

# Bonnefoy and “la conscience dans les pierres”<sup>1</sup>

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When Sartre’s Roquentin stood on the beach at Bouville and discovered the abyss between his mind and the pebble in his hand, he experienced the archetypal movement of modern consciousness suddenly aware of its gratuitousness and of the impenetrable otherness of things. The words, it would seem, were in the head, and the world was out there, walled away in its own space. Roquentin’s experience is also that of many other anxious sensibilities, of Valéry for instance in the *Cimetière marin*, and of Yves Bonnefoy. “Jamais”, writes Bonnefoy, “autant que dans notre siècle l’homme n’a été séparé de la substance des choses”.<sup>2</sup> Such alienation was for Bonnefoy a founding experience. One of his earliest essays examines its implications for Hegel and Kierkegaard,<sup>3</sup> the two giants of the XIXth century, whose confrontation, more than any other accident perhaps, first brought into focus the dilemma of the mind in our modern world. Significantly Bonnefoy’s essay is entitled “Donner à vivre”. Through an obvious echo he rejects the passive surrealism of Eluard’s “Donner à voir” and asks for life and that he may have it more abundantly.

All readers of Bonnefoy know his passionate espousal of earthly existence. His affirmation of the world is a constant everywhere. Already as a child he knew the possible perfection of worldly order. He tells in *L’Arrière-pays* of how he discovered in Toirac, the ancestral home in Rouergue, a sufficiency of being in the ripening fruits of the orchard and the simple gestures of country life. Like Wordsworth, the child Bonnefoy knew intimations of immortality, in his case in the cry of a bird heard on a rocky hillside. Faith was thus early grounded, and the adult poet writes from a proven background of ecstatic knowledge, “J’aime la terre, ce que je vois me comble”.<sup>4</sup>

Bonnefoy’s scepticism before the constructs of the mind is as enduring as his passion for nature. Like all enemies of Hegel, he has denounced the concept, but he has gone further and attacked not only logic, but the subtler symbolization of art as well.<sup>5</sup> For

Bonnefoy all mental systems, whether rational or aesthetic, are condemned to close themselves off in a timeless realm of Platonic essences. Existence, which they set out to capture, escapes their inevitable simplification, and the dilemma is only exacerbated as the systems grow more elaborate. Increased abstraction means increased alienation, until, at the end-point of the logos, Bonnefoy, it would seem, must postulate a mind filled with nothing but its own solipsistic chatter.

Are then consciousness and things forever separate? Is the mind with its symbols no more than a futile intrusion in the woodland paths of being? Bonnefoy must answer no, in spite of his longing for some immediate integration. He knows that the voice of consciousness cannot be turned off and he knows that to exist is also to reflect. There is no seamless eternity. We may experience paradise on earth, but the things of earth move in time and die. In Toirac Bonnefoy glimpsed perfection, but he also experienced death. Consciousness must thus cope with a moving world which corresponds only intermittently to its desire. Alienated as we have seen, by its fatal abstraction, must it then only resign itself to a bootless succession of days, or can it, in spite of the treacherous underpinning of its language, invest the wasteland of paradise lost with some meaning?

Bonnefoy's whole life as a poet has been devoted to finding a positive response to this question. He who has so consistently denounced the fantasizing tendencies of the mind, also believes, somewhat paradoxically, that words, at least poetic words, may sustain a "théologie de la terre"<sup>6</sup> and bring us to a deeper sense of the real. To do so, however, Bonnefoy declares that the words must be used in a new way.<sup>7</sup> The poet cannot manipulate them heedlessly as in the old days of linguistic innocence. He must use them to point to the real, but not to supplant it. Servants of being, words will be a means not an end. They will condition consciousness for understanding, they will bring it to a threshold of meaning, but they will there negate themselves, since the meaning is itself ineffable. In Bonnefoy's terms the words of poetry are a negative theology. They proclaim a god, only to deny him, since he is by nature greater than any definition. At all times the poet must remain watchful in order to maintain his discourse open and undogmatic. He will affirm only to deny, he will create form only to destroy it. He will advance by this *via negativa* to a positive recuperation of existence. By this dialectic Bonnefoy believes that Eden will be restored, or at least made plausible, this

time however in knowledge, not innocently as in its first revelation. All this to say finally that Bonnefoy is an ontological sinner like most modern intellectuals, that he is repentant like some, and that like a few he is saved by the redeeming grace of a deeply ascetic poetry.

Reader as well as writer, Bonnefoy has conducted his search for being through analysis of the works of fellow poets and predecessors almost as much as through his own creative efforts. The range of this reading is impressive: in France from the *Chanson de Roland*, through the leading symbolists, to contemporaries such as Valéry, Saint-John Perse, Chestov, Henein, Lely, Jaccottet, Du Bouchet and Jouve. But the list also includes Shakespeare, the German Celan, the Greek Séféris and the Japanese Haiku poet Basho. In all of these writers Bonnefoy examines the perennial problem of consciousness moving toward, yet pitted against, the world which it seeks to embrace. The goal for each one is a vivid presence of things to perception, and the obstacle is always the absence that consciousness imposes. "Il faut être absolument moderne," wrote Rimbaud. The place requires a new formula. It is the answer to this challenge which Bonnefoy pursues in all his readings.

In discussing the work of others, Bonnefoy writes always out of sympathy and with exquisite tact. Beneath the nuanced phrases, we can, however, detect preference and refusal. Among contemporaries, for instance, Valéry and Saint-John Perse elicit many reservations, whereas Jaccottet, Du Bouchet and Jouve are greeted fraternally as explorers on the same trail. Generally, for Bonnefoy, all extremes are unacceptable, whether the mandarin intellectualism of Valéry, or the pagan insouciance of Saint-John Perse. Only an on-going dialogue of head and heart will satisfy his sense of man, with his double destiny, biological and symbolizing.

