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## Yves Bonnefoy, Selected Prose Works in Translation

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YVES BONNEFOY: SELECTED PROSE WORKS  
IN TRANSLATION

By  
Susanna Lang

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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PREFACE: A POET'S PROSE

"If there is a poetry today that speaks for us all, in the center of all, speaking with a single voice, born of itself, solitary in the space which it opens. . . ." So Gaëtan Picon opens a moving tribute to Yves Bonnefoy in the issue of L'Arc dedicated to Bonnefoy's writing.<sup>1</sup> Picon is not alone in feeling an adherence to Bonnefoy's words, or in feeling that Yves Bonnefoy speaks for us, for what we would like to believe.

There is no other writing, no voice, among those we know today, which bears to this degree the personal mark of the man who speaks to us. No one offers himself as faithfully as Yves Bonnefoy, in the service of his own beliefs. Reread his prose. . . .

This is Jean Starobinski, again in L'Arc.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Picon noted, Bonnefoy's voice is solitary. It is in fact difficult to define his position in contemporary French literature. Though he has published consistently

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<sup>1</sup>"S'il est aujourd'hui une poésie . . . ," in L'Arc (Aix-en-Provence), 66 (1976), p. 41. [All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. S.A.L.]

<sup>2</sup>"La prose du voyage," also in L'Arc, 66, p. 3.

in the same reviews, beside others who are concerned, perhaps, with similar issues; though he has gathered around himself a group of young poets who will always bear his mark as he bears the mark of his early association with Breton and Surrealism; still he cannot be located by reference to any known "school," literary or philosophical.

Today his concerns are current in this country as well. American scholars are increasingly interested in French answers to familiar questions. Can art overcome the sense of loss we have inherited from Romanticism? Can writing restore human meaning to a world in which we feel isolated? Or does writing itself estrange us from our world and even from our lives? Yves Bonnefoy is more optimistic than Jacques Derrida, for example, whose writings question presence, being, ontology--the "categories" which allowed Bonnefoy to move beyond Surrealism.<sup>3</sup> But their voices are raised in the same debate. With his early training in philosophy, and his extensive reading in Platonic and Heideggerian thought, Bonnefoy's approach to questions which have traditionally been in the domain of philosophy is sophisticated, if unorthodox.

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<sup>3</sup>"Interview with John E. Jackson," p. 394 below.

Starobinski tells us to reread Bonnefoy's prose. Richard Vernier has also reminded us of the essential unity of "a work which constantly progresses along several paths, paths which are parallel but always within call of each other, within range of the echoes which reverberate endlessly."<sup>4</sup> We have already admitted the difficulty of placing Yves Bonnefoy within what Vernier hesitantly calls "the poetic horizon";<sup>5</sup> but what is the place of prose in this poet's oeuvre? How should we approach this particular selection of works in prose? Are these texts no more than the scattered thoughts of a sensitive, cultured individual who is faced with the same world we face, of a craftsman who may find the right words to express the misgivings we all share, or our sense of wonder before the illuminated façade of a church, the faded canvas of a master? Or is Bonnefoy's prose of interest, above all, to those who study his poetry: is it the clue which will bring his verse within our grasp? What exactly is the nature of the "echoes" Vernier evokes so convincingly?

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<sup>4</sup>"Dans la certitude du seuil: "Yves Bonnefoy, aujourd'hui," in Stanford French Review, 2:1 (Spring 1978), p. 140.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

The selection of texts to be translated was essentially made by the poet himself, and so a review of his choices may help us to answer these questions. In January of 1982, the University of Chicago Press asked me to submit a proposal for a selection of Bonnefoy's essays. My initial proposal began with "Dévotion," a prose poem which "responds" to Rimbaud's "Dévotion" in Les Illuminations.<sup>6</sup> First published at the close of an early volume of essays,<sup>7</sup> it has more recently been included in the collected edition of Bonnefoy's poems. As a lyrical dedication to the places and moments which have been significant to Bonnefoy in his search for meaning--many of which are the subjects for essays--it seemed a fitting introduction to a collection of essays written by a poet.

Following "Dévotion," the first section of the book consisted of theoretical works, discussing the

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<sup>6</sup>James Lawler, "Celebrating the Obscure," in World Literature Today (Norman, Oklahoma), 53:3 (Summer 1979), p. 405.

<sup>7</sup>L'improbable (1959). For all references to Yves Bonnefoy's works, cf. the Selected Bibliography appended to this collection.

principles of artistic creation.<sup>8</sup> The second section was devoted to Baudelaire and Mallarmé, guardian angels with whom the contemporary poet has maintained a constant dialogue.<sup>9</sup> The last group of essays applied the principles developed in the theoretical works and tested against the two great predecessors to interpret the art and writing of several twentieth-century figures.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the volume was to have concluded with a lyrical essay written out of the poet's personal experience, so that the collection would have opened and closed under the sign of poetry, if still in prose.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The five theoretical essays were: "L'acte et le lieu de la poésie" (1959), "Sur la peinture et le lieu" (1961), "La poésie française et le principe d'identité" (1965), "Peinture, poésie: vertige, paix" (1975) and "Terre seconde" (1976). All but the first and third were retained in the final list.

<sup>9</sup>The second section: "Les Fleurs du Mal" (1955), "Baudelaire parlant à Mallarmé" (1967), "La poétique de Mallarmé" (1976), and "Baudelaire contre Rubens" (1977). None of these texts appears in the final selection.

<sup>10</sup>The third section: "Dans la lumière d'octobre," preface to Seferis' poems (1963); two essays on the art of Raoul Ubac, a friend and collaborator since the days of Surrealism ("Des fruits montant de l'abîme" from 1964 and "Proximité du visage" from 1966); "L'étranger de Giacometti" (1967); "L'obstination de Chestov" (1967); "Pierre Jean Jouve" (1972); and "Quelques notes sur Mondrian" (1977). None of these texts appears in the final selection.

<sup>11</sup>"Sept feux (1967), now the opening text of this selection.



Bonnefoy refused this first proposal as uncharacteristic of his work, and as too allusive for an American audience. His letter all but designed the book I have translated:

So it is better to concentrate on an aspect of my essays. . . . Evidently, it must be those which touch on the places and even on my life.

. . .

The most important of these texts is The Back Country. . . . To that would be added Seven Fires and all of Cross Street. To tell the truth, these are not "essays" in the sense that the University of Chicago Press may understand this word. . . . We would also have to add The Tombs of Ravenna, Byzantium, Of Painting and the Place, The Second Simplicity, Humor and the Cast Shadows, A Dream in Mantua, Second Earth. This would make for a very coherent book, to which could be added, if necessary, a few real essays (Painting, Poetry: Vertigo, Peace, the pages on haiku, and the three Remarks on Color, or perhaps even The Origin of Language). From the perspective of references and allusions, this book would be perfectly accessible to an American reader. It would certainly be my most characteristic book, except for the Poems (where we must leave Devotion).<sup>12</sup>

Well aware that this selection was not really a selection of essays, as an academic press would understand this word, Bonnefoy focused his book on The Back Country, an autobiographical account of the poet's search--through

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<sup>12</sup>Letter to Susanna Lang, February 8, 1982. Not included in the final selection are the "pages on haiku" ("La fleur double, la sente étroite: la nuée" from 1972) and the Trois remarques sur la couleur (1977). I added the recently published discussions with Bernard Falciola and with John E. Jackson.

Italy, Italian art and his own writing--for a possible meaning; on "Seven Fires," a sequence of dreams which fade into childhood memories and return to dream; and on Cross Street, a book of prose poems. As an afterthought, he suggested adding four "real essays," including the introduction to an exhibit of works by Claude Garache, a discussion of haiku--and two more series of poems!

Clearly the question of genre is subordinate, for Bonnefoy, to other considerations. He demanded, above all, that the book be coherent and characteristic. Coherence has been a persistent concern of his: in 1972, he told Bernard Falciola that he does not write poems, "that is to say, brief texts, isolated and even reinforced, often, in their particularity, and one could well say in their difference, by the presence of a title." Rather, the books he writes "form a whole in which each text is only a fragment. . . ." <sup>13</sup> As we will see, each book, whether poetry or prose, recounts a stage in a continuing journey; and as a journey has a first step and a goal if not an end, so each day's progress begins and comes to rest.

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. p. 253 below.

The book will be characteristic, because it will touch "on the places and even on my life." It will be characteristic because it will, in fact, trace the journey and the traveler's growing understanding of the journey's meaning. How else do we read Baudelaire's art criticism, or Mallarmé's commentary on literature and music?

But we still have not defined the "echoes" which reverberate from poetry to prose. Are they echoes of meaning, will we say that the prose elaborates some of the same ideas that we find in the poetry?

Certainly there is no contradiction between poetry and prose. When Jean Starobinski concludes that the poem's function is to "arrive at the point where, abolishing itself as 'work,' refusing to close over an autonomous perfection ('imperfection is the peak'), the poem allows us to glimpse a terrestrial place which would be the 'true country,'" <sup>14</sup> his definition is equally valid for the prose texts. The theme of imperfection, of a word opened to the world, runs through all of Bonnefoy's works.

The most explicit statement of this theme, however, is in the poem from the second book, Hier régna le désert, which Starobinski cites:

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<sup>14</sup>"La prose du voyage," in L'Arc, 66 (1976), p. 7.

It happened that we had to destroy and destroy  
and destroy,  
It happened that salvation could only be had at  
that price.

To ruin the bare face which rises in the marble,  
To batter all form all beauty.

To love perfection because it is the threshold,  
But to deny it once known, to forget it dead,

Imperfection is the peak.<sup>15</sup>

It is not that art cannot reach perfection, but that perfection is its fall. The perfectly finished artistic form--the face in the marble--must be ruined if we are to be saved: that is, if we are to find our place on earth, where we can live. Bonnefoy's religious terminology re-establishes the right of formal questions to enter our daily lives. To be nothing but a closed form, however glorious, is to die, as he makes clear in his first book:

Yes, to be only a word is soon to die,  
Is a fatal task and a futile crowning.<sup>16</sup>

At this early stage, Bonnefoy feels that the voice must be silent or inarticulate: "silence" and "cry" are words which recur throughout the poems of Douve.

Ask that your eyes be shattered by the night,  
Only beyond this veil will there be a beginning,  
Ask for this pleasure, the gift of the night,  
To cry beneath this low circle where no moon rises,  
Ask that your voice be stifled by the night.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Poèmes, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

Had he gone no further than these first books, we could have doubted the value of the salvation which was supposed to rise like Phoenix--a favorite myth-- from the ashes of the form. But in the third book, Words in Stone, the metaphor shifts to the seasons' cycle, and if the grapes burst, it is because they will become the sacramental wine.

