky is a rose that could be, a 'Rose à venir / Par vos travaux d'horticulteurs dans les nuées'. It is a rose that is yet to be cultivated amidst the shifting and ephemeral forms of the clouds. It is a proliferation of endless possible forms: 'Rose d'arbres, de fleuves, de chemins, / De lits défaits, de mains simples, cherchant / D'autres mains, à l'aveugle'. And all these things together, the community and contiguity of all forms – a jumble of trees, rivers, paths, unmade beds, and hands – are potentially a rose.

Form is envisaged as a reaching or a searching. It is a 'Rose [...] des mains simples, cherchant / D'autres mains, à l'aveugle'. It is the gesture that occurs 'à l'aveugle', the selfsame opening itself up to the other, form opening itself up to *l'informe*. A similar gesture recurs in the next image, where the rose becomes a kind of speechless speech: 'Rose des mots / Qu'une dit à une autre, par rien encore / Que le frémissement de la paume, des doigts'. The unfurling form is a *frôlement* between two bodies, a sharing that is

almost, but not quite, an articulation. And then suddenly, the evening sky changes. All these forms are swept away and a new image presents itself: ‘Le ciel change. La rose sans pourquoi, / C’est vous, dans les jardins de sa couleur’. The ‘rose à venir’ has now become ‘La rose sans pourquoi’. Form, far from being something that transcends the unfurling of contingent material existence, is nothing other than the unfurling of being itself. We are ‘La rose sans pourquoi’. And look, listen, this voice urges us, ‘Le moindre mot / A dans sa profondeur une musique, / Le phonème est corolle, la voix, c’est l’être / Qui peut fleurir, dans même ce qui n’est pas’. Language itself unfurls as a wave of sound. Each sound is a corolla, a form. It is being itself, existence flourishing without ground or foundation, ‘dans même ce qui n’est pas’. The motion always resurges and it is always left wanting. As Nancy writes in *Le Plaisir au dessin*,

[...] la forme se tend, s’étend, se bande et s’élance. Cette émotion se donne le sens de la forme qui se sent se former et s’ouvrir – à rien d’autre qu’à elle-même, à son propre sens de forme. Sensation, sentiment, assentiment du mouvement qui se reçoit, qui s’approuve et qui se redemande en sa propre naissance.⁴⁷

The form that asks to be brought into being is not any kind of abstraction or representation of being. It is, rather, an efflorescence of being itself, a swelling of sound, a force that surges outwards, going blindly in search of itself ‘dans même ce qui n’est pas’.⁴⁸

The poet now turns back, looking towards the images of Danaé and Ophelia again, with compassion. Look, he urges, ‘Voyez que Danaé / Se redresse sur sa couche, même

⁴⁷ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ It is striking to note that Nancy also writes, on the next page, that ‘l’« imitation de la nature » n’a jamais été en son fond que l’imitation de l’inimitable force formatrice d’une germination ou d’une génération et d’une croissance supposée sans art, c’est-à-dire sans artifice et donc sans recherche ni effort’ (Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 44). Like Bonnefoy’s thinking of the efflorescence of form, Nancy’s thinking of the opening or unfurling of form deconstructs the traditional separation between artificial and natural form, between the work of art and the physical world. It deconstructs the traditional vision of the work of art as a mimetic form. Form becomes ‘ce consentement à soi d’un mouvement dont la loi la plus profonde est une fidélité à lui-même, à son propre élan – à sa pensée et à son émotion, non pas la reproduction d’une forme donnée’ (Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 43). Both the poet and the philosopher conceive of form in terms of force and movement; they conceive of form as part of the unfurling of being.

sachant / Qu'illusoire est le dieu'. The poet then urges us to see what seems to be the opposite image: 'Et qu'Ophélie / Emporte dans ses yeux le ciel, la terre, / Comme une certitude, bien que se noie / Leur double feu dans sa totale nuit'. One female figure embraces an illusion as if it were real; another embraces the utter certainty of terrestrial existence, only to see all these certainties dissolve 'dans sa totale nuit'. Bonnefoy presents these two images in which illusion and certainty reveal themselves to be dynamic and interdependent forces and then he asks: 'Devant nous, mes amis, est-ce le soir / Ou une sorte d'aube informe ?' Returning to the image of the ambivalent, low-lying sun, he wonders, is this indeterminate miasma an evening or a dawn sun? Is this light dissipating or burgeoning? Either way, he insists, a light persists in the depths of this red and viscous albumen: 'Du soleil / Tout de même, au profond de ces glaires rouges'. A form is coming into and going out of being. Certainty and illusion – as the images of Danaé and Ophelia suggest – are coterminous forces. This light forms in order to dissolve, dissolves in order to form.

Having listened to the voice of this light that rises up within language, having felt its force burgeon alongside all the other forces in the physical world, the poet then turns to address one who sits, looking out of a window, upon a modern urban landscape. He addresses the 'enfant / De ce siècle appauvri'. He addresses one who – like Baudelaire, from whom this formulation is borrowed – has lived through a century without belief, without faith in 'le projet commun de l'humanité' (SSB, 291).⁴⁹ The poet wonders how this lonely figure envisages the world. He wonders what form human existence takes in his or her eyes.

⁴⁹ Strikingly, this formulation 'enfant / De ce siècle appauvri' is another burst of direct speech from one of Baudelaire's poems, 'La Lune offensée'. Addressing the poet, the moon says: '« Je vois ta mère, enfant de ce siècle appauvri, / Qui vers son miroir penche un lourd amas d'années, / Et plâtre artistement le sein qui t'a nourri ! »' (Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 142). This impoverished century, Bonnefoy suggests, is a century in which the aesthetic has triumphed at the expense of love and fellow feeling. 'L'art', Bonnefoy writes, 'cette sorte d'art, ruine l'être' (SSB, 292).

Tu regardes le ciel
Par la fenêtre ouverte, enfant
De ce siècle appauvri. Le monde,
Ces toits de tôle grise, ces fumées,
Cette page souillée, déchirée ? Non, tes mots
Refusent de s'effacer de l'univers,
De ce néant ils veulent faire des collines,
Des vallées, des chemins. N'est-ce que pierre
Et neiges ces montagnes, non, au sommet
De l'une, pas trop haute,
S'évase une prairie. Et de grande paix
Te semble, vu d'ici,
Le passage de l'ombre sur l'émeraude
De son herbe sans fin. Plus bas le fleuve
Rassemblant, éclairant. Vas-tu savoir
Espérer que cette évidence a quelque sens,
Qu'elle s'affermira dans ta parole,
Qu'elle sera l'aimant qui reprendra
L'esprit au désespoir, vas-tu penser
Qu'il n'est de l'être qu'en image mais c'est là
Suffisance mystérieuse, pour autant
Que ce néant consente à la lumière
Indifférente, incréée, par des gestes
De ses contours, des mouvements, du rire
Au profond de sa voix tragique se portant
Vers d'autres de ces ombres ? Peut-être non.
Le ciel noircit d'un coup, la foudre tombe.

