

qui te ravit qui te bat
paradoxe
du floconneux silence
qui allège la pluie
ta première neige
le passé de l'enfant
le rien à présent
qui flambe
regard amoureux
pour ce rien
qui te surprend
la grande portée
des ombres
encore étrange
au plus vif de ton âge (119-20)

Where illness and the nearness of death might have produced utter refractoriness, disgust even, Kern, though quick, no doubt too quick, to characterise a moment's passage as mere nothingness – an emotional metaphor, after all –, realises equally quickly that there is, within himself, a power of love that can illuminate and fire what is, and that this power of amazement at the seeming insignificance of rain or snow coincides with an upsurging renewal of the strange relationship of self to the “real”, its physical fragrances, its recessed mysteries – the greatest of which is (the meaning of) this amazement-within-the-self.

Yves Bonnefoy. *L'Arrière-pays*. Paris: Gallimard, Collection Art et Artistes, 2003. 120 pages. 21 euros. ISBN 2-07-071141-2.

This is, of course, the reedited text of Yves Bonnefoy's celebrated 1972 *L'Arrière-pays*, but it is beautifully reproduced with many colour illustrations, and the text itself, rich, suggestive, deeply personal, never ceases to repay renewed attention, and, in that, elude any temptation we may have, any feasibility we may think accompanies this temptation, to turn an *acte de présence*, a book of existence and experience, into an *image*, a purely intelligible structure, a place of prestigious conceptualisation. Since 1972, Bonnefoy's entire oeuvre has continued to privilege and meditate the terms of this fundamental choice before us – whether

in his major poetical works (*Dans le leurre du seuil*, 1975; *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, 1987; *Début et fin de la neige*, 1991; *La Vie errante*, 1993; *Les Planches courbes*, 2001), or his numerous translations of, and meditations on, Shakespeare, Yeats, Donne, Leopardi, or, again, his considerable essay writing (*Le Nuage rouge*, 1997; *La Présence et l'image*, 1983; *La Vérité de parole*, 1988; *Alberto Giacometti, biographie d'une oeuvre*, 1991; *La Journée d'Alexandre Hollan*, 1995; *André Breton à l'avant de soi*, 2001; *Sous l'horizon du langage*, 2002; *Goya: les peintures noires*, 2003).

Of course, to give oneself over to the ephemerality of existence, an experiential errancy of sorts, implies neither a letting go of what maybe thought of as an instinctive ethical, spiritual (in the broadest sense of the term) vision of what is and how we may best be, nor, in consequence, a drift of mind and its powerful modes of functioning. There is in Bonnefoy's work, and it is everywhere visible in *L'Arrière-pays*, the finest of balances between, on the one hand, consent, love, the affirmation of the option of joy, some childlike openness to light, innocence and an unnameable sacredness at the heart of being, and, on the other hand, a need to contest, query and ultimately worry about the various "lures" our intellect can so easily generate for us as "places" either of transcendence or of spinning, dizzying dis-ease, near-impotent turbulence. "La terre est, le mot présence a un sens", Bonnefoy writes near the close of *L'Arrière-pays*, "et le rêve est, lui aussi, mais non pour les dévaster, les détruire, comme je le crois dans mes heures de doute et mon orgueil: pourvu toutefois que lui-même je le dissipe, l'ayant non écrit mais vécu: car alors, se sachant le rêve, il se simplifie, et la terre advient, peu à peu" (105). One may recognize here a dialogue with Mallarmé that no doubt haunts all of Bonnefoy's writing. It is a dialogue that will urge him to write not a *magnificat* in response to Giacometti's oeuvre, but a "biography" thereof, a dialogue that will ever replant the gestures and the signs of our dwelling in the earth's *hic and nunc*, an act and place of work transcendent of the meanings and oeuvres we accord it.

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