The land of early October had no fruit  
That was not torn in the grass, and all its birds  
At last cried out absence and rock  
From a high curved flank hurrying towards us.

My word of evening,  
You are cold as a grape from the end of autumn,  
But already the wine burns in your soul, and I find  
My one true warmth in your founding words.<sup>18</sup>

And by the time he writes In the Lure of the Threshold, the word's destruction takes place in the fire of love:

(And the fire turned the pages  
Of the book we dreamt,  
Seizing them by the nape, weighting them  
With its bite.  
The pages disappeared, along  
The curved axis of the fire  
Which bent them back, as  
In love's mystery).<sup>19</sup>

The closed form, or the perfect verse--Mallarmé's dream, and Valéry's as well, probably any poet's dream, certainly the young Bonnefoy's<sup>20</sup>--is not a part of the world, nor a

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<sup>18</sup> Poèmes, p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>20</sup> Bonnefoy's ambivalence towards Mallarmé and Valéry, like his attachment to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, runs very deep. In 1967, Bonnefoy told an audience at

part of our lives. Only by breaking open can the word be penetrated by the rhythm of the seasons and the crops ripening, or be the vessel of the human act of love. Even the "great symbols," the bread and the wine, must be renewed in this way: fruit in the grass in the third book, remnants of a meal in the fourth.<sup>21</sup> And the form itself of the fourth book is a graphic illustration of the renewal Bonnefoy urges: with its long lyric passages alternating with brusque, short lines and even rows of dots, the poem stretches towards prose but also towards silence. As Friedhelm Kemp, Bonnefoy's German translator, has noted, the pauses are ruptures but they are also openings towards what is not said, and perhaps towards what cannot be said.<sup>22</sup>

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the Rencontres Internationales de Genève that "We are all, more or less, Mallarmé's disciples. He has a hold on our spirit, and for this reason it is very possible that the Universe, inasmuch as it is the ultimate dream, may triumph in the end." (Entretiens sur la poésie, p. 94.) And in 1963, he wrote that "We have to forget Valéry." (L'improbable, 1980, p. 103.) For his own dreams, cf. his autobiographical interview with John E. Jackson, p. 405 of this volume.

<sup>21</sup> Poèmes, p. 238. Yves Bonnefoy discusses the "great symbols" in his second interview with Bernard Falciola (p. 260 below), to which we will return.

<sup>22</sup> "Dans le leurre du seuil," in L'Arc, 66 (1976), p. 38.

Certainly Bonnefoy has wanted to take the opportunity offered by prose to make an explicit statement of this faith. The conclusion of The Back Country is an example:

It is in my becoming, which I can keep open, and not in the closed text, that this vision, or this intimate thought must be inscribed, must flower and bear fruit if, as I believe, it has a meaning for me. This will be the crucible in which the back country, having dissipated, forms again, in which the vacant here is crystallized. And in which a few words, to conclude, may glitter, words which though they are simple and transparent like the nothingness of language, will yet be everything, and real.<sup>23</sup>

The journey having brought him to a certain understanding, this understanding must be "inscribed" or written into his life, if "a few words" of poetry are to form a constellation of meaning and light. "Writing" and "life" cannot be separated into distinct activities.

But to Bonnefoy, the prose statement inevitably seems inadequate, and so he reaches for a figure--such as the thought which "must flower and bear fruit" in the passage just cited, or the words which "may glitter"; and in the expansiveness of a prose essay, the figure may be extended into allegory. It is in the early text, "The Tombs of Ravenna," that Bonnefoy tries to define the salvation which is presence, our immediate participation in the world, as a torn leaf of ivy:

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. p. 236 below.

And I will say by allegory that it is this fragment of the dark tree, this torn leaf of ivy. The whole leaf, breathing its immutable existence through all its veins, is already the concept. But this torn leaf, green and black, dirty, this leaf which in its wound shows the depth of what is, this infinite leaf is pure presence.<sup>24</sup>

And while the terminology of this passage--"concept," for example--belongs to an early stage of his thought and will be revised, the practice of using allegory will continue. It is in the next book of essays that he imagines the word as a mediocre painting, "reflection of a reflection," its paint cracked and peeling, rolled in a case or nailed Christ-like on the bridge of a sea-going tug.<sup>25</sup> And in the most recent collection of essays, the torn leaf has become a "dusty tree which rises before you at a cross-roads," the tree which "is in its laceration--but still intact, absolute beauty, bringing peace--all the lost earth."<sup>26</sup>

So it is indeed true that the poetry and the prose say the same things. Yet the poetry does not require the prose as its explanation; if anything, the poems we have cited are more explicit, more given to assured statements ("Imperfection is the peak") than

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<sup>24</sup>"The Tombs of Ravenna," p. 33 below.

<sup>25</sup>"Of Painting and the Place," pp. 60-61 below.

<sup>26</sup>"Second Earth, p. 114 below.



the prose passages with their tendency to allegory. In fact, the prose is at least as figurative, and as allusive, as the poetry. It is not enough to say that the echoes are those of meaning. The prose does not merely elaborate some of the same ideas as the poetry, it does so in some of the same ways. The prose is an extension of the same project which animates the poetry, and therefore it makes use of a similarly formal language. It is because the direct statement and the logical argument of traditional discourse--philosophical or critical--are inadequate to his experience of the world (and of the word) that Bonnefoy feels compelled to write, whether in prose or in verse. It is for this reason that he must return again and again to "the same intuition," which he can never completely express.<sup>27</sup>

Let us turn back for a moment to the sacramental bread and wine which we cited in the later books of verse as an example of our "great symbols" re-examined in the light of our continuously changing lives. In his second interview with Bernard Falciola, Bonnefoy defines symbolic meaning in this way:

If I say: the bread, the wine, only these two words, you will immediately think, or so I believe, of a certain type of essential relations between beings, you will think of their solidarity, under the sign of life's fundamental

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<sup>27</sup>"Letter to John E. Jackson," p. 418 below.

needs and of its fundamental constraints; these are words for communion, words which remind us that language is not meant only to describe appearances, but also to turn us towards the other person, so that we may join him in founding a place, in deciding its meaning. So the important thing with these words--the bread, the wine--is not only that they signify something other than flour or glass or a bottle, let us say, but that they signify in another way. And therefore to speak them, to use them under this sign, is to make a structural bond appear at the heart of language, a structure which is not the simple differentiation of signifiers, of notions, but the creation of being: I will call it symbolic for it gathers the beings at the heart of a unity, emanating from the place which has been formed and shining through all things.<sup>28</sup>

The symbol does not simply refer to the world, the symbol creates being because it joins us with others in establishing our presence in a place on earth. We recognize these words (the bread and the wine) as a part of our history and the history of our earth: "fruit of the vine, work of human hands," the dinner of each night and of the one night, and so available to express our individual wisdom within the knowledge of the race. "Poetry is also the theology of the earth," Bonnefoy adds in another interview from this series, because in poetry the tree--the ivy, "fragment of the dark tree," or the "dusty tree" at the crossroads--is an "intercessor," and the source is a "symbolic revelation."<sup>29</sup> So the symbol, if it is the specific use of language we call

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<sup>28</sup>Cf. pp. 255-56 below.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. p. 294 below.

poetry, is not limited to verse: we have seen the tree summoned as an intercessor in two "essays." The opposite of the symbol, open as it is to the other and to the world, is not prose but the metaphor, the "analogical interpretation" which separates us from the world, building another, self-contained world that is like our world but not a world to live in. It is the metaphor or "image" which must be ruined and torn open, if we are to be saved.<sup>30</sup>

It will not surprise us to find symbols, as Bonnefoy defines the word, in the prose poems of this volume. Although he has not consistently used the term "poems" for Cross Street, he did so in their first and partial publication,<sup>31</sup> and The Origin of Language has always been presented as a series of poems. One of the controlling symbols in Cross Street is that of the earth, in its double aspect of what we are losing--as the farms are abandoned, the paintings are lost, the chamois and the ibex are exiled to preserves--and what may still be saved. And so the earth is both "the mother we did not know how to love" and the daughter "who goes ahead of us

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<sup>30</sup>Cf. p. 300 below.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. my discussion of this issue in "The Word and the Place Between," in World Literature Today, 53:3 (Summer 1979), pp. 417-20.

in the day to which she gives birth as she goes-- laughing as she gathers the berries, singing as she bites into the fruit."<sup>32</sup> This explicit association of the earth with both mother and daughter, awakening memories of Demeter (the servant she sings, in "Seven Fires") searching for Persephone, allows us to understand a further dimension of the brief and lyrical evocation, in "The Fruit," of a little girl eating fruit which also slips from her lap, "and [falls] with a dull sound in the grass at the world's end." And it is a similar child who dances among the shadows on the platform in "Egypt," while the narrator waits for the train which will take him to his mother who has suffered a stroke. On the train, he remembers his childhood, when he went with his mother to visit his aunt and his grandmother in the mountains--the father had died, or would die soon--and another woman, the crazy "Promé té ché," seemed to him "the earth itself, the earth which . . . was growing old, aphasic . . . ," as his mother had done in Tours, far from her native mountains.

The four books of poetry, Bonnefoy wrote recently to John E. Jackson, each reflect "a turning point in my life,"<sup>33</sup> a stage in a continuing journey, as we said

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<sup>32</sup>"Convenerunt in unum," p. 339 below.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. pp. 119-20 below.

earlier. Certainly this prose seems to reflect a turning point, as the poet reconciles himself to the death of the mother he did not know how to love, and accepts into his life the new presence of a baby daughter ("Discoveries at Prague" and "A New Series of Discoveries"). This is not to say that the poems of Cross Street can or should be reduced to a coded autobiography; but that the symbol of the earth, and that of the child, "the only true manifestation of what is always sought and lost, in the idea--naive, in sum--of a God,"<sup>34</sup> have been given new meaning within the poet's daily existence. It is the reinterpretation of traditional symbols in the context of one's own life, and the reinterpretation of one's life in the context of human history, that allow for symbolic use of language, in other words for poetry.<sup>35</sup> As Bonnefoy explained in his letter to this translator, his book of prose texts will be as characteristic of his voice as are his poems, because it will touch on the places--Ravenna, Tours, Tuscany--which he has passed along the way, and will even touch on his life--his mother's death, the birth of his child.

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<sup>34</sup>"A New Series of Discoveries," p. 369 below.