Mais tu te tournes
Vers ta chambre louée dans cette banlieue,
Elle est petite, mais ses murs sont presque blancs,
Et tu y as placé, en ce premier jour,
La *Diane et ses compagnes*, de Vermeer,
Une simple photographie mais d'un échange
De si grande douceur, à mains si pures
Que ces quelques figures se détachent
Du gris et noir de la couleur absente
Comme non le soleil mais mieux et plus.
Un rêve, c'est mensonge. Mais rêver, non.
Que se fassent tes rêves
Deux combattants, l'un masqué, mais parfois
Riche de son visage découvert. (HP, 94-6)

This ‘enfant / De ce siècle appauvri’ is looking out towards the sky from a window. The poet asks, using another series of appositions, ‘Le monde, / Ces toits de tôle grise, ces fumées, / Cette page souillée, déchirée ?’ The poetic syntax, with its clipped appositional formulations and recurrent past participles, ‘appauvri’, ‘souillée’, ‘déchirée’, evokes a used and tired landscape. The whole scene is a dirtied and tattered page that presents a dirtied and tattered vision. The poet wonders – posing yet another question – whether this tired landscape, these grey metal rooftops and trailing bands of smoke, are really the world. No, he immediately insists, ‘tes mots / Refusent de s’effacer de l’univers’. Words want to make something out of this nothingness: ‘De ce néant ils veulent faire des collines, / Des vallées, des chemins’. Like the human voice, ‘l’être / Qui peut fleurir, dans même ce qui n’est pas’, words want to come into being. They want to bring forms into being, ‘des collines, / Des vallées, des chemins’. Words set in motion what Nancy describes as ‘la forme formatrice de soi’.⁵⁰

And these words immediately start to sketch a different kind of landscape: ‘N’est-ce que pierre / Et neiges ces montagnes, non, au sommet / De l’une, pas trop haute, / S’évase une prairie’. Out of the cold, hard forms of the distant mountains, the vision of a meadow opens up. This expanse of emerald green, with cloud shadows trailing across it, seems infinite: ‘Et de grande paix / Te semble, vu d’ici, / Le passage de l’ombre sur l’émeraude / De son herbe sans fin’. Below the meadow, a river swells and catches the light, and Bonnefoy uses enjambments and present participles to evoke this movement: ‘Plus bas le fleuve / Rassemblant, éclairant’. As the noun ‘l’éclair’ makes itself felt in the verb ‘éclairer’, the lightning that flashed at the beginning of the sequence is flashing here again. The use of the verb, the present participle in particular, ‘éclairant’, insists upon the dynamism of this flashing light. Between the worn and used forms of the city, and the cold

⁵⁰ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 22.

and hard forms of the mountains, this light is '*la forme naissante*', '*la forme naissante dont la forme n'est nulle part donnée*', to use Nancy's formulation.⁵¹

Turning to the onlooker, the '*enfant / De ce siècle appauvri*', he asks in the immediate future tense, '*Vas-tu savoir / Espérer que cette évidence a quelque sens, / Qu'elle s'affermira dans ta parole, / Qu'elle sera l'aimant qui reprendra / L'esprit au désespoir*'. Rather than simply affirming the sense of these shifting forms, Bonnefoy poses a question that leaves their sense open to affirmation. One question leads to another, each one projecting forwards in the future tense. And each question – asking are you going to know to hope that this '*évidence*' has some sense – suggests that this sense is only something that we can ready ourselves to receive. We can only allow it to come to us, like '*l'aimant qui reprendra / L'esprit au désespoir*'. Another question, formulated in precisely the same manner, begins with an enjambment and then runs over eight lines of verse: '*[...] vas-tu penser / Qu'il n'est de l'être qu'en image mais c'est là / Suffisance mystérieuse, pour autant / Que ce néant consente à la lumière / Indifférente, incréée, par des gestes / De ses contours, des mouvements, du rire / Au profond de sa voix tragique se portant / Vers d'autres de ces ombres ?*' The poet asks whether – having accepted the sense of this '*évidence*' – we are also prepared to think the '*imaged*' or imaginary nature of these presences. This illusoriness is mysteriously sufficient '*pour autant / Que ce néant consente à la lumière*'. Its negativity – the absence of any kind of fixed or permanent form – consents to the light. It consents '*par des gestes / De ses contours, des mouvements, du rire / Au profond de sa voix tragique se portant / Vers d'autres de ces ombres*'. The light provokes an endless movement, the endlessly changing gestures of the contours of

⁵¹ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 36.

things.⁵² These gestures and movements become a kind of laughter, rising up from the voice of ‘ce néant’ itself: ‘des gestes / De ses contours, des mouvements, du rire / Au profond de sa voix tragique’. Being laughs, joyously, tragically, at its perpetual effusion. Its forms are always going out – like the ‘je’ of ‘La Voix lointaine IX’ – to dance with other shadows, ‘se portant / Vers d’autres de ces ombres’. Bonnefoy asks if we are going to accept the mysterious sufficiency of this movement. Are we prepared to open ourselves up to the endless turning over and the endless ‘othering’ of form?

Over these twelve lines of verse, one clause after another runs together, suggesting the dynamism and fluidity of that which we are being asked to accept. Both these rhetorical questions, with their use of the near future tense – ‘Vas-tu savoir / Espérer que [...]?’ , ‘vas-tu penser / Qu[e] [...]?’ – ask us to think ‘un sens’ and ‘[un] être’ that is always ‘à venir’. They ask us to open ourselves up to a world that is always surging forwards. Words want to bring forms into being; the river is flowing, swelling, and catching the light; being is casting endlessly different forms ‘par des gestes / De ses contours, des mouvements’. The poet asks whether this onlooker is going to open himself up to this movement. He asks us whether he or she is going to know to hope. The final lines of the poem read: ‘Peut-être non. / Le ciel noircit d’un coup, la foudre tombe’. The dynamic of hope, the dynamic of language, Bonnefoy suggests, can only be accepted or rejected. When the words ‘Peut-être non’ sound out, the light suddenly changes. The world darkens and we hear the ominous sound of thunder.