Valéry,<sup>8</sup> heir to Mallarmé, and creator of M. Teste, seems a natural target for the existentialist censure of Bonnefoy. Indeed the critic has little truck with the formalist preoccupations of his predecessor. In 1944 Bonnefoy attended the last lectures of Valéry at the Collège de France and was astounded to observe that Valéry, instead of speaking of the place of poetry in the existence of man, discussed only the ideal length of a poem and the rules of the poem's construction, as if poetry were mere craftsmanship. Here in fact lies Valéry's great weakness. In Bonnefoy's eyes, he has forgotten the dialectical relationship of temporal and eternal,

of mind and matter. "La poésie est l'expérience même de cette tension, de cette déchirance irréductible entre l'existence concrète et le monde idéal et intemporel dans lequel on veut essayer de vivre. Mais Valéry a nié le premier de ces deux termes".<sup>9</sup> So it is that Valéry lives in a world without death, the immobile domain of M. Teste. Only the *Cimetière marin* approaches the real world of movement. If modern poetry is a religious experience, Valéry is an apostate. He did not take part in the great debate between intellectual knowledge and love which for Bonnefoy has inspired all French poetry since Baudelaire. Yet, outside the main-stream of modern poetry, Valéry is taken seriously by Bonnefoy on his own premises and, because Bonnefoy is in earnest, he can only reject: " Nous avons à oublier Valéry".<sup>10</sup>

Celebrant of earth's creatures and energies, Saint-John Perse might be expected to win greater favour in Bonnefoy's eyes.<sup>11</sup> Certainly the critic writes of him with considerable sympathy, but also, as we shall see, with many qualifications. If Valéry is too much in the mind, Saint-John Perse is in it too little, as if for him the whole heritage of Western consciousness were sloughed off like some cumbersome burden. Bonnefoy writes his essay from the measure of Rimbaud. With the latter Saint-John Perse shares the sense of "la réalité naturelle dans son évidence glorieuse",<sup>12</sup> a sense vividly aroused in him by his idyllic Caribbean childhood. Unlike Rimbaud, however, Perse experiences no obstacle between himself and an exalting environment. Saint-John Perse, his words and nature, all exist in an uninterrupted continuum, "un vaste corps respirant",<sup>13</sup> where the spirit knows no separation. Rimbaud is denied this communion because of the obstructive weight of his person, that character in him which is the accreted inheritance of a long Christian culture. Saint-John Perse can "return" to the world, because in him are attenuated the Christian ideas of person, of sin, and of good and evil. In fact, Bonnefoy observes, all religious positions whether Christian or otherwise are rejected by Saint-John Perse, along with most other Western forms of thinking and doubting. The man, whom Perse celebrates, is the one who lives practically and unmetaphysically with things, like the 18th-century inhabitants of Washington's Mount Vernon. Thus, for Bonnefoy, the poet's great originality is to have derived knowledge and confidence from the "geste humain", the harmonious act of man in his natural home. Bonnefoy, however, cannot share Perse's optimism. For him the dichotomy of nature and person, which Rimbaud had tried to

hold in balance, remains intact. Perse's solution is only possible at the expense of the person, a concept from which the ordinary Western sensibility is not yet freed.

Contemporary writers whom Bonnefoy admires seem at first a curiously mixed company: Jaccottet, the unassuming nature poet, Chestov, the Slavic mystic, Lely, the student of Sade, Henein, the expatriate Egyptian surrealist, Du Bouchet, the austere Franco-American intellectual and Jouve, the Catholic Freudian novelist. All, however, share Bonnefoy's hope and despair in one way or another. All are sceptical of facile, ready-made perception and all grope through their writing to a new and authentic vision glorious.

Henein is valued for his unassertive life and studies,<sup>14</sup> Lely is the admirable witness of the existential moment,<sup>15</sup> and Chestov is the heroic defender of faith against system.<sup>16</sup> The latter's well-known essay "Athènes et Jérusalem" sharply demonstrates the two ways open to Western consciousness, the essentialistic rationalism of the Greeks, or the absurd existential faith of Judeo-Christianity. Close to Bonnefoy, Philippe Jaccottet attempts to balance inner and outer. His poetry is a structuring act of enlightenment, but a modest one, since Jaccottet remains *L'Ignorant*, the speaker in the poem of this name, a text described by Bonnefoy as "un des plus beaux que l'on ait écrits et l'un des plus signifiants".<sup>17</sup>

Similar to Jaccottet in his refusal of any cultural ballast is André du Bouchet, Bonnefoy's one-time co-editor of the review *L'Ephémère*. Bonnefoy's Du Bouchet seems remarkably like Rimbaud in his quest for a truly objective poetry. Quoting Du Bouchet's line "J'écris aussi loin que possible de moi",<sup>18</sup> Bonnefoy emphasizes this rejection of the self, in so far as the self is a superstructure of accumulated civilized prejudices. Du Bouchet's sensibility, he believes, pushes back to a state of pristine receptiveness before which the world appears in unprecedented novelty. "Tu apparais, quand je tourne la tête, comme une chose sauvage",<sup>19</sup> writes the poet. Bonnefoy compares him to a beast in the forest before whose innocent and undifferentiating eye appears "l'unité même de l'être".<sup>20</sup> Put another way this unity is "la présence sauvée", an overwhelming revelation of "le non-vu, le non-compris, le non-su",<sup>21</sup> a sense of the world uncorrupted by any human distinguish, and a genuine basis for a new form of knowledge. Poetic language has a place in this illumination only as a servant. To prevent encroachment Du Bouchet pares it down

to a few minimal indications. Sparse and widely spaced on the page the words denote not appearances, but inner qualities, such as heat, cold and whiteness. Yet this economy, says Bonnefoy, is not despairing. It is nearer "la vraie vie" than much abundant and apparently generous poetry. For this reason, Du Bouchet appears in Bonnefoy's pantheon as an exemplary figure, the bareness of whose poetry provides an inexhaustible source of energy and whose concentration is unequalled: ". . . il y en a peu dans ce siècle à incarner d'une façon aussi décisive cette limite qu'il faut que notre époque rejoigne: la pureté de l'acte de poésie".<sup>22</sup>