<sup>35</sup>"Interviews with Bernard Falciola," p. 257 below.

Nor is symbolism possible only within what we have always called poetry, in prose or verse. "Second Earth," the introduction to an exhibit at the Château de Ratilly, is dominated by the same allegory of the earth-mother: "A music is lost, which we thought was a mother, always present."<sup>36</sup> And in The Back Country, there is a figure like the "Promé té ché," in whom the author sees Demeter, "the earth standing upright, girdled with fires, crowned."<sup>37</sup>

And symbol is not the only formal resource which we find in both these prose texts and the poems. The structure of the essays which are not really essays, of The Back Country for example, is not one of argument which relies on proof and logic. Rather, a lyrical structure links paragraph to paragraph through image and memory, as when the attraction Bonnefoy feels for the mountainous interior of Mediterranean countries leads to an understanding of Piero della Francesca's Triumph of Battista, an intuitive understanding which the resources of art history are not asked to substantiate.<sup>38</sup> In this first section of The Back Country, there is even a refrain: the "land of a higher essence" is only

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. p. 113 below.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. p. 204 below.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. p. 143 below.

"two steps" along the road he did not take; on the plains, he feels that the center "may only be two steps further"; his "distant god has only drawn two steps back."

While it is a poem's logic which leads us through each section of The Back Country, the structure of the book as a whole is narrative: account of the author's journey. Narrative, too, is "A Dream in Mantua," the title piece of a selection of essays. Written in memory of Sylvia Beach, this "essay" recalls a trip to Greece (again the journey) during which Bonnefoy accompanied Sylvia Beach and their friends, Jackson and Marthiel Mathews, a dream he had in Mantua, on his way back from Greece, and the funeral service which his dream had seemed to foretell. The tone, at first, is anecdotal, using realistic dialogue, short sentences, and a vocabulary which is surprisingly down-to-earth: Sylvia "ciambers" (grimper) up the stones, "perches" (se jucher) on top; the eggs "sizzle" (grésiller) in the cast-iron pans. Yet the prose may also be read as we would read the tightest of lyrical poems. A movement of descent-- to the well at Mycenae; in search of a hotel in Mantua; down a spiral staircase in the dream, and still in the dream, down a street which would lead the narrator and Sylvia to the fairies' house of immortality; finally

down the steps of the Colombarium at the Père-Lachaise cemetery--is balanced by one of waking. The narrator watches Sylvia pass as the port awakens in Nauplia, or joins her for breakfast in a restaurant in Delphi; the young girl Sylvia had been passed early through the village streets; the chauffeur brings Sylvia a bunch of flowers wet with dew, understanding that she is one who "reascends towards the light," as Bonnefoy also understands when he comments that she "certainly belonged to the rising sun." He himself awakens, after his dream, to find light and "the tufted song of the birds," and at the end of the text, he evokes "that inaccessible wakening which my awakening in Mantua, to the concerns of poetry, could only imitate." Here, built into the very structure of what appears to be a simple, narrative reminiscence, is the movement of temptation and return which also characterizes the more prolonged and complex narrative of The Back Country. To descend with Sylvia into the fairies' lovely house, though the rooms were filled with "the brilliance of the late morning, where the green of the foliage was dappled with dancing flecks of orange from the ripe fruit," would be to continue in sleep. Sylvia knew enough to refuse that labyrinth, to refuse all magic; and she teaches the narrator that he



must "look higher," and give "an unblinking attention" to the finite realities of this world.<sup>39</sup>

So far we have only considered essays which "are not essays." What about the "real essays," the critical essays? Even in these, symbol, lyricism and narrative are the tools which allow Bonnefoy to define Byzantine art, Quattrocento painting or Baroque architecture with an extraordinary precision.

We have already referred to the allegory of the torn leaf of ivy, which is taken from an essay concerning Byzantine funerary ornament in Ravenna, and beyond any history of art, the saving grace of presence in opposition to the concept. And we alluded to the work "of uncertain quality and dubious ambition" which the narrator imagined to be following him on a sea-going tug, in an essay which appears to discuss the diaspora of Italian paintings. For the reader who wonders at finding this fantasy in an "essay," the author concludes:

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<sup>39</sup>I do not have time here to consider the other lyric structures of this "récit": the parallelism which links the young Sylvia to the kores she loved, and the cemetery which seems like a photograph to the photos of Sylvia, the funerary stele which resembled Joyce to the old man who appears--like Joyce--at the funeral; or the construction of sentences in which a complex parenthetical structure moves forward and backward in time. It should also be noted that the image of ripe fruit in the branches is used as well, and in almost the same words, in the initial poem of Words in Stone.

I believe two things: a work of the "third order," a copy of a copy, the anonymous work of a school--and precisely because it is anonymous, because the flood of the unknown has penetrated its form--can be nearer the inaccessible center towards which all art turns than the most conscious works. On the other hand, works of art are cryptic. We need a grid--chance, our own place, our existence--to read them. Will you refuse me these two principles, will you hold them to be imaginary? Then I will remind you that in geometry, the most real figures can always pass through two "imaginary" points; and I will confess that I feel myself unable to define a real art, the paintings of Tuscany and of Northern Italy and Rome, between 1300 and Guardi, in any other way than by these mirages.<sup>40</sup>

The symbol, "imaginary point" or "mirage," is the grid which allows the writer to re-examine art, not as the self-contained world which rivals our world, but in its significance for our world and first of all for his own existence.

Significantly, Bonnefoy follows the paintings in their travels--the fantasy of the third-rate painting accompanied him as he sailed to the west. "The Tombs of Ravenna" are also described in the author's bibliographical addendum as "travel notes"; but their structure is lyrical rather than narrative. A series of repeated phrases provides the necessary transition from paragraph to paragraph and even between sections of this long essay.

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<sup>40</sup>Cf. p. 61 below; and refer to "Rome, the Arrows" (p. 328 below) for a reconsideration of the idea of a "grid."

The second paragraph of the second section begins: "Yet I felt only joy [at Ravenna]. I was gladdened by the sarcophagi." And the following paragraph starts with the sentence: "I was gladdened by the sarcophagi of Ravenna." Again, the third section opens with the rhetorical question, "From what tangible thing, moreover, from what stone in this world has the concept not turned away?" The succeeding paragraph echoes, "From what stone has the concept not turned away?" And as the third section closes, "I only call its name: here is the tangible world"; so the next section begins, "Here is the tangible world."<sup>41</sup>

In the same way, this essay which builds on the evidence of Byzantine ornament, carved in stone, to counter Kierkegaard's conceptual thought, turns to a childhood memory of a bird crying from the summit of a hill: "Later I decided to build on general ideas. But I return now the bird's cry as to my absolute stone."<sup>42</sup> Bonnefoy does not answer concept with concept, but relies instead on the Biblical resonances of this phrase--to build on the bird's cry as on his absolute stone. He relies on the echoes awakened by this phrase, and by the

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. pp. 22, 27-28, and 33 below.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. p. 39 below.

remembered cry of a bird, within a text devoted to images on stone--including the image of two birds, peacocks standing face to face. In short, he returns to the traditionally "poetic" resources of figure and allusion. He does not do so in order to mystify his reader or to cloud his meaning, which could otherwise be stated plainly. He returns to the emblem of the bird's cry because, for him, building on general ideas is like building on sand. To be true to his vision, he must choose emblem over argument.

In other critical essays, he returns to narrative:

I imagine an architect's study, perhaps at Bergamo, around 1780. There are plaster casts set on the floor which is an inlaid pavement, precise and worn, of grey stone. There are plans and blueprints in rolls under the tables. It is six o'clock in the evening, towards the end of summer, and the room is empty. Elsewhere, no doubt, they are eating ices under the arcades. The music of Cimarosa struggles against the folds of shadow in its depth.<sup>43</sup>

This passage comes near the end of an essay which seeks to define the element of humor in Piero's fantastic hats, and in his Madonna del Parto who points to her swelling womb; and then finds a "sign with analogous resonances" in Chirico's elongated shadows, concluding with a panorama of Western art from the rising sun of the Quattrocento to the setting sun of Neo-Classicism. The value of fiction

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<sup>43</sup>"Humor and the Cast Shadows," pp. 78-79 below.

for such an enterprise is that in this "oblique writing," Bonnefoy feels that he can express his "bizarre but intimate knowledge" of painting: as he dreamt of doing in An Unknown Sentiment, the story sketched in Venice (on his way to the dream in Mantua) but never written;<sup>44</sup> and as he did, eventually, in the prose poem entitled "Rome, the Arrows." Fiction is also the most appropriate form of writing to recount a journey: into his childhood (as in "Seven Fires," "Egypt," the fourth section of The Back Country), or through Greece or Italy. Never traveling directly towards his goal, the poet takes the oblique path of figure and allusion, or narrative, learning from Zen, among other disciplines, that the arrow which falls beside the mark may, in fact, be closer to the center.<sup>45</sup>

Again and again, Bonnefoy refers to the earth as a "sentence," not as a line of verse--though he is a poet and master of the verse line.<sup>46</sup> But poetry tends towards

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<sup>44</sup>"The Back Country," p. 233 below.

<sup>45</sup>"Rome, the Arrows," pp. 317-18 below.

<sup>46</sup>"Second Earth," p. 113 below; "The Back Country," p. 137 below; "Letter to John E. Jackson," p. 127 below; and "The Cricket," pp. 469-70 below.

the perfect image, which must be broken. Indeed, its power is that it tends towards the image which is our shared condition, our common fall. If we can both hear the music of the image and transgress it, "then life begins again, the labyrinth is dispelled."

Having intensified the image, having denounced it as well, trying to force it open, to simplify it and at the same time to preserve its richness of dream, that is the poetic experience which more than any other human practice lives the ambiguity which marks all human activity. . . .<sup>47</sup>

Bonnefoy is not far, in the 1980 text, from the early poem in which he called us--in verse--to "batter all form all beauty," having loved it as the threshold. And here he makes explicit what we should have seen by now: that if the form of his writing is ambiguous, it is because writing is a human activity, and ambiguity is the hallmark of all human activity. To ask what role may be assigned to the prose written by a poet is not, perhaps, the right question: rather we should ask what power may be vested in writing, this ambiguous practice which more than any other can isolate the writer and allow an exchange, can illuminate the writer's particularity and integrate him into a history, can ravage the earth and save a dusty tree.

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<sup>47</sup>"Letter to John E. Jackson," p. 459 below.

## VITA

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PART I

## SEVEN FIRES

### I.

Seven fires. Like a silver candelabra with flames always bowed, carried along these paths by the sea, before the night falls: our uneven steps, inventing this gold beneath the brusque curtains of ash. And sometimes a few flames are quenched, precisely because of that sea breeze.