As this figure turns away from the changing light and changing forms of this landscape, he looks indoors towards a painting that hangs on the wall: *Diana and her Companions* by Vermeer. The same force, the same light, is manifest in this painting. It is

⁵² Being consents to the negativity of the light, to what Nancy describes as ‘*Lux sans fiat*, n’ayant pas de sujet créateur ni de source, étant la source, mais en soi-même diffractée, en soi-même rayonnante, explosante, brisée’ (Nancy, *Les Muses*, p. 61).

a cheap reproduction in black and white. The image has been stripped of all colour, and yet, it depicts ‘un échange / De si grande douceur, à mains si pures / Que ces quelques figures se détachent / Du gris et noir de la couleur absente / Comme non le soleil mais mieux et plus’. The return of the words ‘douceur’ and ‘pures’ echoes the ‘feu de grande douceur’ and ‘or pur’ of the first stanza. This ‘échange’ is like the gesture that unfurls blindly, silently, between two people in the fifth stanza: ‘des mains simples, cherchant / D’autres mains, à l’aveugle’, ‘le frémissement de la paume, des doigts’. The exchange between the figures in this painting is so tender, the hands that reach out to touch are ‘si pures’, that these bodies stand out ‘Du gris et noir de la couleur absente’. They stand out ‘Comme non le soleil mais mieux et plus’. The ‘échange’ generates a light. The dynamic by which the self opens onto the ‘other’ gives the painting its force. Bonnefoy writes, ‘Un rêve, c’est mensonge. Mais rêver, non’. Whereas the dream that crystallises is a ‘mensonge’, the act of dreaming – the movement between dreams, between forces – is not. The poet urges now in the subjunctive mood, opening language up to this future motion, ‘Que se fassent tes rêves / Deux combattants, l’un masqué, mais parfois / Riche de son visage découvert’. In an image that parallels the ‘échange’ between the two bodies, the poet urges us to allow our dreams to be ‘deux combattants’. He urges us to embrace the struggle or the dance between dreams, the movement by which one dream overturns and unmask another. May we always open ourselves up to the ‘other’ and to the movement of the ‘échange’. May we open ourselves up to the force of becoming, possibility itself.

In the final stanzas of the poem, Bonnefoy returns to the image of the skyline. This figure, the ‘enfant / De ce siècle appauvri’, watches the evening *live*. He perceives the vital and desirous, the living force – ‘la forme formatrice’ – of the evening sky. Personifying the sky and the earth as male and female, as two lovers, Bonnefoy echoes the creation myth at the heart of almost every world religion: the sexual union of sky and earth, the celestial

male and the terrestrial female.⁵³ The poet embraces the vitality that is restored to the sky and the earth by the personification of these two forces, and yet, as in his reworking of the *drame solaire*, he rethinks the closure of this myth, the union of earth and sky, the physical and the metaphysical.

Tu regardes vivre le soir. Le ciel, la terre
Nus, allongés sur leur couche commune.
Et lui, rien que nuées,
Il se penche sur elle, prend dans ses mains
Sa face respectée.
Dieu ? Non, mieux que cela. La voix
Qui se porte, essoufflée, au-devant d'une autre
Et riante désire son désir,
Anxieuse de donner plus que de prendre.
Ne vas-tu pas penser, ce soir encore,
Que puissent devenir un même souffle
La matière, l'esprit ? Que de leur étreinte
Apaisée, desserrée,
De la couleur, de l'or retomberait,
Quelques débris de verre, taché de boue,
Mais à briller, dans l'herbe ?

Et la mort, comme d'habitude ? Et n'avoir été
Qu'une image chacun pour l'autre, tisonnant
Un âtre, dans rien que nos mémoires, oui, je veux bien,
Mais souviens-toi
Des prairies de l'enfance : de tes pas
Pour t'allonger à regarder le ciel
Si lourd, de tant de signes mais se faisant
Immensément en toi cette bienveillance,
Les éclairs de chaleur des nuits d'été.
Heure présente, ne renonce pas,
Reprends tes mots des mains errantes de la foudre,
Écoute-les faire du rien parole,
Risque-toi
Dans même la confiance que rien ne prouve,

Lègue-nous de ne pas mourir désespérés. (HP, 96-7)

⁵³ This vision of a sexual union between earth and sky echoes the myth alluded to all through the poem. Zeus – the god who manifests himself as a thunderbolt, a flash of lightning – descends in a golden shower and fertilises Danaé.

The sky and the earth are stretched out together, naked, ‘sur leur couche commune’. The horizon becomes a lovers’ bed. It becomes a place of sharing, of intimacy and exposure. As the sky, the male, leans over the earth, the female, he is immediately associated with nothingness, with emptiness. He is ‘rien que nuées’. His advances towards the female are gentle: ‘Et lui, rien que nuées, / Il se penche sur elle, prend dans ses mains / Sa face respectée’. Bonnefoy – posing and immediately answering his own question in the negative, presenting one possibility and its opposite – writes: ‘Dieu? Non, mieux que cela’. This is not a god. With a certain degree of irony, allowing ‘Dieu’ to rhyme with ‘mieux’, the poet insists that this is something better. It is ‘La voix / Qui se porte, essoufflée, au-devant d’une autre / Et riante désire son désir, / Anxieuse de donner plus que de prendre’. The sky and the earth are two voices – two finite beings, two ethereal forces – that move towards one another desirously, out of breath. Laughing, these voices desire only the desire of the other. They are anxious to give rather than to take. The earth and the sky open generously onto one another, desiring only the perpetuation of this opening.

Bonnefoy presents the sky and the earth as two vital and desirous forces. The desire that he presents is not a desire for some object, a desire for appropriation. It is a desire for sharing, for an opening onto the ‘other’, and for a perpetuation of desire in and through the ‘other’. As Nancy writes,

Désir n’est pas tension mélancolique vers un objet manquant. C’est tension vers ce qui n’est pas un objet : à savoir, la syncope elle-même, en tant qu’elle a lieu dans l’autre, et qu’elle n’est pas « propre » qu’en étant dans l’autre et de l’autre.⁵⁴

The traditional image of a union between sky and earth – the consummation and closure of metaphysics – gives way to the desirous but endlessly giving motion by which sky and earth open onto one another. A vision of a closed horizon – a union of sky and earth –

⁵⁴ Nancy, *La Déclosion*, p. 128.

gives way to a vision of an endless opening. One image opens out of the other.⁵⁵ The two dreams have become, as the poet suggested in the previous stanza, ‘deux combattants’.