Bonnefoy's admiration for Jouve may seem more surprising than some of his other enthusiasms. While Jouve certainly enjoys the favour of a select public, he is not generally a popular figure with avant-garde critics. Bonnefoy's passion for his work is of long standing and his interpretations are highly original. It is certainly significant that reviews of *En Miroir* and *Mélodrame*, published in 1954 and 1957 respectively, were among Bonnefoy's first acts of criticism.<sup>23</sup> It is also noteworthy that the essay on Jouve of 1972<sup>24</sup> is one of Bonnefoy's largest critical articles comparable in scope to his studies on Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. One suspects in fact a major influence or model. "Un des grands poètes de notre langue", writes Bonnefoy, ". . . le premier ou presque après Baudelaire et Rimbaud — et bien que créateur autant ou plus que quiconque de formes, de métaphores —, il a su, il a dû, *parler*, dans une société d'esprits trop subtils que l'art, les prestiges de l'œuvre élaborée, prise comme fin — l'éternel mallarméisme — intimident".<sup>25</sup> Jouve is here aligned with the great masters as a writer suspicious of art and intent on the higher value of a living word. This judgment from the 1972 essay confirms Bonnefoy's first assessment of Jouve. In 1954 the critic had already compared him to Baudelaire as a practitioner of "rhétorique profonde", in opposition to the majority of contemporary poets who maintained a cult of "rhétorique brillante".<sup>26</sup> Bonnefoy had also noted in the early reviews the religious dimension of his work, and reading perhaps from his own preoccupations, had discerned in Jouve an artist-saboteur, who destroyed the perfection of his art by deliberately violating the rules of prosody, by breaking the regularity of the line and by introducing the redemptive *faulle*. This Jouve is of course made over to some degree in Bonnefoy's own image. As with Bonnefoy himself, the pole which orients his poetry draws sense not meaning, it is dissatisfied with image and proportion, and it is

rooted in a central space of the psyche, the memory of presence.

To most readers Jouve is known as the writer who unites the intuitions of Freudian psychology with those of Catholic Christianity. Bonnefoy's major essay on him is an attempt to explain the paradox of Jouve's power for a reader, who like himself, is "sans religion".<sup>27</sup> Intent on revealing a Jouve less Jouvian than we thought, Bonnefoy's arguments are characteristically intricate. First of all, the critic sees common ground in Jouve's subordination of poetry to grace. The supreme value for Jouve is not poetry, but holy communion, just as in Bonnefoy's own case, poetry, although a last resource, is not comparable to the participation in the world which it prepares but may not supplant. Thus, in different ways, both Bonnefoy and Jouve seek an "état de transparence vécue",<sup>28</sup> which transcends all scripture, whether it be that of tradition or of personal invention. On the way to this common goal, however, the non-Christian reader must cope with Jouve's sense of sin and death. For Jouve the world is totally corrupt, but Bonnefoy sees in it and in its transience his only hope. "Là où Jouve ne voit que le mécanique et la mort, je pressens une syntaxe, avec tout le possible qu'une syntaxe réserve. Et je lui trouve, et aussi bien au vocabulaire des espèces, à l'économie sourde des minéraux, une beauté augurale, celle de l'esprit encore en puissance".<sup>29</sup> Bonnefoy is thus forced to argue, superficially at least, against some of Jouve's positions. He tries to show that the poet's thinking is perhaps less Christian than he believed, and at a deeper level may even be closer to the concerns of a secular sensibility. In the first place Bonnefoy observes that two essential Jouvian convictions are in sharp conflict with a theology of incarnation. Jouve sees the fault in eros whereas in strict orthodoxy it is located in pride; secondly Jouve believes in art as a saving grace and gives himself up totally to the work, "quand il s'agit justement de s'ouvrir à l'amour de Dieu".<sup>30</sup> Christ may be effaced by such activity, as indeed all creatures are in so far as the artist-creator demotes their presence by transposing it into aesthetic symbol. Bonnefoy concludes that Jouve has mistaken the true character of original sin. The latter springs not from eros, but from art, a sin which brings its own punishment since the creating soul seeking through art more perfect love is frustrated by art's fatal annihilation. Bonnefoy has thus brought Jouve to an aporia worthy of Blanchot. The solution he envisages is linguistic: words may be life-assertive or life-denying, they may designate or exteriorize, they may be

*langue* or *parole*: "autant la langue est la faute, autant la parole est la délivrance. Les mots qui font le mal, quand ils nous induisent au masque, ou à valoriser une objectivité illusoire, qu'ils soient parlés dans l'échange et c'est le lieu du salut, lequel oeuvre depuis qu'ils sont à chaque heure de vérité. De tout dieu qui vient rassembler on dit qu'il est la Parole".<sup>31</sup>

Bonnefoy does not believe that Jouve's work ever does achieve the life-giving freedom of true *parole*, but he does see within it a deep sense of *parole* as supreme value and along with this a pervasive feeling that art may be only *langue*, and hence guilty. This tension is demonstrated in a reading of the novels *Paulina* 1870 and *Dans les années profondes*. Here Jouve "reste solidaire de ce qu'il a aboli"<sup>32</sup>; he knows that his characters resist the penetration of his art, and shows as much in the detailed description of *la chambre bleue* with which *Paulina* opens. This room displays an intricate decor, where trompe-l'oeil vistas and foliage, a "natural" world created by artifice, lead compellingly to a tiny window which looks out on the real world of time and space, of which the painted one is but a figure. Furthermore, within this room is a tiny toy theatre, decor within decor, and over this theatre passes a mysterious shadow, that of Paulina. Thus is expressed all the ambiguity of the work, an object of artifice connected necessarily to realities which transcend it. Jouve, through his work seeks Paulina, a presence which the work alone makes visible, but which he knows it cannot contain. ". . . Jouve a regardé la forme artistique avec recul, du dehors, il y a aperçu la présence qui la hante mais qu'elle ne peut retenir: et il exprime au seuil de son livre son souci de cette présence qu'il ne pourra que décrire quand il voudrait lui parler".<sup>33</sup>