### II.

By the dream's will I am in a small church, very white, with no altar--probably secularized--but equally without the accoutrements of a museum. And I am listening to music which comes from the adjacent vestry. Near me, scarcely visible, are several persons caught in an extraordinary excitement, which is still contained. "Listen," they tell me in a whisper, "listen! Here at last is proof of God's existence."

In fact, one can distinguish a fifth voice in this sort of cantata for four voices. It is a woman's voice, certainly very beautiful, which weaves in and out of the others and dominates them from within. There is no place for it in the structure of the work. A square has four sides: she cannot be singing there. And yet the music lasts, the form not so much destroyed as revealed.

If at times the voice pauses, it is only to begin again, always the same in its absolute difference, without a place as it soars with jubilation and childhood from the meadow--as if green and blue--of the other four: a new color, lamb of bright color, "the voice of God."

Again I see the record player on that table, and the record which has stopped at last, which someone has taken in his hands, examines. But the dream changes and at once it is my somber native city.

### III.

And here: a young woman who was leading me as I returned towards the railroad station (who is she, and was she leading me--there is no past in this moment that closes), began to run, then smiled as she turned to me, already riddled with sky, already the breath of a torch, already the gap between the tufted leaves on the branch of green laurel; and has faded into the air of the large waiting room. This room is very much changed since my last trip; it is now the station of broken time. When I want to know if I can still take the train I took before (the 6:10, after school, on track D), I discover that the clocks they've hung in several places indicate--by numbers randomly scattered on the faces without hands, by signs emptied of meaning--some gulf at the limits of eternity: not time.

I take my place waiting in line at a window, and ask for information from others standing near me. Yes, they assure me, I have time, but no, I am too late. At the window I request a ticket for my former destination, and they name a price I cannot measure. They have issued a new currency which is formless, or variable. Someone tells me that strangers (I am a stranger) regret the old way of things, the rational currency with immutable conventions; and that they complain especially of this system of time. But the new way is better (I am now on the platform) since it leaves the will free. If I want to be able to pay my way, I can. If I want it to be the time the train leaves, it is.

I do: I decide that the train will leave, and for the same village. An employee shows me the track, and I walk along several cars, covered--in the same disorder and excess of signs which I had already noticed--with innumerable names that contradict each other. Benevento, London, Bourges, Cholet . . . so many. The entire system of designations, perhaps the entire language, has returned to chaos. Nonetheless I board, pensive, and now it is night as it was night before, at 6:10 in the winter.

And the train leaves the station, badly lit as always before, with that yellow light I loved. An old man sits beside me. He speaks to me--has been speaking

for some time. "Have you noticed," he asks me, how the monuments at Tours have changed?"

It's true. The church Saint-Etienne, once so mournful in its grisaille--there it is, covered with magnificent stone slabs (rose, it seems to me), where the image is everywhere potential. And these streets, their cornices peopled with airy statues--almost clouds! "Everything's like that," the old man tells me, "and you see how simple it all is."

#### IV.

I took the train a thousand times in this station--either as a young child leaving, summers, for the other country (the rapid Lot, color of absinthe, hidden in the poplars: there we glimpsed the "sun-fish" with their phosphorescent scales), or later, when that land had been lost forever and I came home in the evening from high school. That was a time--those years--as if in black and white, a war all around: stations collapsing in the silence of the bombs, and the disorder after, as if at the end of a dream, the beginning of a dream; above all the obstinate appeal of great allegorical figures, sitting in the car, immobile at the end of the platform: women of grey stone, their eyes closed and open, their foreheads crowned with stars, the cornucopia in their hands which do not tighten their grasp.

As for the car where I found myself each evening, with its half-light, its passengers so long the same and yet unknown (did they speak--perhaps, but it was so distant, I did not hear the words): for many years, my perception of reality was troubled by its mysterious drift, its halts, and its tremors, sometimes, at junctions controlled by incomprehensible lights at the end of the track. And I am still sensitive, perhaps more than I should be, to these moments in which time and place oppose their evidence: these moments of approach, when the train or boat slows down, but still in the dark suburbs, or so far from the shore that the affirmation of the beacons rises only a little above the sea's horizon.

I remember arriving in Ravenna, one evening. Some children talked to each other across their compartments; they were returning from a school in Rimini. The accelerato was late, still pausing for long moments outside stations. I looked through the glass that was marked only by rain. And I no longer knew when the trip had begun; it seemed to have lasted for years, zigzagging through the night of small lines, but also through a back-country saturated with an absolute presence, though this country showed me only the rapid gleams of a house on the hillside. An indefinite, "absolute" voyage: was that the ground, and was this fatigue the incarnation?



In the compartments around me, in the passageways, a leaden humanity which slept, heads thrown back, their eyes sealed by dreams, like the guardians of the sepulture in Piero's Resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Someone had asked me if I came "for the mosaics," so that the faraway gold was now among us, in the lamplight.<sup>2</sup> And I thought of another evening, along Lake Trasimeno, where the train had stopped. There was still light, in the reeds by the long shore; and it seemed to me that I should leave the car and set forth, seek a way out or a way to return at the end of this country--the more so that this strange pause, silent, insistent, resembled a call of destiny. I stayed in the car, but full of imaginings; which is in the order of things. A night of movement with no goal. At daybreak I find the lake through a remnant of mist. My eyes are following a bird which has flown off the bank--when at once a shot sounds, the bird falls in the reeds. Who has fired in this solitude, which seemed so deep? I leave in search of the bird; finding it only wounded, I take it in my hands that are

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<sup>1</sup>For a more complete discussion of this Umbrian painter of the Quattrocento, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," especially note 2, and "Humor and the Cast Shadows."

<sup>2</sup>The following two essays will evoke the Byzantine churches, with their mosaics, at Ravenna and elsewhere.

warmed by its blood. Is it his song that I caught at each moment (but always as if from the past, the stifled, the lost), is it his song that I catch now, this slow effusion of the creation's blood? Distracted, absent from itself, the song of a servant in a house where she is alone, song like the servant, so emptied of destiny that she is divine. I remember that Demeter was once a servant.<sup>3</sup> I look at the bird who seems to look at me, and I would like to measure the gravity of this wound, but cannot.

They say that dreaming is a language; I feel above all that it designates and at times even gives us that portion of gold "beyond," which the speaking hand wants to grasp; that whiteness which already dissolves the syntax which desires it. From this point of view the structure, clenched in its obsessions, is the failure of dream. And a certain light, along certain beaches where there is little surf: the denouement.

On the night scales--if we only think of those strange balancings! A hand passes over the forehead, and wipes the sweat that is the tearing of images. I dream-- and the dream is only these words--that I am once again in Athens, "in the light of the feast of the basilisk."

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<sup>3</sup>Greek goddess of the cornfield, who was wet-nurse to Demophoön while searching for her lost daughter, Persephone.

V.

But what I will try to reconstruct now is not a dream, unless the great rain, with its movement of sheets that swathe, that slide, has stunned me in a bed as large as the sad day; perhaps a boat rocking on far-off ropes: the being--the truth--of the sea voyage has not yet been unsealed from the cliff, sleep is only an invitation which the man who walks in this strange city, tired as he is, accepts and rejects at each instant.

It is Sevilla, and this morning is dark almost as night--it is raining so hard. I cannot see where the façades end and the sky begins. But here--chance itself--a door in the flank of a church. And I enter. It is still dark inside, and I must feel my way hesitantly in the odor of damp incense. Soon, however, I perceive a weak light, which I approach. Very near me, but the crest drowned in shadow, rises a vast retable of gilded wood, with figures in the heights, and something agitated which I can only see vaguely (which I remember, which I imagine?): smiling, leaning above the peaks, lost in the rustling of cloth that the wind moves--but no, I haven't seen that yet: simply, and at my level, a bare lighted shoulder. A candle is lit in front of the retable, and bathes the silhouette of an angel with yellow light. And now I distinguish the curly hair, then the neck, then this laughing mouth, partly hidden by the

cheek, for the head leans, turned towards the shadow-- what does the arm reach for, what does the hand seize, what warmth is wrapped in its grace?--then the bare flank, lost in tumultuous drapery. Is it really an angel, after all, or a sort of saint? I look for the wing, but my attention is already called away. For with another gleam from the candle (less brilliant, as if a new light had dawned in the black sky of the first), a leg appears above; and here is a third light, shining on a child and some fruit, on a sheaf of flowers; and still more and more, ceaselessly now like the stars in the evening. From one reflection to another, the entire retable comes to life. Their power of revelation seems irresistible, fatal. One would think their frailty were the condition of an intimacy, a transparency of each figure to each; and even if the central image, painted on canvas and perhaps torn and blackened in its grotto that is vaulted with clear silver--if this image must remain dark to me, I see that none is any longer in peril, on the mountain where it is worshipped; none will grow old alone and deprived of its self.

And so I come to think of this "unconscious" which we must suffer today. Wasn't there a like presence in us, rich in hidden figures which could have merged; and would it not have had sufficed to bring something like this narrow light--let us say a stricture, but with

no vain renouncement; a choice founded on sympathy, a fealty of the imagination--for this fortunate approach of Being to be revealed by harmony, the real to be revealed--from within, as it turns to light--as unity? I project this route, believe it to be true, and, so doing, set forth again into the dark of the church, where other signs are rustling. How alive this place is! So close to the street, yet so easy to miss: how well it knows to mean that chance is the key, the necessary first acceptance! I advance and find myself near the great door, closed with all sorts of bars; but a presentiment takes me, I turn, it is time. A few seconds later, the event takes place.

A door opens in the back corner where the retable stands. The entrance to the sacristy, I suppose, intensely lit, and I see the retable caught in a sheaf of light, bristling with shadows--suddenly deprived of that mysterious life which had seemed to promise so much. What a change of sign, in this moment of exteriority, fatal as lightning! I find that the wall is higher than I had thought, that the retable does not reach to the ceiling; it can spread wide its great wing of shadow--and that truly an "evil plumage":<sup>4</sup> so many hard angles,

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Mallarmé to Henri Cazalis, 14 May 1867. He is referring to his "terrible battle with this old and evil plumage, defeated, fortunately, God."

hidden complexities, that it trembles with fantastic suggestions. What is this strange profile at the ceiling's edge: something of the goat and of the acanthus leaf--"or of the camel or of the weasel"? And what does this shadow say, of an open hand so tragically held before the leaning body, which falters; what torch has been loosed, which will fall forever? The hand has dropped the fruit, this profusion is only an emptiness, the empty world of appearances: what opened has closed again. And I am outside now, in the icy breast of an absence, in this geometric space where the wreathed pillars cast shadows on the walls, shadows like staffs bent by water.