Similarly, the final lines of this stanza set two rhetorical questions in apposition. Echoing the questions posed in the immediate future tense in the previous stanza, but now using a negative formulation followed by the subjunctive mood, Bonnefoy asks, ‘Ne vas-tu pas penser, ce soir encore, / Que puissent devenir un même souffle / La matière, l’esprit ? Que de leur étreinte / Apaisée, desserrée, / De la couleur, de l’or retomberait, / Quelques débris de verre, taché de boue, / Mais à briller, dans l’herbe ?’ The poet asks us to envisage one possibility and then another: a union of matter and spirit and a slack and soothed embrace. As the two lovers fall away from one another, colour and gold fall. The ‘pluie d’or’ falls once again, but now, it is a few shards of glass, spattered with mud, catching the light amidst the grass. Setting these two questions in apposition, Bonnefoy aligns images of union and of release, of consummation and of dissemination. The metaphysical and the physical, the closed and the open, he suggests, are not simply opposing terms. As Nancy writes, ‘La clôture toujours déclôt d’elle-même’.⁵⁶ Bonnefoy invites us to think union and release as part of the same dynamic, ‘sa clôture et sa décloison conjointes’, to use another of Nancy’s formulations.⁵⁷ The lightning – this symbol of the divine – falls, breaks, and is dispossessed of itself. As Nancy writes, ‘*Le passage du dieu est identique à son retrait*’.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The poet’s deconstruction of the religious or Christian myth here – the sexual union of sky and earth – comes very close to Nancy’s vision of Christianity as a force that inevitably deconstructs itself. Meditating upon the Christian doctrine of *kenosis*, Nancy thinks God as ‘un dieu se vidant de Dieu, ou un « divin » de l’exhaustion de toute substance divine’ (Nancy, *La Déclousion*, p. 100). Nancy writes, ‘En ce sens, le dieu chrétien (voire monothéiste) est le dieu qui *s’aliène* : il est le dieu qui *s’athéise* ou qui *s’athéologise*, si l’on peut un instant forger ces mots. (C’est Bataille qui avait, pour son compte, fait le mot « athéologique ».) [...] « pas-de-dieu » veut dire, non pas l’autosuffisance immédiate de l’homme ou du monde, mais ceci : pas de présence fondatrice’ (Nancy, *La Déclousion*, p. 127).

⁵⁶ Nancy, *La Déclousion*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 126.

⁵⁸ Nancy, *La Déclousion*, p. 176.

This vision of the passage of the divine, of '[la] clôture et [la] décloison conjointes', offers a finite and terrestrial thinking of the metaphysical. The penultimate stanza then confronts the questions of finitude and death: 'Et la mort, comme d'habitude? / Et n'avoir été / Qu'une image chacun pour l'autre, tisonnant / Un âtre, dans rien que nos mémoires [?]' Using the formulation 'Et la mort, comme d'habitude?', Bonnefoy asks if we can accept the habitual nature of death, what Nancy describes as 'l'imminence perpétuelle du mourir'.⁵⁹ He asks if we can accept the transience of existence, the fact that all that we share passes by and we are left only with images and illusions. We are left poking a fire, trying to stir up heat and light, 'dans rien que nos mémoires'. To both these questions, the poet responds, 'oui, je veux bien'. He accepts the impermanence of every act, the groundlessness and the fleetingness of existence.

And yet, in the same breath, he insists upon the importance of one memory: 'Mais souviens-toi / Des prairies de l'enfance'. Remember, he urges, the moment in childhood when you used to go out in order to lie down upon the grass and look up at the sky: 'de tes pas / Pour t'allonger à regarder le ciel / Si lourd, de tant de signes mais se faisant / Immensément en toi cette bienveillance, / Les éclairs de chaleur des nuits d'été'. The sky was heavy, laden with so many signs: 'Les éclairs de chaleur des nuits d'été'. As streaks of lightning came and went, the child experiences only an immense feeling of 'bienveillance'. The child is open to the unfurling and the passing of form, to the dynamism and unpredictability of the present moment. Nancy writes of childhood,

⁵⁹ With the withdrawal or the retreat of the divine comes 'l'imminence perpétuelle du mourir'. Bonnefoy writes in his early essay on Baudelaire, 'Rien n'est que par la mort. Et rien n'est vrai qui ne se prouve par la mort' (IM, 34). Nancy writes, 'Le divin se retire de ses demeures [...] Il devient, se retirant, l'imminence perpétuelle du mourir. La mort en tant que fin naturelle d'un mode de l'existence est elle-même finie : le mourir devient le thème de l'existence selon l'imminence toujours suspendue de la parousie', (Nancy, *La Déclousion*, p. 85). In *Le Poids d'une pensée*, Nancy writes: 'Puis-je penser que « la mort » va naître en moi ? qu'elle est sans cesse en train de naître ? Assurément, je ne puis penser autre chose' (Nancy, *Le Poids d'une pensée*, p. 131).

Ce qui, de la naïveté, fait la vérité et donne jouissance, [...] c'est le caractère naissant, natif (*naïf*), c'est l'élan d'une forme qui se cherche elle-même et ne se trouve qu'en quête de soi. L'art a partie liée avec la remise en jeu d'une enfance des sens et du sens, [...] c'est-à-dire, d'une enfance de tout notre rapport au monde.⁶⁰

As the poet accepts the passing and loss of all things, the habitual death of form, he opens himself up to 'le caractère naissant' of the present moment. He rediscovers 'cette bienveillance', 'une enfance de tout notre rapport au monde'.

As the poet imagines this moment in childhood, the child's receptivity to the unfurling and passing of form, he addresses the present hour. Using a series of imperatives, making a list of appeals, he prays to the present moment. He appeals to the 'Heure présente' to keep presenting itself, 'Heure présente, ne renonce pas'. He urges it to sound forth and to speak again: 'Reprends tes mots des mains errantes de la foudre'.⁶¹ These 'mots des mains errantes de la foudre' are words that are not quite words. A physical gesture, a wandering of hands, rumbles across the sky. The poet urges the present moment to listen to these words, to attend to its own performance: 'Écoute-les faire du rien parole'. These words thunder out amidst the nothingness. They articulate being – bring being into being – 'dans même ce qui n'est pas'. The hour *presents*. And the poet urges it onwards, 'Risque-toi, / Dans même la confiance que rien ne prouve'. He urges it to keep risking itself, to keep making the only truly sacrificial or redemptive gesture, moving into the unknown and opening up the space of becoming, displaying 'la confiance que rien ne prouve'. The final stanzaic break, between the penultimate and the ultimate line, conveys something of this risk. An empty space opens up before us. The final line of the poem ventures out into the emptiness and, there, it appeals: 'Lègue-nous de ne pas mourir désespérés'. Amidst the emptiness the poet appeals to the only force available. He appeals

⁶⁰ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 71.

⁶¹ This appeal to the present moment is reminiscent of the refrain in *Les Planches courbes*, 'Que ce monde demeure!' (PC, 25).

to the present moment – as it passes – to bequeath us its way of passing. The poet asks only to be shown how to accept this motion. He asks only to die without despair.