Bonnefoy's analysis of *Dans les années profondes* embraces the whole meaning of the novel, which he sees essentially as an allegory of every literary enterprise. In the first pages, the hero Léonide feels a secret harmony of grass, wall and stone, a euphoria which is increased by a vision of a dark lady of pre-Raphaélite beauty. This world of unity, however, is tainted by death. The wall against which Léonide leans is that of a cemetery and the woman, Héléne de Sannis, will die when Léonide finally possesses her. This tale of paradise found and lost again is for Bonnefoy the paradigm of every writer's experience. The world is perceived in its unity, but she who made this possible is doomed to die. Thereafter the writer, like Léonide who becomes one after Héléne's death, can only devote his life to the



memory of what was. Léonide, however, is not allowed to forget entirely the fleshly presence of the woman who brought him his vocation. She pervades every landscape which he seeks to focus into unity, and in this way forces into the ordered world of art the memory of imponderable existence. Such for Bonnefoy is the chief characteristic of Jouve's work and the secret finally which makes him universally modern. "Constamment, dans la poésie de Pierre-Jean Jouve, il y a le mouvement dialectique par quoi la présence perdue comme être est rémémorée comme mystère, trace qui défait le réseau des métaphores heureuses, mais foudre, aussi, parfois, qui dans ce monde créé enveloppe tout, unissant brusquement les deux plans de la faute proche et celui de l'unité, de l'innocence, lointaines".<sup>34</sup>

Among his studies on contemporary authors, Bonnefoy's work on Jouve is unusually detailed. Generally Bonnefoy devotes no more than a review notice or an article of homage to the living; he reserves his main critical energies for the founding fathers, for Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. In these predecessors Bonnefoy discerns the seeds of the dilemma which is his own. Mallarmé pushes to the limit the intellectual reduction of nature, Baudelaire reaches lovingly into the world, hoping to discover in the free movement of existence some hint of the flawless unity of the ideal, and Rimbaud tries to create from his own resources alone a new sacred order.

Bonnefoy's portrait of Mallarmé seems the least assured. If he counselled his readers to forget Valéry, might not the same advice apply to the mentor who sought to abolish the world altogether? Bonnefoy, however, has confessed a continuous fascination for Mallarmé, and he speaks of him in respectful terms almost without exception. Indeed one suspects in Bonnefoy's own sensibility a strong streak of the *maître* himself. In both poets we find the same anxious brooding over the possibilities of language, and Bonnefoy's hieratic prose-style is not without affinity to the calculated syntax of Mallarmé.

Bonnefoy's most developed view of Mallarmé appears in the article "La Poétique de Mallarmé" (1975).<sup>35</sup> Its most original insight lies probably in the conclusion where Mallarmé is presented as a Husserl-like pragmatist, an idealist who has renounced the ideal as an absolute, but who believes it may be elaborated provisionally in a process of *inachèvement*. On the way to this conclusion Bonnefoy covers both familiar and unfamiliar ground. Inspired perhaps by his own optimism, he depicts a

rather unorthodox Mallarmé who says yes to the world on condition of course that it resolve itself in some harmonious order. We also know, however, that Mallarmé wrote “La Nature a lieu, on n’y ajoutera pas”, and Bonnefoy portrays him turning from the obstinacy of things to the more manageable medium of language. Again the familiar obstacle and the familiar solution are evoked; the simple word is a veil not a lense, incapable of conveying the pure notion; in the poetic phrase, however, its impurities are eliminated in the reciprocal play of the words around it, and a vision of total virtuality is eventually disengaged. This belief, in Bonnefoy’s eyes, sustained Mallarmé through the early half-successes of the *Hérodiade* period, and the fully realised poems such as *Toast Funèbre* until the eventual disillusionment of the *Coup de dés*. Here Mallarmé admits that the *hasard*, his life-long enemy, can never be abolished. Was then the poetry that should have exorcised it composed in vain? Was it only a “jeu suprême” with no effective action, as it is for the bleak linguistic radicals of our own time? Had Mallarmé only created some new ceremony for a society without hope? Did he decide that “la parole est sans référent et notre existence sans être”?<sup>36</sup> Bonnefoy will not accept such suggestions of defeat. For him, Mallarmé at the end of his life, by recognizing chance, accepted the basic given of human existence. He who had pursued the absolute of the pure notion, came to see the fundamental openness of every human project. Coherence was still credible, but it was not hidden away, behind some veil, waiting eternally and unchangeably to be uncovered. Instead it was a virtuality, which each person was called upon to develop although never to complete, in a communal movement towards sense. For Bonnefoy it is as if Mallarmé had renounced the naive mathematics of Pythagoras and embraced in their place the calculus of probabilities which was then being explored. Mallarmé himself thought in musical terms and Bonnefoy takes them up too in a striking exposition of the “compte total en formation,” the last great image of the *Coup de dés*:

En termes musicaux — puisque la préface du *Coup de dés* reprend une fois de plus cette analogie — c’est comme si l’échelle de sons qu’on avait crue longtemps toute décidée par les Sphères, apparaissait maintenant une construction, et la tâche, de notre race, disons un Temple à bâtir sous le ciel hélas hors d’atteinte — une invention collective.<sup>37</sup>