Idle moments of pure expectancy, since the other call was still sounding too loudly for me to be taken in--become a person again, a dreamer (in Mallarmé's sense),<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>In the coherent analysis of Mallarmé's enterprise which he wrote as a preface to a recent edition of his predecessor's prose. Bonnefoy says that Mallarmé dreamt of a perfection in language, in the verse line, which would have compensated for the imperfection and arbitrariness of the individual word. Bonnefoy refers in particular to the opening lines of "L'après-midi d'un faune," where the unfortunate clarity of the word "nuit," night, is modified by other words which surround it. Though Bonnefoy does not mention it, the stanza which evokes the night begins with the question, "Did I love a dream?" Then in the preface to "Un coup de dès," Mallarmé explains that the new genre with which he is experimenting "leaves intact the antique verse, which is still my faith, and to which I attribute the dominion of passion and of dreams. . . ." These two passages are separated by most of Mallarmé's career, as "L'après-midi d'un faune" was probably finished by 1866, while "Un coup de dès" does not appear until 1914.

a critic--by the insidious charms of this ship of the dead.

## VI.

After which, I went towards the "sacristy," which in fact was only a small closet where a coil of rope and a bench were growing old, along with an opened sack of plaster which spilled its white dust. No one appeared and I turned off the light, then returned towards the retable. From a distance I saw it as a high cliff, hollow, breathing, peopled with birds--and lit only by the gleam of the surf. For the candle had meanwhile been almost entirely consumed, so that the shadows had become more mobile, currents thrown along the channel of an arm or the reefs of a drapery, as if by the thrust of a ship which had passed nearby, blending its lights with the water. Water certainly, made of these images and of this rending of images; water of invisibility which dissolves the illusion, always reborn, of forms, which resolves the mortal glance; which we ourselves could be, at the height of attention to our works, on this clear nocturnal beach where the affirmation and the surf, desire and finitude, oppose their first words but associate their powers. And my thought takes another turn. How many roads, I wonder, will man have refused, though they gave

themselves to him? How many times will the interruption of a false light have kept him from taking the decisive step, from making himself a sign more vast than meaning, and more mobile--but more (from within) a celebration, its fires lit where meaning runs aground? And wouldn't he have changed, would he have become if, for example, he had enlarged these retables which he had already imagined so far beyond the limits of the concept--if he had built them to the proportions of real façades, immense and maybe black, multiplied by the sea like an absolute city? I image the winter water in these streets that would be soaked with images. I understand that I am the prince who imposes these images and the sculptor who gives body to this dream. And here, in the middle of a cloudy sky, he is renewing the same figure in a hundred places of the holy city: the flank, the shoulder, the head a little bowed on the neck, the hand searching and finding in the shadow--where the marble, it is true, would still lack form, would halt the chisel. Thus the eternal Isis in her high chamber of stone.<sup>6</sup> And may she have a thousand times the same face. And in one, very high, far from sight, the true likeness: what cannot be

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<sup>6</sup> Egyptian earth goddess like Demeter, who also took the guise of a servant, while searching for Osiris.



seized will be seized, as the cornucopia escapes the gods' hands. Secret which flakes like stone, in time that is no longer lost. And so much rain falling all around, in the world's solitude!--The candle has finished going out. Nothing remains of the retable, but a few shadows which unknot, a last whiteness of surf--nothing but the sound of the sea.

## VII.

And having coming this far, I can only think of what was--once again--only a dream, though it was colored by such a brilliance of reality that when I awoke I remained a long time wondering--and later, and even today, when the idea comes to me by surprise--if it were not a memory. I am on a ship which sails on the Atlantic, "towards South America." And nights have passed, it is again daylight, and we pass through islands, but in the most literal sense of these words. When I reach the bridge, we have entered the streets of a town, as if by some canal: strangers and yet, in this moment, so close to the ancient people who are preserved there. On the left is a plaza, and a church fully lit by the rays of the rising sun--unusual orientation. And there are children playing; I see, and appraise in a rapid glance, the star of space, on the parvis, the simple relation of

the shadows to the distant facades, the trembling of something like ink in the transparency of the dawn. We look and are seen, everything is perfectly calm in the laughing light, but the ship glides, we are passing.

To the memory of Bernini,<sup>7</sup> who sculpted the Truth in the tomb of Alexander VII--she who raises herself like the blown flame--may these steps be dedicated, steps taken outside, in the smoke of the seven fires.

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<sup>7</sup>Predominant sculptor and architect of the Baroque in Italy (1598-1680). In the tomb of Alexander VII in St. Peter's (1671-1678), the pontiff's virtues, Charity, Prudence, Justice and Truth, surround a high pedestal where he kneels in prayer. The figure of Truth, leaning as if against the wind, carries the sun's disk as her attribute, and rests her foot on the world's sphere.

PART II

## THE TOMBS OF RAVENNA

I. Many philosophies have tried to account for death, but I do not know that any has examined the tomb. That spirit which questions being, but rarely stone, has turned away from these stones which are thus abandoned a second time to forgetfulness.

There is nonetheless a principle of burial which has constantly governed men, from Egypt to Ravenna, and even to our day. Burial has attained a perfection in complete civilizations, and all perfect things have their rightful place before the spirit. Why has the tomb been left to such silence, untouched by the philosophies of death, which claim to be brave? I doubt that a system of thought can be valid, which is willing to stop when to continue would be so logical, and would answer our concerns.

Hic est locus patriae, says a Roman epitaph. What is a country without the ground which is its limit; and must this ground count for nothing?

The concept, almost the only instrument of our philosophy, is certainly a profound refusal of death in

all the subjects it does examine. The concept is always an escape: so much seems clear to me. Because in this world one must die; and to deny their destiny, men have made their home in logic--this house built of concepts, where the only principles that count are of permanence and identity. House made of words, but which will stand forever. Socrates dies there without too much anxiety. It is in this refuge that Heidegger meditates; and though I admire his writings for this conclusive death which breathes life into time, and directs being, yet it is without adherence except aesthetic or intellectual: for in the end, all is resolved. An object of thought which is no longer the real object, and which calms our first fears with a doubtful knowledge, must strike with vanity this darkest melody of words which mask our death.

Since the Greeks, death has been thought of only as an idea, which becomes the accomplice of other ideas, in an eternal reign where nothing dies. This is our truth, which dares to define death, only to replace death itself with its definition. And definitions are incorruptible: they promise a strange immortality despite death, so long as we forget the brute appearance.

Provisional immortality, but sufficient.

It is like an opium. Let this comparison indicate what sort of criticism, above all moral, I will oppose to the concept. There is a truth of the concept, which I do not claim to judge. But there is a dishonesty of the concept in general, which lends thought the vast power of words, so it may leave the house of things. Since Hegel, we can measure the force of sleep, and the insinuation of a system. I say that beyond coherent thought, the least concept is the artisan of an escape. Yes, idealism conquers in all organized thought. Better to re-create the world, it is said, if obscurely, than to live at risk in our world.

Is there a concept of a step coming in the night, of a cry, of a stone falling in the brush? of the effect made by an empty house? Of course not: nothing has been kept of the real that does not contribute to our repose.

Nonetheless, I doubt that the tomb is among those cursed things that the concept cannot envision. How can the spirit be embarrassed by a bare stone, carefully sealed, and washed by the sun of all thought of death? Despite the name it bears, and the epitaph, the tomb is already the first forgetting.

Even more so that a veil seems to be laid over most sepultures, which further softens and denatures the

nearness of death. Almost a material veil: like leaves above the tombs, which murmuringly keep distant any voices raised too loud. One can touch this veil in Ravenna, over the purest deaths that time has covered.

## II.

The monuments of Ravenna are tombs. This place, so long separated from the world, has preserved, from a time which recedes from history, all the ways one can enclose what is no more. The high round towers, no longer attentive to an end, and blind, have meaning only through their impending ruin. In a vast silence, the abandoned sarcophagi everywhere expose their twofold death. One mausoleum, claimed to be the tomb of Galla Placidia,<sup>1</sup> gathers in four walls all the slow, sad perfection which mortal desire can attain. Even the churches, as if receding under the weight of their mosaics, seem to close over the remains of a cult. If there is a place in the world where the tomb must speak all the horror of the death it signals, that place is Ravenna, which is, in the dimmed forms of its lost royalty, nothing but death.

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<sup>1</sup>Roman princess (ca. 390-450), daughter of Theodosius I, wife of Athaulf, then of Constantius III. She ruled the empire in the West during the minority of her son, Valentinian III.

Yet I felt only joy there. I was gladdened by the sarcophagi. I more than most would have liked to find, under these vaults hung with unmoving faces, in the cloisters, on the parvis, the momentary darkness which is the apprehension of death; and I came to these empty tombs as if to the simplest repose. Perhaps it would have been satisfying if four walls had reserved the possibility of a higher consciousness at the limits of our world: I forgot to wish it, Ravenna has other virtues. This city said to be sweet, and melancholy, said moreover to have been abandoned by time, this half-buried city is vehement and joyful.

I was gladdened by the sarcophagi of Ravenna. If this city is filled with joy, it is because, leaning near the tombs, she sees her reflection and is pleased. But a reflection supposes water, dark and shining, and I sought this water in Ravenna. For the spirit, the concept is at times this light where we could rest, where we lean to see--and are deceived. What unknown principle sustains a brighter day near San Vitale?<sup>2</sup> I knew it was nearer, more alluring, less deceptive.

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<sup>2</sup>Octagonal church in Ravenna. The church itself and its mosaics are among the finest examples of Byzantine art from the Justinian period. Cf. "Byzantium," note 3.



This principle appears in the ornament. Bare stone would perhaps have brought anxiety. A rough block, ruined, pillaged, would perhaps have affirmed the void. But the sarcophagi of Ravenna, though they hang open, are ornamented, and the ornament brings them peace.

In ornament, at least in the network of tresses and tracery, the rosettes and the running scrolls of the tombs at Ravenna, there is a virtue which cannot at first be explained. Power of appeasement, did I say, also of vertigo; power which draws our eyes and holds them among the hollows and reliefs of the marble, a power living with a subtle life that trembles on the stone. The purity of water, the fluidity of a robe; secret movements in a solemn immobility: the sharpest anxiety is inexplicably calmed.

I had sketched one theory of ornament; I left it for another. There is nothing in these bright forms which does not defy the vain desire to prove.