‘L’Heure présente III’, the final poem of this sequence, embraces the movement by which form unfurls amidst a nothingness. The poet accepts the transience, the groundlessness, the negativity of existence. He accepts ‘la mort, comme d’habitude’, ‘n’avoir été / Qu’une image chacun pour l’autre’. He opens himself up to what Nancy describes as ‘*la forme naissante*’ of the present moment.⁶² The prayer to God – to the lightning, to Zeus, to a transcendental form – becomes a prayer to the present moment. It becomes a prayer to the very movement by which the lightning falls and expends itself. The poet asks, not for any single act of redemption, but for the endless renewal, the endless redemption, of the present moment.⁶³ He offers nothing up except this address: an address to the present moment that unfurls in the present moment. In *Le Poids d’une pensée* Nancy writes,

La singulière transmission de l’art, ni perdu ni sauvé, serait l’offrande d’une offrande, et peut-être l’offrande de l’offrande même, absolument. Ou bien, la présentation de la présentation même. L’art nous est présenté, par lui-même en somme et pour lui-même – ou pour la présentation qu’il forme.⁶⁴

The hour *presents*. And this hour, as it presents, as it unfurls itself, asks only for a gesture of presentation. It asks for a poetic gesture that knows itself to be the offering of an offering: a fleeting burst of energy, a dynamic, a light. This gesture of presentation is simply part of the presentation – part of the unfurling – of existence. As Nancy writes in

⁶² Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 33.

⁶³ As the child goes out to lie down upon the grass and to look up at the sky, the poem goes out towards this perpetual opening. To return to a quotation from Nancy, partially cited earlier, the poem goes out towards a ‘Plaisir [...] d’un désir moins tendu vers un objet à atteindre que vers cette ouverture même, vers son élan, vers sa propre possibilité, [...] la possibilité indéterminée du possible en tant que tel, d’un pouvoir-être qui n’est pas la forme encore abstraite d’un être à incarner [...] mais qui est bien plutôt lui-même une modalité et une consistance de l’être : un être de pouvoir, une *energeia* de *dynamis*, pour le dire avec les mots d’Aristote, la réalité de l’élan, de la naissance, du commencement’ (Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 49).

⁶⁴ Nancy, *Le Poids d’une pensée*, p. 56.

Les Muses, 'L'art n'a pas affaire au « monde » entendu comme extériorité simple, comme milieu ou comme nature. Il a affaire à l'être-au-monde dans son surgissement même'.⁶⁵

This gesture risks itself and passes by. It bequeaths us only the force of its passing.

Conclusion

At the beginning of 'L'Heure présente', a light that seems absolute or divine falls and breaks, revealing its contingency and its finitude. Bonnefoy dramatises the repercussions of the passing of this light and the passing of this form, in the first and second poems of the sequence: the disintegration of theology, the sense of non-being that overtakes human existence, and the negativity that comes to define the individual life. In the final poem of the sequence, however, Bonnefoy insists that the passing of this light does not leave humanity in darkness. The dissolution of this form does not leave us in a fallen and broken world. Rather, the light persists. It continues to pass, and form continues to unfurl. The final poem of 'L'Heure présente' – this paean to light, dynamism, and burgeoning form – insists that humanity might have faith in a finite light, in a passing form. Humanity might have faith in being itself, in a force that, neither building on a foundation nor aspiring to any kind of absolute, passes into and out of being. The continual passing of form, Bonnefoy insists, allows us to experience the dynamic, inaugural, and redemptive force – 'le caractère naissant' – of a form 'à venir', a form that is always burgeoning and coming into being. It allows us to experience the motion by which being itself goes in search of 'l'inchoatif de son élan', to use Nancy's formulation.⁶⁶

A sense of the divine or the metaphysical remains, as do notions of beauty, sense, and truth. We are touched by the very motion by which this light comes into being *and*

⁶⁵ Nancy, *Les Muses*, p. 36.

⁶⁶ Monnier, Nancy, *Allitérations*, p. 79.

grows tired of being and withdraws. We are touched by the movement by which our transcendental dream ‘toujours se déclôt d’elle-même’. As Nancy writes, ‘Ce retrait n’est pas une séparation sacrée : il est, très précisément, le retrait du sacré et l’exposition du monde au monde’.⁶⁷ The nothingness into which this light retreats is the openness where all movement gets its start, where form comes into and goes out of being, where one being turns to another. And so, in the final stanza of ‘L’Heure présente’, Bonnefoy prays to this openness and this dynamism. He prays to the present hour, to the hour that presents itself and passes by. He prays to the very dynamic of presentation itself, to the dynamic that ‘disencloses’ all closure and that ‘redeems’ all form, all existence, in each and every moment.

⁶⁷ Nancy, *La Déclosion*, p. 85.

Conclusion

The Performative and the Negative

This thesis has explored Bonnefoy's reaction to a crisis of faith, both personal and historical, in the structures of conceptual thought. He depicts this crisis in personal or psychological terms in 'La Terre', 'Hopkins Forest', or 'La Voix lointaine', exploring how the human mind grapples with and seeks to apprehend finite material existence, only to realise that it exceeds and evades our linguistic structures. He depicts this crisis in historical terms in 'L'Heure présente', a remarkably summative poem that appears towards the end of his career, dramatising the dissolution of the over-arching conceptual narratives of the Western tradition and a steadily increasing awareness of the 'unmasterability' of finite and dynamic human experience. Bonnefoy presents himself – much like Baudelaire in 'Les Phares'¹ – as the heir to this crisis. The poet is the one who must confront the fallen ideals of the tradition and the fractured nature of language and who must offer another way of knowing the world and another way of existing within language.

This thesis has used the terms 'negative' and 'performative' to analyse the way in which Bonnefoy confronts this crisis. It has examined how Bonnefoy confronts an experience of negativity within his poems: an experience of groundlessness, an intuition of the radical lack of any kind of foundation or absolute that might support or structure our conception of existence. Bonnefoy dramatises, in many of his later poems, a moment in which he realises – like Mallarmé during the *crise de Tournon* – that nothing transcends

¹ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I, pp. 13-14.

the finite motion by which things come into and pass out of existence. He accepts that the timing and the spacing of existence are irreducible. Watching a swirl of snowflakes, dust circling along a path, or a mist enveloping a landscape, Bonnefoy accepts that language has little purchase upon these movements and metamorphoses, upon this sensible and material contingency. The stable structures of language – its certainties, its absolutes – reveal themselves to be mere fictions.