In the Mallarmé who inspires this quotation, we recognize one of

Rimbaud's "horribles travailleurs", but Bonnefoy cannot allow this battling poet a totally peaceful conscience. Mallarmé, he suggests, may have found some modest hope in his poetic effort, but he still felt the call of some simple existence which might bring greater ontological rewards. Bonnefoy's Mallarmé remains disquieted, but he is not desolate. His life is an approach, not an arrival, and his writing, although never complete, does not despair of the order which is its goal: "Mais loin bien sûr d'indiquer l'abandon de l'idée du référent, et la dislocation de celle d'un ordre propre de l'être, de la Nature, cette poétique de l'écart, de la goutte noire à jamais dans l'encrier de cristal, en dirait, en célébrerait toujours la présence, dans sa distance".<sup>38</sup>

If Bonnefoy's admiration for Mallarmé seems somewhat unspontaneous, his love for Baudelaire is organic and necessary. Of all the world's poems one may surmise that "A une passante" is Bonnefoy's most precious. He has defined the *Fleurs du Mal* as "le maître-livre de notre poésie"<sup>39</sup> and has written variously on Baudelaire from 1954 to 1977. Three of his essays are major contributions: "Les Fleurs du Mal" (1954), "L'art et le sacré, Baudelaire parlant à Mallarmé" (1967) and "Baudelaire contre Rubens" (1977).<sup>40</sup> From those studies a general picture emerges which shows a Baudelaire moving from success in the *Fleurs du Mal* to failure and disillusionment expressed in the poet's attacks on Rubens at the end of his life.

In Bonnefoy's view the great originality of Baudelaire in the *Fleurs du Mal* lies in his "invention" of death.<sup>41</sup> At a time which declared that God himself had died, Baudelaire showed that death in the broadest sense could restore the lost unity of man, could assume the function of servant to the soul and open the dwelling-place of poetry to religious feeling. This recourse to death takes place in order to meet the threat of the concept which as always in Bonnefoy's eyes abstracts dynamic reality into fixed essence. Yet Bonnefoy observes that although Baudelaire wishes to defeat conceptual systems, his poetry paradoxically remains close to expository discourse. Its greatness is saved only by the constant naming of death, by Baudelaire's decision to assume his own death wilfully in various guises, and by the attention which the poet focusses on the human body, site of "la mort en acte".<sup>42</sup> Thus for Bonnefoy great poems such as "Les Bijoux" and "Le Beau Navire" celebrate the mortal time-bound flesh in immortal timeless language. Death may still of course lose its purity and be degraded in various ways. When this happens, Bonnefoy

believes that Baudelaire falters and loses his creative vigour. "La Béatrice" for instance, shows him hesitant and dispossessed; fearing that he has been only "parole vaine", the poet castigates himself as *le gueux* or *l'histriion*. On the whole, however, death remains a convincing presence in the *Fleurs du Mal*, and Bonnefoy is able to declare the volume "un livre quasi sacré", a work in which "notre désir de transcendance . . . a trouvé son inquiet repos".<sup>43</sup>

Bonnefoy's insistence on the importance of death for Baudelaire derives of course from his concern for temporal existence. A second great theme of his study is Baudelaire's conception of beauty,<sup>44</sup> a subject inspired by the critic's fear of encroaching essence. Such misgiving, Bonnefoy claims, was felt by Baudelaire with ever growing intensity throughout his whole career. In the *Fleurs du Mal* the poet counters the closure of art through the use of *chevilles*, but he still remains fascinated by the purely aesthetic. Bonnefoy notes in the poet the dandy, the *connaisseur* of jewels, perfumes and cats, the author of the poems to beauty, and the aesthete consumed by what Baudelaire would call "l'amour exclusif de beau". Ultimately, however, Baudelaire sees beauty as temptation and for Bonnefoy, Baudelaire is thereafter torn between his love for it and his loyalty to higher concerns. This conflict lies at the heart of such key-poems as "Le Masque" and "Rêve parisien". In "Le Masque" the beautiful statue conveys first an impression of elegance and strength, then on closer inspection fatuousness, deceit and complicity, and finally behind the mask a hideous grimace, the raw material of life delivered over to suffering, temporality and death. "Rêve parisien" shows a similar assumption of time and of the real world after a momentary escape into the perfect realm of dream. Bonnefoy's most striking demonstration of the dichotomy between existence and art appears, however, in his parallel study of "Les Phares" and "Le Cygne". These two poems present two different kinds of intercessors before being, in the first case the great artists, creators of durable yet dangerous beauty, in the second those who have suffered irretrievable loss. In the world of the latter beauty has no place, it is only the mirage of the sacred. Bonnefoy believes, however, that its temptation remains for Baudelaire, particularly in the face of a degraded society as in Belgium, and the poet will often return to it as to a drug. Alternatively Baudelaire may associate beauty with unhappiness and so wrench it from the world of essence into the world of

existence, the only true locus of suffering. As in "A une passante" the movement is always outward, away from perfection and solitude into the concrete situation of life. The critic analyses this outward movement at length, seeing in it a general manifestation of love. Beauty in its egoism frustrates this movement until finally Bonnefoy's Baudelaire views it as diabolic. The Satan Trismégiste who ruins the rich metal of our will is none other than Hermes, the god of *correspondances*, and so of art, and the poetry which he inspires, beyond time and impersonal, is nothing less than the ancient enemy of man, *la faute*.

Baudelaire's uneasiness before the image is once again the subject of the essay "Baudelaire contre Rubens". Here Bonnefoy attempts a bold and subtle analysis of Baudelaire's thinking in the last years of his life when he might be expected to view in retrospect a whole career devoted to poetry. A summa is thus implied, and it is Bonnefoy's belief, at least implicitly, that when Baudelaire speaks of Rubens, he is thinking of the artistic enterprise in its most general sense.