I compared ornament to the concept. The concept can deny death because it is also what escapes death's abstraction. The concept fulfills itself in "coherent" thought. The system is the completion of a dike to hold death back.

Ornament, I believed, seeks the universal. The bird formed in the marble is to its model what the concept is to the object: an abstraction which saves only the essence; an eternal farewell to the presence it was. Look at the scenes--Daniel, Lazarus, Jonas--which have a place on the ornate flank of the sarcophagi. It is as though a wind had seized these faces, and they had become no more than signs in the universe of images. Yes, the ornament protects Lazarus from suffering in this perishable body. A net which does not hold, but lets death pass.

Ornament is a closed world. If to create a work of art is to project oneself outside one's self, there is no art, I thought, in ornament. It simply pursues a game. So does the concept: the game without end is the system one builds. The system of ornament is the harmony of its thousand forms, of its palms, its scrolls. . . .

The concept seeks to establish a truth without death. So that death is not true. I believed that ornament would build our house without death, so that death was not here.

But that was to count without the stone, which belongs to the very being of ornament, and retains its strange universals in the tangible world.

And this joy that one feels near the tombs is too feverish and too pure. There is only a meager satisfaction in half forgetting death, in logical coherence: these are melancholy reasons for a joy whose essence is almost divine. If ornament is a place to live, how can we say it is an abstract thing, when place is the ultimate reality?

There is a motif which is frequently found in Ravenna, perhaps the most beautiful, at least the most charged with meaning. Two peacocks, standing face to face, knowing and simple like hyperboles, drink from a single cup or seize the same vine. In a tracery of the spirit which follows and completes that of the marble, the peacocks signify death and immortality.

Never have I found a more living spring. One feels that this vine is inexhaustible, where the heart comes unnoticed to draw the glory of living, and the teaching of death. Such is stone. I cannot examine a stone without recognizing that it is unfathomable; and for me, this gulf of plenitude, this night which an eternal light recovers, is the exemplar of reality. Pride which finds what is, dawn of the tangible world! What is traced in the stone exists, in the strongest and most pathetic sense of the word. Ornaments are of stone. If, in the world of ornament, form turns away from the physical life of beings, and is carried towards some

heaven, yet the stone has restrained the indifferent word, and maintains the archetype among us.

If nothing is less real than the concept, nothing is more so than this alliance of form and stone, the exemplary and a body: nothing is more real than the Idea endangered.

Ornament belongs to that species of beings which, in their profound purity, join the universal and the singular. It is the Idea made presence, and I have tasted a true eternity in the joy it awakens.

I remember a sarcophagus that I saw not long ago, in the museum at Leyden. This university museum is dark and narrow as the oldest houses of study. And that day the streets, too, were black. But suddenly all was light.

The tomb, taken from a Roman camp in the Rhineland, is of the most common type. It is a gangue, uneven like the wall of a cave. I do not know the name of this earthy stone, with a surface like fallow land. It seems entirely utilitarian, an old sheet in which to wrap a body. But the cover has been removed, the tomb is empty. O pure joy, which seizes the heart! O memory, but in the abolition of time! How could contemplation, though it cleave the sky, more profoundly open the house of the Idea; what lightning can save in one strike a soul stronger and more free? The interior walls of the sarcophagus are of a silky substance. They have all been

sculpted. And there is the house and its outbuildings, ranged in low relief like categories recovered by the spirit which has long been exiled; and the interior of the house, seats, closets and tables, and the bed where the dead woman is laid, all confined in the space of the tomb as in the true place of their being. There are the jars, where the oil and the wine are conserved. There is an infinite rustling in the powder of this stone, as of curtains which do not move. Draped in tight folds on the funeral couch, the eternal soul meditates. Her glance passing between life and death possesses these objects which being has returned to her. O triumph of ornament! The "long desire" of the intemporal, pathetic line of the acanthus leaf; the coherence of forms, which since Egypt are the true nobility of the heart; the massive wakefulness of the stone--all join in the miracle of a present in which death is no more.

### III.

So that if conceptual thought has turned away from the tomb, let us at least assume that it is not because it desires death. From what tangible thing, moreover, from what stone in this world has the concept not turned away? The concept has separated itself from

death, but also from everything that has a face, that has flesh, a pulse, immanence; all that holds, it is true, the most insidious danger for the concept's secret greed.

From what tangible thing has the concept not turned away? Think of the purest joy, and the least expected, that sparkles in Kierkegaard's thought. Stunning moments, in this work the color of ash. If ever a heart were deprived of earthly goods, and separated by an infinite detour from the tangible object, it is the very anxious heart of Kierkegaard, who knew that he only gained the essence, and remained locked in the general. He fought all system. But the system is the fatality of the concept, which was Kierkegaard's only wealth. He tried hard to believe in God. . . . His joys belonged to the instant when the long stormy sky opened. Then he was transported, from the reign of the impossible, where it seems we live, to another where everything is possible, and suddenly given. More immediately, what was involved, is still involved, is a tearing of the concept, of the cloud that weighs on us. In the conceptual man, there is an abandon of what is, and an endless defection. This abandon is ennui, anxiety, despair. But sometimes the world rises before us, the enchantment is broken; and in an instant, as if by grace, all the life and purity of being is given us. Such joys are a

passage that the spirit has opened, towards the difficult reality.

One experiences such openings at Ravenna, by virtue of the tombs. And so I return to Ravenna, as to the source of a light which is valuable in and of itself. In Ravenna, nothing clouds the purity of this light which, I've learned, is necessary for us to live; nothing distracts the genius of the tombs from its initiatory role in the spirit's destiny.

Let no one be surprised by the part I assign to a city's monuments. It is not that I am concerned with allegory, or simply that I have a taste, itself mysterious, for meditation on ruins.

But I defend a truth which persists beneath the truth of the concept, and is persistently fought. And it is of the essence of this truth that any city in which one could live, for example Ravenna, is as valuable as a principle, and is as apt to found the universal. The roads and the stones of Ravenna can replace conceptual deduction. The least debris of one of these stones, posed here, in its unanswerable presence, is the strictest equivalent of the concept's generality. The universal, a notion most useful to man's potential happiness, must be entirely reinvented. The universal is not a law, which is everywhere the same, and so is everywhere worthless. The universal has its place. It

is in each place, in seeing the place, in the use we can make of a place. I am thinking of the Greek formula of the true place, deflected from its meaning, offered to this idea that on certain horizons I can glimpse the vigilant truth, and that these horizons are the paths of my return. The true place is the place of a profound conversion. A new principle can revolutionize a science in the same way, but here the principle is a point on earth, and a monument founds it, or a more admirable site, a statue. What else was the oracle in ancient times, what else is a country?

Here (the true place is always here) the reality, mute or distant, and my existence join and convert and exalt each other in the sufficiency of being. What beauty in a place of this sort--an extreme beauty; and I would no longer belong to myself, but would be governed, possessed by its perfect order. But where I would also, and finally, be profoundly free, for nothing in this place would be strange to me. I know that somewhere this place exists for me, this threshold of the possession of being. But how many lives are spent in not knowing how to find it! And so I am fond of voyages, these attempts to return. Quest marked by halts, if I reach a place which resembles my desire. Then an old hope, which had been wounded by religions, is reawakened, and watches anxiously for those doves from the shore which seems so



close. Madonna della Sera, and the lighted walls of Orsanmichele in the evening, the narrow square of Galla Placidia in Ravenna<sup>3</sup>--we will try here, and listen to the silence of the last step. Poetry, too, is this search, and is concerned only to find this place I know in advance; poetry prepares and translates this monument of physical eloquence, where the day it desires will appear, shrouded everywhere else. . . . Poetry and voyage are of the same substance, the same blood, I say it again after Baudelaire;<sup>4</sup> and of all the actions man can take, these perhaps are the only ones he can use, the only ones which have a goal.

I have gone astray, if the truth I summon can contradict such wanderings.

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<sup>3</sup>I have been unable to locate a church called "Madonna della Sera." There may be an allusion to it in "Dévotion," a litany which originally closed a selection of essays, and is now included in Bonnefoy's complete poems (Poèmes, p. 157). Many of the images which are significant in the essays translated here are included as well in "Dévotion": the poorly lit train in the evening ("Seven Fires," p. 6), Galla Placidia here in "The Tombs of Ravenna," the church of Saint Martha in Agliè ("The Second Simplicity," p. 65), the painters of Rimini ("Of Painting and the Place," p. 53), Delphi ("A Dream in Mantua," p. 83). But in the prose poem, the name of this church (if it is the same church) is translated into French, emphasizing the meaning: Our Lady of the evening. And this meaning is singularly apt in the context of our essay, since the walls of Orsanmichele are lit by an evening sun. Orsanmichele is a Florentine granary and church completed in the fifteenth century (cf. "The Back Country," note 44).

<sup>4</sup>"Le Voyage." The affinity of voyage and verse is a constant theme in these essays, and Baudelaire's voice is frequently heard beneath Bonnefoy's.

And when I opposed tangible reality to the concept, I already recognized the truth in wandering. At Ravenna, I discovered the outcrop of another reign.

What gives beauty to certain lines? How can a stone appease the heart? The concept can barely formulate these questions, much less answer them, though they are the most important we can ask.

But over these slopes of grey stone, these unending tiers of sculpted stone and walls, the old anxiety takes its flight like Phoenix towards Heliopolis.<sup>5</sup> I will not pose the problem of the tangible world in any philosophical way. I want only to affirm. That is the

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<sup>5</sup>The Phoenix is an Ovidian creature: "When it has lived five hundred years, it builds itself a nest in the branches of an oak, or in the top of a palm tree. In this it collects cinnamon, and spikenard, and myrrh, and of these materials builds a pile on which it deposits itself, and dying, breathes out its last breath among odors. From the body of the parent bird, a young Phoenix issues forth, destined to live as long as its predecessor. When this has grown up and gained sufficient strength, it lifts its nest from the tree (its own cradle and its parent's supulchre), and carries it to the city of Heliopolis in Egypt, and deposits it in the temple of the sun." Metamorphoses, as quoted in Bullfinch's Mythology (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1970), p. 311.

virtue of bare lands and of ruins: they teach us that affirmation is an absolute duty.