This thesis has then examined how, in response to negativity, Bonnefoy develops a finite and dynamic thinking of the poetic act. It has analysed how he presents performative or theatrical poetic acts, staging apostrophes and ‘monodialogues’, foregrounding acts of address and reference. His performative or theatrical utterance engages with the temporal and spatial dynamics of its own unfurling. It is concerned precisely with its own gesture of presentation. Bonnefoy cultivates this act in all its finitude, knowing that it delivers nothing other than its own dynamic, its own fleeting act of relation. It serves no higher aim and results in no external product. It ‘offers up’ nothing from the flux. Certainly, if Bonnefoy reworks Mallarmé’s *drame solaire* at the beginning of ‘La Terre’, it is to suggest the incongruous or impossible nature of a poetic performance that aspires towards transcendence. For Bonnefoy, the solar drama (the sun orbiting the earth, the turning of the seasons, cycles of life and death) is a performance from which nothing can be extracted or retained. Light flares and dissipates, and nothing – no form or rhythm – transcends the infinite finitude of this process. It is an expenditure without reserve. Bonnefoy insists upon a practice of poetic performance that embraces this endless expenditure, that is not ‘undone’ by the negativity of existence but, rather, fuelled and strengthened by it.

In a series of recent interviews, Bonnefoy suggests that he uses theatre as a model for poetry because theatre generates a heightened awareness of finitude. In an interview

with Fabbio Scotto in 2003, he affirms, ‘Je ressens de plus en plus la parenté de la poésie et du théâtre’ (IN, 388) and he observes,

Le théâtre, c’est de saisir les hommes et les femmes dans leurs rapports immédiats, en des moments où l’urgence des situations, rendant évidente la finitude, prend de court la pensée, et va libérer le savoir profond. De ce fait le lieu de l’action théâtrale, sa scène, c’est celui même où la poésie se retrouve dans son travail d’écriture. (IN, 390)

The theatre, for Bonnefoy, is a space of finite interactions or exchanges, a space of contingency and possibility. It presents a dynamic upon which the stable structures of conceptual thought have no hold. In the movement or exchange between bodies, these conceptual structures fall away and ‘[un] savoir profond’ is liberated. Language opens onto the endless passing and opening of finite existence, onto a way of knowing that is in itself an opening and a release. It embraces the rhythms of its own fleeting performance and of our finite, shared, and physical existence: a dynamism and a finitude, a timing and spacing, that could never be distilled to anything higher or more essential. This ‘liberation’ is, Bonnefoy observes in this interview, ‘cette rénovation du théâtre que seule la poésie pourrait accomplir’ (IN, 390). In an open theatrical space, a space in which the fourth wall ‘s’est descellé’, a space that Nancy describes as ‘un théâtre du monde’,² poetry ‘se retrouve dans son travail d’écriture’.

Staging acts of address and reference, Bonnefoy attempts to open language up to this finite moment of interaction. Cultivating sound and rhythm, the inherently performative aspects of language, he tries to keep its conceptual or signifying structures always in motion. He keeps them in dialogue with forces that exceed them. Language thus resonates or dances on a *limen* between the conceptual and the anti-conceptual, the selfsame and the other, the closed and the open. The poem continually welcomes the coming of the other. It is an amazed cry issued as ‘un soleil enfant’ comes over the

² Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 43.

horizon. It is an apostrophe to an infant or a distant voice, a dance with a shadow. It is the excited exclamation that greets a streak of lightning that flashes and then absents itself. The images of the ‘infans’, the one who does not speak, or the wordless voice, or the fugitive flash of light all recur. Bonnefoy attempts to open the poem up to forces that exceed language, that are articulate and illuminating in their *excess*. The poem welcomes the birth of presence and, without attempting to hold or preserve it, welcomes its coming and its going. ‘La présence’, Nancy writes, ‘est elle-même la naissance, la venue qui s’efface et qui se reconduit’.³ ‘La présence’, he observes, ‘n’est donnée que dans ce surgissement et dans ce franchissement qui n’accède à rien d’autre qu’à son propre mouvement’.⁴

Poetry is no longer conceived of as a representative but as a performative task. Its function is no longer to *transpose* being but to *propose* a relation to being, to open itself up to a certain realm of possibility. In the essay ‘La Ressource des mots’, setting up an opposition between a referential and a non-referential use of language, Bonnefoy writes:

Il y a deux fonctions, distinctes, de la parole. D’une part dire, transposer dans les mots un objet qu’elle s’est donné, réel ou imaginaire, explicite ou non, simple ou de nombre de composantes; et d’autre part, instituer un lieu où qui parle propose à d’autres que lui une vie changée, moins aliénée de son grand possible. Le texte de poésie est cet instituer, ce donner à être. (SPV, 328)

Whilst the first function of language divides the world into two distinct realms, one physical and one linguistic, one immanent and one transcendent, with the linguistic act effecting a *transposition* between the two, the second function of language simply opens up a space, ‘un lieu’. This space is the space of address and of *proposition*. A proposition is an utterance that goes forwards, that goes towards. It is prospective, exploratory, and searching. The poet, addressing himself to ‘d’autres que lui’, proposes ‘une vie changée’.

³ Nancy, *Le Poids d’une pensée*, p. 134.

⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

Addressing himself to the sharing of being and the contingent force of our own exchange or interaction, the poet proposes a life capable of being transformed, a life ‘moins aliénée de son grand possible’. Our becoming, he proposes, is to be proposed. It is ours to propose. And the poem is ‘cet instituer, ce donner à être’. The proposal that the poem makes is at once performative and negative. It is an act, contingent and fleeting, real and improvised, an act that can only be repeated and reaffirmed. It is an opening, a step forwards into an emptiness, into an unknown and unmade future. It is, like the unfurling of the present moment, ‘la confiance que rien ne prouve’ (HP, 97).

Bonnefoy and Nancy

Bonnefoy’s performative stance, his conception of the poem as ‘cet instituer, ce donner à être’, is born of a refusal to philosophise *about* existence. The poet attempts to remain faithful to a finitude that consumes all philosophies and all abstractions. There is no place outside of this world, he insists, from which we can speak about the world. To assume such a transcendental and atemporal perspective is the *hubris* of all conceptual thought. And it is in this respect that Bonnefoy’s poetics and Nancy’s thought converge. Both the poet and the philosopher resist the transcendental signifying structures of language and attempt to find, within language, a way of entering into relation with being. They explore the text’s capacity to be ‘with’ or ‘towards’ corporeal or material existence. And this act of being ‘with’ or ‘towards’ is philosophical, but only to the extent that philosophy is re-envisaged as a kind of linguistic *praxis*. It is ‘an activity that does not result in an external product but that aims only at itself’, to use Marie-Eve Morin’s definition.⁵ The linguistic,

⁵ Marie-Eve Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p. 29.

poetic, or philosophical act points to nothing higher or further than the consciously finite act by which it enters into relation with being.