From the beginning the critic feels that Baudelaire's understanding of Rubens is ambiguous. The Flemish master is the first to appear in the list of great artists honored by "Les Phares", but although this position might suggest a preference, Baudelaire's words appear to Bonnefoy to indicate a vacillating judgment. *Oubli* and  *paresse* could imply reproach, and certainly Rubens' paintings exclude the possibility of love. On the other hand they do display a constant impression of moving existence. In Belgium, in the last years of Baudelaire's life, Bonnefoy believes that the poet's view of Rubens stabilizes in a negative way. He now describes him as a typical Belgian, "un goujat habillé de satin",<sup>45</sup> and reacts with violence to his religious paintings. In Bonnefoy's opinion, Baudelaire is distressed by Rubens' easy acceptance of the fallen world. Although the painter can obviously see it and portray it, he appears to do so without sorrow, a practice quite contrary to that of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Baudelaire and Rubens are opposed in their spiritual postures. The poet observes primarily the world's evil presence, the painter displays a remarkable confidence in the incarnation. Yet Baudelaire, for Bonnefoy, is himself divided. Although he knows the "raisonnement profond" which destroys all illusion, he also feels the pull of love, and is thus perhaps more ready than might seem to admit Rubens' position. The image as pardon, the image as denunciation, these are the alternatives faced by Baudelaire

and anxiously explored. Bonnefoy underlines the difficulty of the choice, noting for instance that the condemnation of Rubens is accompanied by seeming approval of the Jesuit churches which are in many respects inspired by the same sensibility as the painter's canvasses. For the critic such hesitation stems from Baudelaire's remorse. In Belgium he found himself in truth as the guilty artist, although Bonnefoy points out that this guilt was always to some degree present, and explains why Baudelaire the maker of images wilfully contracted syphilis at the beginning of his artistic career in order to counter the alienation of art and to seal his alliance with mortal nature. The Jesuit churches and the paintings of Rubens merely stimulate an inner debate which never ceased in Baudelaire's mind. Both raise again the treacherous character of images, embodying in their particular fashion a universal problem of art. To paint, after all, is not to love, and Bonnefoy recalls in this connection the celebrated outburst of Pascal: "Quelle vanité que la peinture".<sup>46</sup> Symbols are finally no more than screens interposed before being; "la langue est la dimension de la chute".<sup>47</sup> Bonnefoy remarks, speaking for himself perhaps more than for Baudelaire, that even Rubens who could break formal laws only succeeded in creating a new formal order and failed to penetrate the invisible wall to the *hic et nunc*. The Jesuit churches, for their part, present only a system of signs, where figures and symbols encircle consciousness, but exclude every aspect of the world beyond the enigmatic quality of the signs themselves. The spectre raised here is the perennial one of iconoclasm, and Bonnefoy goes so far as to make an extreme claim: "On ne peut atteindre en image à la présence".<sup>48</sup> However, he recognizes, with Baudelaire, that certain artists may still bear faithful witness to the sacred. These are the painters of personal temperament, like Jordaens and Delacroix. Such artists oppose the supreme heresy, religious art, by replacing the traditional codes with a personal style indicating in this way the transcendence of being in relation to the medium which expresses it. Thus finally Bonnefoy's meditation on Baudelaire and Rubens has brought him to the fundamental question of modern poetics: "Que vaut l'oeuvre",<sup>49</sup> a question suddenly made urgent when the premises of art are undermined by existential doubt. His reply reflects many of the arguments of Baudelaire, while at the same time indicating a solution to Baudelaire's despairing impasse. All art is by nature closed, yet this closure should never be definitively recognized, but must be read in such a way that this

defect disappears. Such an end of course can only be achieved paradoxically. "Pratiquement, ne pas faire œuvre, écrivain, et ne pas la voir, où elle est. Mais est-ce vraiment praticable?"<sup>50</sup> Alternatively the authentic power of art may be sought further back, at the earliest stages of artistic elaboration. The poetic word, at its beginning, has not yet abolished presence, and the creative process in its dynamic unfolding is a "recherche toute pratique, recherche d'inconnu où l'œuvre n'apparaît plus que comme un brouillard qui s'effacerait à mesure".<sup>51</sup> Viewed in this light Baudelaire was wrong to choose the larger finished canvasses of Rubens, the authentic hand of the painter is to be found elsewhere, in the countless preparatory outlines and sketches which he assembled for his great works. The general lesson to be derived from this counsel is familiar. The place of poetry is the breaking point of the poem:

L'œuvre et scandalise et fascine. Autant que d'explorer les pouvoirs que son autonomie multiplie, on se soucie de justifier, ou de contester sa prétention à coloniser le temporel, à se substituer au dialogue. Et c'est pour cela qu'on peut vouloir chercher aux limites, aux points où le poème se brise, le lieu de la poésie.<sup>52</sup>

Poetic knowledge lies where the poem falls away. Rimbaud, who gave up poetry forever, cannot be far from this thought. Indeed he is for Bonnefoy a constant companion, the subject of essays beginning in the early sixties and the central figure of course in the great *Rimbaud par lui-même*.<sup>53</sup> Yet the poems of Bonnefoy and Rimbaud are quite dissimilar. Bonnefoy's intense concentration differs utterly in practice from the "dérèglement de tous les sens" of Rimbaud. For both poets, however, the ultimate aim is identical: the maintenance of hope in a forlorn world, and the recovery of the absolute within personal limitation.

Unlike the partial studies on Mallarmé and Baudelaire, Bonnefoy's work on Rimbaud offers a total view of the poet. Biography, poetry, letters and social history are all merged in a remarkable picture of a man whose life knew no compartments but unfolded as a single quest for wholeness. Bonnefoy's Rimbaud may be placed between that of Claudel and that of Fondane.<sup>54</sup> He is the peasant, if not the orthodox Catholic whom Claudel recognized, and he is Fondane's virulent critic of spiritual delusion. A realist, this Rimbaud pursues an essentially private activity which will nonetheless create for all men a revolutionary loving vision and restore plenitude to the social order.