Ever since Parmenides,<sup>6</sup> thought has existed at the expense of an aspect of being claimed to be dead, excess of appearance over essence which has been called the tangible world, and illusion. Thus has the spirit hesitated between two grisailles. The cameo of the concept, and the deep, violent grey of the amphitheaters, the mountain gorges, which are the entrance to reality. I do not know, and do not want to pose the dialectic of the world, to find the place in being of the tangible world, with the meticulous art of a patient metaphysics. I only call its name: here is the tangible world. The word, this sixth and higher sense, must go to meet it, must decipher its signs. This is my only ambition, this search for the secret which Kierkegaard had lost.

#### IV.

Here is the tangible world. In truth, there have always been obstacles to its approach. The concept is only one among many. Kierkegaard is not the only exile.

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<sup>6</sup> Parmenides was a Greek philosopher from Elea (ca. 504-450 B.C.), founder of the Eleatic school. In his poem "On Nature," he holds that the many and moving aspects of the universe are only the appearance of a single eternal reality ("being").

It is far from us, like a forbidden city. But at the same time, it is in each of us, like a possible city. Nothing can keep the heart which truly desires it from discovering this threshold, and making its home there.

Conceptual thought; but also the notion of a God of moral exigencies; a power of night outside the spirit, which is present everywhere in distorted objects, in impure forms, in ugly things: these are the principle obstacles on the road to return.

Majestic city, simple city: reaching beyond our mannerisms and our gold.

City which seems born of a single glance. High walls, their matter undisguised (and belonging therefore to a higher truth, recognized at once, revealed), converge like the lines of a deliberate perspective. Perhaps there are strange rectangular reliefs projecting from the worn stone at mid-height, as in the churches of Armenia, reliefs which seem to fix these walls in a hidden substance. And yet behind them, in the depths of the houses, a space is contrived in which to live. A city deserted: solitude, at the height of reality.

I cross the streets which all descend into a sort of combe. All I can hear is the torrent which runs there. On all sides, the monuments of a possible religion,

still shrouded in their superb complexity, rise in tiers above the nearest roofs. Domes, porticos, campaniles, tinged with the red vapors of the true sky.

I avoid each side street which would lead me to a plaza. And so I am surprised by the plaza which fate had reserved for me. Here destiny is silence, speaking without irony in the slight echo of steps. And it is liberty; in the tangible world, one touches the profound unity of all things. And the One, Plotinus makes clear, is absolute liberty. . . .<sup>7</sup>

A city too pure. No doubt I describe it as a utopia. It is a utopia, bearing, as all utopias do, the

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<sup>7</sup>Plotinus was a Neo-Platonic philosopher (ca. 205-270) whose writings were published by Porphyry, in six books of nine sections, or Enneads (cf. the prose poem of this title, p. 467 below). In Plotinus' thought, which has been a lasting influence on Yves Bonnebois (cf. the epigraph to "The Back Country," p.136, and the interview with Jackson, p. 399), all reality consists of a series of emanations from the One. The first emanation is that of Nous (mind or intelligence), the second that of Pysche (soul). Matter exists at the periphery of the universe.

As man himself belongs to both realms, his soul can look upwards to the sphere of pure spirit, or downwards to the regions of matter. Rational knowledge is the cognition of intelligible realities, or Ideas, in the realm of the mind which is often called Divine. Knowledge culminates in an intuitive and mystical union with the One, which is experienced only by a few.

The Idea of Beauty is One and Perfect. All lesser beauties participate in the One Beauty. The most important attribute of Beauty is Splendor, the shining forth of the spiritual essence of beautiful things.

seed of an abstract ethics. As we say that a slope has a western exposure, so the city I imagine belongs to ethics, and is penetrated by the rays of that setting sun.

But there is an occult truth in utopia, which nothing can equal: for in utopia, concrete existence, the infinite description of that world one knows in advance, ceaselessly compromises the archetypal. It is, but in imitation, the double truth belonging to each thing, which seems so clear when one looks passionately. There is an inexhaustible truth in that rare painting of our century, in which the spiritual blood comes to beat: Mystery and Melancholy of a Street.<sup>8</sup>

Or perhaps I will have described a theater. For the tangible world is only the scene of an act which begins. And it is by intuition of the cry always about to come that men have invented architecture; by intuition of the sacrificial value of a place.

I walk in this city. This mysterious distance which divides the echo from the cry also divides my presence from something absolute which precedes me. . . . What is the tangible world, in truth? I have called it a city, because the concept forgets that being is in

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<sup>8</sup>Giorgio de Chirico, 1914. Cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," note 8, and the interview with Jackson, p. 384.

appearance, and that appearance--even of ruins, of the humblest things, of chaos--is sumptuous, and therefore obsessive. But what divides the tangible from the conceptual is not the simple appearance.

The tangible object is presence. It differs from the concept above all by this act: its presence.

And by passing. It is here, it is now. And its place, because it is not place itself; its time, only a fragment of time; are the elements of a strange force, of a gift which the object makes us--its presence. O presence which grows stronger as it bursts all around us! To the degree that it is present, the object does not cease to disappear. As it disappears, it imposes, and cries its presence. If it remains present, it is as a reign which is founded, an alliance beyond causes, an accord between itself and us which goes beyond the word. If it dies, it opens the way to that union in absence which is its spiritual promise, and in that union it is fulfilled. In that union, absent from itself, hollowing itself like a wave, the object opposes the life of its being to the concept, and says that this presence was for us. It was only this, a sign in being. Here it is, ambassador of good, which saves me. Will I be understood? The tangible world is a presence, notion almost empty of meaning, notion forever impure, to the conceptual mind: and it is our salvation.

The act of presence is in each instant the tragedy of the world and its dénouement. It is Phèdre's voice, appeased in the last act, when she teaches, and breaks off.<sup>9</sup>

And I will say by allegory that it is this fragment of the dark tree, this torn leaf of ivy. The whole leaf, breathing its immutable essence through all its veins, is already the concept. But this torn leaf, green and black, dirty, this leaf which in its wound shows the depth of what is, this infinite leaf is pure presence, and so my salvation. Who can take this from me--that this leaf has been mine, and in a contact beyond destinies, beyond particular sites--in the absolute? Who could destroy as well, who could destroy it? I hold it in my hand, close my hand on it as I would have liked to hold Ravenna, I hear its tireless voice.--What is presence? It seduces like a work of art, and is crude like the wind or the earth. It is black like the abyss, yet it reassures. It seems a fragment of space among others, yet it calls us, and contains us. And it is an instant which will be lost a thousand times, yet it has all the glory of a god. It is like death. . . .

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<sup>9</sup>Phèdre is the title and main character of Racine's most famous tragedy (1677). In Act V, scene vi, Phèdre, who has fallen in love with her husband's son by an earlier marriage, poisons herself and then explains how she has been the cause of her lover's death.



Is it death? In a word which should heap its fires on our darkened minds, a word which has become despicable and vain: it is immortality.

V.

Let me make clear that I do not mean that immortality of body or soul which was guaranteed by recent gods or those long past.

The immortality which is in the presence of the ivy is still in time's course, though it ruins time. An impossible immortality which we feel nonetheless, it is of the eternal we savor, not a cure for death.

It is the cry I heard as a child, cry of a bird at the summit of a cliff. I no longer know where to find that combe, nor why nor when I passed there. It is dawn or twilight, no matter which. The violent smoke of a fire runs through the brush. The bird sang. To be accurate, I should say that the bird spoke in an instant of perfect solitude, its voice harsh above the fog. I guard this image torn from time and space--tall grasses on the hill, which shared with me an instant of immortality.

There is eternity in the wave. Fabulously, concretely, in the play of the foam at the wave's crest. Later I decided to build on general ideas. But I return now to the bird's cry as to my absolute stone.

Whoever attempts to pass through tangible space will rejoin a sacred water, flowing in each thing. And if he even touches that water, he will feel himself immortal. What can be said, after that? What can be proven? For a contact of this kind, Plato built an entire world beyond, the world of the strong Ideas. I am sure this world exists: it is, in the ivy and everywhere, the substantial immortality.

Simply it is with us. In the tangible world. The intelligible, Plotinus told us, is the expression of the vast and changeful face. Nothing could be closer to us.

There is no heaven. The immortality, whose joy sometimes rings in Kierkegaard's voice, is the breath and the echo of a place to live, but only for those who pass. For those who try to seize it, it will be a lie, a deception, and a night.

Fear of death, I said, is the concept's secret. In truth, this fear is the concept, and only begins with the concept. Death, or at least its spiritual reality--fear in our souls, existence confined in fear--begins with this movement, which is already the concept, of abandoning the tangible world.

The concept runs badly from death. No doubt it fears its fatality and seeks to vanquish it. But the

vain and false immortality which the concept invents is, in its own weakness, an acceptance. Fear, denied and suffered: that is the hold which death has on the concept. So this strange game is made possible, to run from death, and yet to take pleasure in naming it.

The concept is an illusion. It is the first veil of the old metaphysics. As regards the concept, we must be unbelievers and atheists: for it is weak as a god. And do not say that in its absence, and in this debris of ivy which I've held, in the passage and the wave, all truth becomes impossible, and all rule. This can be our rule, to take a vow to immortality. That is solid ground on which to build.

"It is not in the sentiment of their nothingness that man has erected such a sepulture," noted Chateaubriand in Egypt, "it is by an instinct of his immortality."<sup>10</sup> I deduce from the aspect of the great Egyptian tombs, raised so high in assurance and peace, strong and so subtle; which insert, with so many beautiful faces and signs that are painted there, the conscious accent of life in their night; I deduce from these tombs

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<sup>10</sup>From the Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem (1811), 6e partie, "Voyage d'Egypte." Chateaubriand has just caught his first sight of the pyramids.

without gods except figured--union of paint and stone, forms which from this time are almost life--that the immortality they bear is the one I have spoken. Whoever trusts in the dream of a resurrection simply throws on the ground, as did the first Christians, the dark trace of a passage.

Egypt affirms in stone that the only possible future is in this physical world. So do the sixth century sarcophagi at Ravenna. So speak the people of the dead, in the cities (there are still a few, touched above others by grace) which opened and closed with rows of tombstones.

My question has not been lost. Why does the concept, why does this practical idealism turn away from the tombstone? The answer is that the stone is a liberty that rises.

One could throw the ashes of the dead to the winds, yield to nature's will, accomplish the ruin of what was. Here, with the tomb and this explosion of death, a single gesture speaks of absence and maintains a life. It says that presence is indestructible, eternal. Such an assertion, in its essence double, is foreign to the concept. What concept could join ethics and liberty?

Here is the vast and serviceable stone; without it, all would have perished in poverty and horror. Here

is the life which does not fear death (I am parodying Hegel) and which possesses itself even in death.<sup>11</sup> To understand, we need a language and a faith which are not the concept. The concept is as silent before these things as reason is silent in hope.