Bonnefoy and Nancy thus respond to a conceptual crisis, a loss of faith in a transcendental act of signification, in a very similar way. For they both retain confidence in and they both cultivate language's transient act of reference. This is not an act of reference in the traditional sense, a designation of a discrete unit of signification. In Bonnefoy's and Nancy's writings, reference is an experience that occurs at the limits of signification, when appropriative and essentialist impulses are deconstructed and when language points towards all that exceeds it: a fugitive presence, a moment of embodied sense, the dynamism of shared physical existence. Nancy writes, 'le sens offert à la limite de la signification nous prend dans le mouvement d'une présentation à'.⁶ This is the experience that Bonnefoy wishes upon the child in 'Le Tout, le rien':

Te soient ces branches qui scintillent la parole
Que tu dois écouter mais sans comprendre
Le sens de leur découpe sur le ciel
Sinon tu ne dénommerais qu'au prix de perdre. (DF, 141)

The act of reference becomes an act of being 'towards'. It is an opening from the linguistic to the non-linguistic, an experience of 'contact in separation'. And with a revised conception of reference comes a revised conception of 'le sens'. For both Bonnefoy and Nancy, 'le sens' is not that which is signified but, rather, that which the act of reference touches upon fleetingly. Neither transcendent nor immanent, it is, as Nancy writes, 'trans-immanent'.⁷ In everyday life, in transient acts of contact, it manifests and absents itself endlessly.

⁶ Nancy, *L'Oublie de la philosophie*, p. 98.

⁷ 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

Both Bonnefoy and Nancy attempt to reconcile a deconstructive thinking of the irreducible timing and spacing of existence with a desire for contact and exposure. They affirm an ephemeral act of relation that is never definitively accomplished or achieved. They affirm an act of address, of touching and not touching, that trembles on the threshold of sense. Singular, infinitely finite, it is 'sustained' only in repeated *surgissements* (what Nancy describes as 'un singulier pluriel'). The sense of existence is affirmed physically, sensually, materially, and intellectually in an endless series of 'touches du sens'.⁸ And so, whilst the text does not affirm any conventional form of ontology, ethics, or materialism, it affirms the sense of its fleeting and open-ended relation to being, or to the other, and to material presence. It affirms ontology, ethics, and materialism in finite and dynamic terms, as on-going performances, as an endless opening to the singular plurality of sense.

The temporal and spatial nature of this thinking of being 'with' or being 'towards' is heavily influenced by Heidegger's writings on ontology: his thinking of being as appearing, as the spatialising-temporalising event of being-in-the-world.⁹ Like Heidegger, Bonnefoy and Nancy refuse to think existence according to the model of the Subject. They reject Hegel's synthesising movement towards the enclosure of self-identity or Husserl's reduction of existence to a set of immanent, perceptual principles. And yet, although they both think being as a spatialising-temporalising event, Bonnefoy and Nancy often tend to read Heidegger *away* from Heidegger. Whereas Heidegger emphasises the essential non-appearing of Being itself, they emphasise the generosity of the motion by which existence

« transcendance » de son « immanence » - sa *transimmanence*, ou plus simplement et plus fortement, son existence et son exposition' (Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 91).

⁸ Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, p. 24.

⁹ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes, 'The "environment" does not arrange itself in a space which has been given in advance; but its specific world-hood, in its significance, articulates the context of involvement which belongs to some current totality of circumspectively allotted places. The world at such a time reveals the spatiality of the space which belongs to it' (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 138). For an over-view of the relationship between Nancy and Heidegger, and their respective thinking of the timing and spacing of existence, see James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, pp. 80-113.

endlessly arrives. Whereas Heidegger's thinking of the 'openness' of the disclosure is accompanied by a thinking of the proper (with its attendant images of gathering, sheltering, and binding), they insist upon a radical opening by which existence always finds itself outside of itself, a centrifugal or ex-centric movement outwards.

Bonnefoy's and Nancy's writings, enacting this endless opening and arrival, offer a subtle critique of the lingering attachment to the phenomenological method that makes itself felt in Heidegger's work. As Nancy writes,

toute espèce de phénoménologie, voire d'outre-phénoménologie, n'ouvre pas encore assez à la venue du sens, ou au sens en tant que venue, ni *immanente*, ni *transcendante*. Cette venue est infiniment présumée : on ne s'y laisse pas prendre, emporter, mettre à bout.¹⁰

Bonnefoy's poetry and Nancy's philosophy offer a post-phenomenological thinking that opens language up to the unmasterable excess of the temporal and spatial dynamics of being, the 'coming' of 'la présence' or 'le sens'. The poet and the philosopher insist that the sense of being resides precisely in our exposure to this excess, in the act of being surprised or overtaken.

It is important to note that, whilst Bonnefoy and Nancy insist upon the unmasterable and excessive nature of this 'coming', they are both willing to affirm a gesture of being 'with' or 'towards' this irreducible excess. They both have faith in language's ability to 'touch upon' that which cannot be mastered. This is the act of relation or touch that Derrida critiques in *Le Toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, suggesting that it remains fatally implicated in a haptocentric metaphysics of presence.¹¹ One can argue, however, that Bonnefoy's and Nancy's willingness to think a contact in separation between the linguistic and the non-linguistic allows them to overcome some of the limitations of Derrida's thinking. It allows them to affirm something beyond an aporetic textual logic, a

¹⁰ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 34.

¹¹ Derrida, *Le Toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, pp. 179-80.

withdrawal of presence or identity, and an experience of radical alterity (*even if* this ‘beyond’ is nothing more than an ephemeral dynamic, an irreducible excess). Bonnefoy and Nancy write ‘towards’ embodied sense, material presence, and the ‘other’. They affirm the gesture of the human hand or ear or voice or text, as it opens onto ‘an ungraspable being-to or being-towards of finite sense’ (to use James’ formulation).¹² They celebrate the act that reaches without appropriating and seeks without arriving, and they affirm the transitivity of our shared physical existence.

This willingness to affirm a movement ‘towards’ means that a certain thinking of subjectivity, or community, or even form persists within their works. ‘L’Heure présente’ is an exploration of the endlessly finite and mutable experience of form that arises out of the ashes of absolute form. In a similar manner, Bonnefoy and Nancy are eager to think the endlessly finite and mutable experiences of ‘community’ and ‘subjectivity’ that survive deconstruction. ‘La Terre’ affirms an experience of community or togetherness which is nothing more than a restless reaching, a syncopated rhythm of presence and absence, intimacy and distance. Subjectivity is presented as a dance in ‘La Voix lointaine’: an oscillation between interiority and exteriority, self and other, sound and sense.