Bonnefoy examines this quest in prodigious detail. Although

he sees it in his own terms, these terms are natural for Rimbaud too. The critic's love of the world and distrust of art find a ready echo in the "manger les cailloux" and the poetic "folie" of the boy poet. At the beginning of Rimbaud's career, Bonnefoy places the experience of deprivation. In a dreary province and a loveless home, the young poet found his ego diminished and assaulted. He then decided to assume this mutilation absolutely and to destroy voluntarily all trace of the battered self. This is the Rimbaud of objective poetry, the writer who sheds his personal identity and dissolves into the world of things. Here before the *inconnu*, Rimbaud contemplates the divine face. Radically new and monstrous in the religious sense, the *inconnu* is being, and almost certainly the same as Bonnefoy's own ecstatic vision. It is mediated not by the formal perfection of traditional poetry, but by the assonance, broken rhythm and lyric suggestion of the *derniers vers*. Effective for a time, this artless art soon loses its power however. Bonnefoy sees Rimbaud once more burdened by the self and turning at the end of the *voyant* period to art's alternative, active commitment to existence, in Rimbaud's case love for Verlaine. Here too we know the issue. Rimbaud's angelism and Rimbaud's charity, his devotion to the mind, like his practice of the body, were both *délires*. Bonnefoy does not alter this conclusion, but his articulation of it and his sympathy for the transcendence invoked by Rimbaud carry the persuasive authority of a fellow seeker of the Grail.

Bonnefoy's treatment of *Une Saison en enfer* and *Les Illuminations* is inspired by the same enlightened identification. The Rimbaud of the first work, "un de nos livres quasi sacrés",<sup>55</sup> sees himself in "Mauvais Sang" in the historical context of a scientific age dominated by mass opinion. Here, in Bonnefoy's view, the poet repeats the gnostic experience which is the common lot of modern man. "Ebauchant l'acte vraiment *moderne*, qui est de vouloir fonder une vie 'divine' sans Dieu",<sup>56</sup> this Rimbaud gives up even hope and yields himself entirely to the insoluble contradictions of real life. There is no other place, no other time; man lives within his puzzling limit, desiring still and finding in this desire his being, yet unsure both of salvation and of defeat. Such hopeful openness is, in Bonnefoy's eyes, the authentic response to Rimbaud's demand for absolute modernity.

La modernité, c'est le savoir *paysan* d'un réel qu'aucun miracle ne borde, d'une dure mais salubre dualité de la condition de l'homme, à la fois misère et espoir — et l'avenir ne sera pas de possession ou de



gloire mais vérité, l'obsession du salut ou son vain reniement ayant su faire place à cette reconnaissance créatrice: qu'il n'y a d'être en nous que dans ce désir qui jamais n'obtient et qui jamais ne désarme — notre affrontement à jamais de la finitude, loin des résignés comme des crédules, *loin des gens qui meurent sur les saisons*.<sup>57</sup>

In *Les Illuminations* Bonnefoy discerns a somewhat different sense of human possibility and a new art for tempering consciousness. Rimbaud's final vision of man is a synthesis of universal and particular, of Greek and Christian. Beyond the good and evil of biblical tradition, the inspirational figure of "Génie" embodies the harmony, order and universal reason of Athens. He is not serene, however, but orphic and still largely Christian in his incarnate presence. This ideal, Rimbaud believes, may be realised through man's discovery of the latent music and silent voices which lie untapped within him. The goal, however, was only fleetingly achieved, dubiously even if we consider the drugged and savage rhythm of "Matinée d'ivresse". Rimbaud, in "Conte", admits defeat: "la musique savante manque à notre désir". The unprecedented harmonies, which are the dream of Bonnefoy as of Rimbaud, are beyond our reach. Consciousness can never hold the world in some untainted act of participation.

Did Rimbaud fail then completely? Bonnefoy believes not, at least in so far as the example Rimbaud set demonstrates the dilemma of modern man, still shaped by forces which crystallized round the poet in the writings of Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Bonnefoy's Rimbaud is the defiant postulant of the true life. Of the two kinds of liberty, recognition and acceptance of necessity after the manner of Hegel, or the refusal of limitation and the desire for the absolute in the face of all evidence, Rimbaud chose the latter. This was tantamount to saying no to the law like Christ, a refusal which Rimbaud would support, also like Him, through a new love. If his poetry failed the poet, Bonnefoy believes that the readers who come after him may still find within his work a liberating image of their dignity:

Toujours placé dans la situation que ce poète a su dénoncer — la crise de la vie née de l'addition des forces d'exil de la science et du christianisme — l'homme de notre temps peut apprendre de lui bien des choses qui l'aideront à lutter. La différence entre objet et présence, entre existence et simple survie. L'antagonisme ruineux de l'amour et d'un certain respect de la loi morale. Une foi dans la vie, qui, peu à peu s'affirmant, et s'emparant d'abord des consciences, va pouvoir être un jour l'éducation enfin bénéfique d'un enfant.<sup>58</sup>

Yet this spiritual heir of Rimbaud, Bonnefooy continues, will not be freed forever from our metaphysical impasse. He will instead have found again his tragic grandeur. Liberated from the pointless misery of a secular age, he will still know suffering, but his pain will be redeemed, and will be voiced in the bright song of Nietzsche's joyous ecstasy.

"Pour moi la poésie n'est pas un art."<sup>59</sup> These words spoken by the young Bonnefooy in 1959 indicate a preference which has not changed. Critic and poet, he rejects all purely aesthetic writing. Poetry for him, he confesses in the same conversation, is "dans un sens large et nouveau religieuse".<sup>60</sup> The religion which it expresses, however, is in no way orthodox; without god or moral obsession, it is a religion not of faith found, but of faith sought. It is a religion of the object, of the material world fallen from grace and consecrated again by the words of poetry made pure by a ruthless purging of the mechanizing thrust of consciousness. Roquentin's pebble holds no terror for Bonnefooy. Unlike the philosophic mind scandalized by a burgeoning world impervious to the idea's reductive force, Bonnefooy's sensibility rejoices in the multiplicity of things and the unique suchness of each creature. In this he is with Claudel and Saint John Perse; but he separates from them in his active assault on the common medium of their integration. Imperfection is the summit, "marteler toute forme, toute beauté",<sup>61</sup> he writes. Hence his sympathy for all iconoclasts, active like Rimbaud, or merely incipient like Jouve and Baudelaire. Bonnefooy, like Rimbaud, must "trouver une langue". However, where the boy poet of the Ardennes envisaged a total liquidation of Western culture, Bonnefooy pursues a second simplicity which has worked through the culture to the knowing ignorance of wisdom. This consciousness is that of the civilized man who has read the books, lays them aside and turns to the window.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. "Lieu de la salamandre", *Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1953), p. 85.
2. "L'Invention de Balthus", *L'Improbable* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1959), p. 51.
3. "Donner à vivre", *Le Surréalisme* (Paris: Editions Pierre à Feu, 1947), pp. 66-68.

4. *L'Arrière-pays* (Geneva: Skira, 1972), p. 10.
5. V. "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne", *L'Improbable*, passim.
6. *L'Arrière-pays*, p. 34.
7. V. "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie", *L'Improbable*, passim. Cf. also the dedicatory page of this volume: "Je dédie ce livre à l'improbable, c'est-à-dire à ce qui est./ A un esprit de veille. Aux théologies négatives. A une poésie désirée, de pluies, d'attente et de vent./ A un grand réalisme, qui aggrave au lieu de résoudre, qui désigne l'obscur, qui tienne les clartés pour nuées toujours déchirables. Qui ait souci d'une haute et impraticable clarté".
8. Bonnefoy's views on Valéry may be found essentially in "Paul Valéry", *L'Improbable*, pp. 137-146, and in an interview published in *L'Express*, no. 444 (17 Dec. 1959), pp. 34-36.
9. *L'Express*, p. 35.
10. *L'Improbable*, p. 145.
11. V. "L'Illumination et l'éloge", *Le Nuage rouge* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1977), pp. 221-233.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
14. "Georges Henein," *Le Nuage rouge*, pp. 287-302.
15. "La Cent-vingt-et-unième journée", *L'Improbable*, pp. 119-133.
16. "L'Obstination de Chestov," *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue*, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1967), pp. 127-143.
17. "Hommage à Philippe Jaccottet," *La Revue des belles lettres*, no. 3-4, (1973), pp. 107-109, p. 109.
18. "La Poésie d'André du Bouchet," *Critique*, no. 179 (April 1962), pp. 291-298, p. 291.
19. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 293.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
23. "En Miroir", *Les Lettres nouvelles*, no. 17 (July 1954), pp. 93-97; "Mélodrame par Pierre-Jean Jouve", *Mercure de France*, CCCXIX, no. 1123 (March, 1957), pp. 510-512.
24. "Pierre-Jean Jouve", *Pierre-Jean Jouve* (Paris: Editions de l'Herne), 1972, pp. 60-75; reprinted in *Le Nuage rouge*, pp. 235-265. Our quotations will be taken from the latter.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
26. "En Miroir", p. 93.
27. "Pierre-Jean Jouve", p. 238.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
35. *Critique*, XXX, no. 341 (October 1975); reprinted as preface to the Poésie/Gallimard edition of *Igitur* (1976), and again in *Le Nuage rouge*, pp. 183-211. Our quotations will be taken from the latter.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
39. "Les Fleurs du mal", *L'Improbable*, pp. 37-48, p. 37. This essay was originally published in the *Mercure de France* (September 1954), pp. 40-47.

40. "L'Art et le sacré, Baudelaire parlant à Mallarmé", in *L'Art dans la société d'aujourd'hui* (Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1968), pp. 75-94; "Baudelaire contre Rubens", *Le Nuage rouge*, pp. 9-80.
41. This theme is explored essentially in the early essay "Les Fleurs du mal".
42. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
44. This theme, briefly touched on in "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie" where Bonnefoy comments, for instance, on Baudelaire's use of *chevilles* (p. 162), receives detailed treatment in "L'Art et le sacré, Baudelaire parlant à Mallarmé", in particular in so far as it relates to the practice of *Les Fleurs du mal*.
45. Quoted, "Baudelaire contre Rubens", p. 20.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 62. In the original version of his essay (*L'Ephémère*, no. 9 [Spring 1969], pp. 72-112), Bonnefoy had written, "On ne peut atteindre en image à la présence de Dieu", p. 105.
49. "Baudelaire contre Rubens", *Le Nuage rouge*, p. 64.
50. "Baudelaire contre Rubens", *L'Ephémère*, pp. 108-109.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
53. "La décision de Rimbaud", *Preuves*, vol. X, no. 107 (Jan. 1960), pp. 3-16; "La Poésie objective", *Two Cities*, no. 4 (15 May 1960), pp. 6-15; "Une Saison en enfer", *Mercur de France*, vol. 341, no. 1171 (March 1961), pp. 385-412; *Rimbaud par lui-même* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1961); "Rimbaud devant la critique", in *Rimbaud*, Collection Génies et Réalités (Paris: Hachette, 1968), pp. 269-287; "Rimbaud encore" in *Aujourd'hui, Rimbaud*, Archives des lettres modernes, no. 160 (Paris: Minard, 1976), pp. 25-31, reprinted *Le Nuage rouge*, pp. 213-219.
54. See "Rimbaud devant la critique".
55. *Rimbaud par lui-même*, p. 110.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.
59. *L'Express*, p. 34.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
61. *Hier régnaient désert* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1958), p. 35.