The experience of subjectivity, community, or form is thus affirmed as a recurrent series of acts of exposure, as an ex-centric motion. It is affirmed, not in any self-contained figure of identity, but as a *praxis*, a rhythm. Bonnefoy speculates in ‘La Terre’ that the sharing of existence might be affirmed as the steady rhythm of the scythe, as the infinitely finite flashing of light on its blade. As the poet speaks as self and other at the end of ‘La Terre’, speaking *with* the stones in the evening sun or *with* the masons as they return home in their van, his repeated acts of consent build into a steady incantation. The seventeen poems about snow at the beginning of *Début et fin de la neige* – each one brief, slight,

¹² James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 104.

sketch-like – suggest the singularity of each encounter and the steady proliferation of these singularities. Bonnefoy affirms the rhythm of a continual *surgissement*. Of such a conception of rhythm, Nancy writes,

Le rythme n'« apparaît » pas, il est le battement de l'apparaître en tant que celui-ci consiste simultanément et indissociablement dans le mouvement de venir et partir des formes ou de présences en général.¹³

Nancy insists that rhythm must not be conceived as a form or a figure but as the motion that brings being into being, the motion that creates and transforms all forms and figures. It is the pulse, the systole and diastole, by which presence comes to us and goes from us. This is the rhythm that brings the 'subject' or the 'nous' into and out of being in Bonnefoy's poems. It is the rhythm that brings the poem into and out of being, reminding us that language not only signifies but resonates, is not only a *poesis* but also a *praxis*. This rhythm reminds us that the poetic performance is part of the performance of being, part of 'le mouvement de venir et partir des formes ou de présences en général'. It at once affirms the performativity and the negativity of existence.

In the series of close readings presented within this thesis, I have attempted to follow the *praxis* of this performance. Resisting abstraction, reading across stanzas and across series of poems, I have tried to remain faithful to the poems' sustained or recurrent dynamics. I have attempted to trace these movements and to 'touch upon' their sense without conferring undue conceptual structures or lucidity upon them. Given the anti-conceptual nature of this subject matter, the poetic performance's resistance to critical appropriation, I have often found it necessary to write 'with' or 'alongside' the poems, to accompany their performances. I have at times used an allusive and appositional style of writing that shadows both Bonnefoy's and Nancy's styles. I have embraced the poem's tendency to subvert or to 'other' the critical discourse. For if Bonnefoy and Nancy

¹³ Nancy, *Les Muses*, p. 46.

cultivate a finite and dynamic linguistic performance and insist upon the reality of its relation to being, it is in the hope that we, as readers, will be acted upon and in some way transformed. And so, I have tried to be responsive to this challenge and to be receptive to the syntactical or stylistic modifications that the poem seems to request.

Going Forward

This thesis opens up a new perspective on the late work of a major poet. Reading Bonnefoy's poetry in the light of Nancy's work, it allows us to perceive the affinities that exist between Bonnefoy's poetic practice and a later strain of Deconstructionist thought. We discern how Bonnefoy is at once faithful to an experience of finitude that deconstructs all forms of transcendental signification and affirmative of language's fleeting act of reference to finite material existence. In broader terms, it allows us to perceive a growing affinity in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century France between anti-conceptual forms of poetry and deconstructive practices of philosophy. As we compare Bonnefoy's and Nancy's writings, we become aware of a deconstructive current that runs, not only through Bonnefoy's consciously finite poetic performances, but through the fragmentary and dehiscent texts of a poet such as du Bouchet, or the violently incisive and blindly material writings of Dupin, or Jaccottet's work of 'unknowing'. We become aware that all these poets are working *within* language *against* language. They are all attempting to open conceptual language up to an ephemeral, mobile, and unmasterable experience of physical reality.

The comparison between Bonnefoy's and Nancy's writings also allows us to discern a resolutely affirmative impulse, often under-appreciated, in late Deconstructionist or post-Deconstructionist thought. As Bonnefoy equates poetry with hope, Nancy equates

philosophy with movement, energy, and momentum. He affirms the dynamics of sense, finitude, materiality, and corporeity. And we perceive this same affirmative impulse in the work of other philosophers such as Catherine Malabou. She affirms a materialist metamorphic ontology, a thinking of the plasticity of being and language¹⁴ that has much in common with Nancy's conception of 'la forme naissante' in *Le Plaisir au dessin*¹⁵ or Bonnefoy's thinking of the infinitely finite nature of form in 'L'Heure présente'. At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, there is a strong desire, amongst both philosophers and poets, to affirm dynamics that survive deconstruction, the mutable forms which come to us in passing, as presence withdraws and existence is made and un-made.

These connections between late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century French poetry and Deconstructionist (or post-Deconstructionist) thought open up many exciting avenues for future research. Widening the scope of this current project, one might explore how Bonnefoy's and Nancy's commitment to negativity grows out of their respective (somewhat unorthodox) readings of Hegel, or how their thinking of the inappropriable excess of 'la présence' or 'le sens' is influenced by the writings of Georges Bataille. One might also forge interesting connections between Bonnefoy's poetry and other contemporary philosophers, Malabou for example. One could examine how the 'metamorphic' poetic practice of *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*, with its motifs of composition and decomposition, relates to Malabou's materialist metamorphic ontology. In a larger study, one might compare Nancy's and Malabou's finite and dynamic thinking of materialism, analysing how it relates to poetic explorations of ephemeral and

¹⁴ See, for example, Catherine Malabou, *L'Avenir de Hegel: Plasticité, Temporalité, Dialectique* (Paris: Vrin, 1996) or Catherine Malabou, *La Plasticité au soir de l'écriture* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2004).

¹⁵ Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin*, p. 33.

changing landscapes in the work of poets such as Eugène Guillevic, Jaccottet, or even Marie-Claire Bancquart.

There is also much work to be done on Bonnefoy's relationships with other poets. Bonnefoy's interchanges with nineteenth-century Symbolist poetry, in particular, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud, suggest new ways of reading these poets and also – as Bonnefoy writes *through* and *against* these poets, debating aesthetics and ethics, transcendence and finitude, representation and presentation – new ways of understanding his own poetic practice. One might scrutinise how the anti-conceptual experimentation of these late nineteenth-century poets fosters Bonnefoy's own anti-conceptual experimentation. It might also be fruitful to examine the relationship between performativity and negativity in the work of the poets of *L'Éphémère*, analysing how Dupin's apostrophes, or des Forêts' monologues, or du Bouchet's interaction with empty space explore what Nancy terms '[la] praxis de la pensée'.¹⁶ It seems fitting that Bonnefoy's performative poetics should trigger this reappraisal of these poetic voices, opening up new ways of reading and understanding. The poem, for Bonnefoy, is precisely that which opens up new possibilities for being. It is, Bonnefoy writes, 'un examen attentif, et philosophique, des voies de la création' (IN, 108), '[un] index pointé vers une aube dans la parole' (IN, 389).

¹⁶ Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, p. 37.

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