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<sup>11</sup>Bonnefoy used the Hegelian sentence he has in mind now as the epigraph to his first book of verse: "But the life of the spirit is not frightened at death and does not keep itself pure of it. It endures death and maintains itself in it." On the Motion and Immobility of Douve, Galway Kinnell, tr. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968).

## BYZANTIUM

I am thinking of the naive Byzantium found in fin de siècle fantasies. Like a false gem, or one, at least, whose light has dimmed in a setting too heavy with too much gold. All the signs of the ideal--not the absolute; of aristocracy--not nobility; but a pernicious immobility, as of a heart which cared nothing for life's joys and sufferings, and which would escape reality even at the cost of submitting, in the passive anticipation of death, to instinct as to an unintelligible and fatal effrontery. The affirmation of the Beautiful could no longer be distinguished from a hatred of existence. The soul tried to survive in a room filled with select objects, but the selection had been made in consideration only of their forms, without loving anything of their incarnation in a span of existence; and the forms, left to themselves, grew and flourished diabolically. Is it true that the historical Byzantium ever justified this specious perversity? Must we not recognize, with Yeats, that Byzantium is a place where the heart can possess itself, sing when it is

tempted to lament, and reinvent a joy?<sup>1</sup> Even Yeats situated this pole of his passion in a distant region, outside a life which he abandoned to brilliant but fugitive couplings; and he opposed to the real and ephemeral bird that automaton of gold and gems which signified the autonomous reign of art.

I do not believe that art can be solely this refuge, and not betray itself. And yet I in my turn salute Byzantium, knowing in my heart--as no doubt many others in our time--that its call still resounds. But is it the same call, is the same word spoken? Indistinct, badly understood in its too subtle inflections, heard at the borders of countries still unknown, in this call I deciphered--no longer Theodora in her gold,<sup>2</sup> but Mistra in ruins;<sup>3</sup> no longer the peacock but the stone; and I immediately associated this call with a desire in me which sought its homeland, the desire to encounter our world in its most fugitive aspects, those which seem

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<sup>1</sup>Yeats, of course, dedicated two poems to Byzantium, one in The Tower ("That is no country for old men. . . .") and one in The Winding Stair and Other Poems ("The unpurged images of day recede. . . ."). Cf. Argile (Paris),<sup>1</sup> (Winter 1973); pp. 70, 82, for Bonnefoy's translation of both.

<sup>2</sup>There is a mosaic portrait of this Byzantine empress (ca. 500-548) at San Vitale in Ravenna (Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 2). Wife of Justinian I, she had extraordinary influence over imperial legislation.

<sup>3</sup>Mistra is a ruined Byzantine city near Sparta.

least charged with being, and in order to consecrate them, and that I might be saved with them. It is true that each time a bird's call resounded in a forest, outside me; each time I approached the threshold of a stone circle where it was my absence that reigned; each time the limited and mortal here required me in this way to break the seal of the modern rejection of being, it was the irradiance of Byzantium which, by presentiment, and as soon as I learned the name of the city of images, I thought to touch. And it was certainly a question of eternity, this time as before; the dominant note of Byzantium still sounded as it had in all epochs. But this eternity was no longer the rejection of the tangible country; it came to burn in the trees of that country, we had to draw it from the depths of our dispersion, because it was the substance of that dispersion and, suddenly, its glorious body. All the forms of consummation and, above all, the voyage. If a boat leaves the port, at night, it is the spiritual Byzantium which already shines like another shore. I liked to give this name to immanence, danger, ruins, to cities barely seen, tilled land, to all that lacks a name. Was I wrong? But I have also found places where, in the diverse signals of the historical Byzantium, a nearly



pure voice seemed to justify me. I remember Torcello;<sup>4</sup> and a few Greek churches, their walls in the sun and their paintings, and the Savior of Sopoćani.<sup>5</sup>

Sopoćani! I know nothing more accomplished than this chapel in the mountains. And in the picture of the true country which I am attempting, I want to acknowledge this chapel as a threshold.

Already the near valleys, in the colorless rays, resemble the metropolis I'd dreamt would be beyond. The Serbian mountains are a rigorous elucidation. The spirit of diversion fades quickly there; nature itself seems to rise above its peak and with all its mute ravines, its torrents, its furtive humanity, its black roads, seems to be lost like a flame in the sky. The monasteries are great circles of stones, in the image again of the sky. In these enclosures where one or two churches grow old, where the tumultuous horizon seems

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<sup>4</sup>Torcello is an island in the lagoons of Venice, and was once a flourishing city. It has the ruins of a Byzantine cathedral, Santa Maria Assunta, founded in 641 and rebuilt in 864 and again in 1008.

<sup>5</sup>The thirteenth-century Church of the Trinity at Sopoćani is celebrated for its frescos, including a Dormition on the west wall of the name. This is a traditional image of the death of the Virgin, which shows Mary lying on her bed with the Apostles gathered at either side and in back. Christ stands behind the bed at the center, handing her soul--a child in swaddling clothes--to waiting angels.

immense, one sees beautiful blue peacocks walk gravely over the brown earth.

And already, in the church itself, on the intrados of the great arch, under the capital, to the left, and intact in this field of so many ruins like a gift, like a grace, there is the angel who speaks the words of welcome. But nothing can replace the most majestic of paintings. And when one turns towards it, in the light of October, it is certainly the true word, pursued for so long, which brusquely resounds. How near he is to us, the man-god offered in this hall, which will now be empty! And how purely he identifies, as we have so profoundly desired, the two discordant intuitions of western thought: what is perishable--and destiny--and what is eternal! Beautiful pensive face, grave and as though wounded in the light of the nimbus; but all around him is deployed his army of the world's conqueror--arms, clouds, the clarified powers of what is human--and here are effaced the excessive simplifications where the dialectical ambition of the spirit had nearly foundered. The god of Sopoćani does not mutilate. He is not the Apollo of the Hellenic sixth century, who in all the brilliance of his strength is still like the trunk of a tree that has grown straight, still like a pure and blind plant--so much did Greece want to recall

humanity to life, to its impersonal species and its numbers, not knowing the other reign which is the finite existence of the individual conscious of himself. But neither is the god of Sopoćani, robust and possessed of a nervous elegance, the Christian god who only re-affirmed the individual in order to separate him from his natural potential, and change his finitude to fault, as if the sorrow finally acknowledged in man's double essence could become an end in itself. If he does not mistake the value of this sorrow, he who bends his head like Jesus on the cross, neither does the young god of the Serbian church forget that he is the consecrated one, and that vigor and glory are his essence. And he gives us the secret of deliverance as well. The Christ of Sopoćani is the son who remembers in the Dormition, who returns out of love for the mortal condition. The remains of the old woman, long and black, are laid before him--the real which seems dedicated to the consummation, and to death. But having loved the real, he transfigures it, and raises in his hands the new-born infant of his unconquerable care. In truth, he is our inmost future, what we can be if we know how to decide that death is not, if we know how to see and to love. Never has a divine archetype been so like the highest moment of subjective ambition, or so easily accepted by one who is

trying to be a poet, so close in its nature to the poetry of today.

Byzantine art may have been the first in history to speak in the name of the individual who, though he is obstinate in his singular condition, is still anxious to return to the house of being. Certainly it is because Byzantine art was subjective that the spirit of "decadence" loved it, as Yeats did later; but it did not accept exile, and experimenting in the hypothetical field of forms, it sought the conditions of a life recalled to the heart of the sacred. That impersonality, for which the poor in spirit reproach it, dreams for us--far off, like a snow-covered peak--that our difference could become the absolute, without betraying itself.

And we must try to write the history of this inaugural art--contradictions, forgettings, denials--in terms of desire, of paradox and of grace; we must first show that form is a writing, which in its simplification, its search for symmetry, can suggest a complicity of being and the universal in which our presence is effaced; and we must then discover that these twisted and bent forms, these elongations are, in the Byzantine canon, so many refusals of this dangerous fantasy. That is its excess, unavowed at times like the trembling of a voice, at times made clear like a rite. A certain ostentation can celebrate the transcendence of a place.

In the same way, an impoverishment which is conscious of itself can recall the form to its earthly charge, which is matter--the circular contour of a cup, for example, which in itself reveals the pewter's depth. And midway between this poverty and the ostentation of great rituals, we must define elegance, which is one of sorrow's daughters; and from Ravenna to Mozart, from Botticelli to Tiepolo, haunts all the anxious works of western art. It is Byzantium which first taught this discipline, and which demands that luxury awaken all the powers of our senses, though it lives in the senses only to meditate on an absence. Byzantine art, which designated the absolute, also knows that it is distant. It is not, as Venice can be sometimes, and Rubens often, the vain unfolding of an illusory triumph.

But today I will only evoke the great silver plates, dark and shining, without ornament except a cross inlaid in niello,<sup>6</sup> or the slender trace of foliage. All their art is resumed in the accord of several circumstances, and sometimes only two: one the rim, the other the crown which is always a little uneven, and which delimits the basin. And this accord does not try

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<sup>6</sup>Niello is a black, metallic amalgam, inlaid on delicately engraved silver, gold or bronze. Decoration whose origin is attributed to the Egyptians, it was practiced in Byzantium and Italy from the first to the sixteenth centuries.

to be the perfect accord which was the ambition of Greek art, does not claim to reveal, in a light without shadow, the numeral essence of what is; it simply accomplishes a momentary balance between proportion and disproportion, the soul's accord with itself--the joyful accord, by virtue of which we can live. When the experience of life is honestly conducted, a light is given even in its ebb, or if you like, its failure. In the best of Byzantine art, the form is the very act of existence which is tempted; and when it does not allow what belongs to miracle, it is still what detaches our misplaced attachments, and what gives us the freedom to forever exchange Possession for Knowledge and Desire. For us, whose consciousness is infinitely personal, and who refuse that magic of sleep in the universal that must be seen as death, Byzantium holds a cup. There we can touch for a moment the invisible water--finitude which is made presence--flowing in the depth of all.

## OF PAINTING AND THE PLACE

There is no book I want so much to write as an account of the world's museums. The central part would be dedicated to galleries of paintings, and the most partisan chapter, the most unjust,<sup>1</sup> which would moreover be elliptical, allusive, almost mute, would be given to the small Italian museums. Museum of Spoleto, a room in the town hall with painted crosses and the illumination of a work of the Rimini school. Museum of Pistoia, visited on a rainy morning, a black day, in the attic of the Questura. The Bardini Museum in Florence, for the first naive devotions, for a lost ignorance, for the first Florentine days. And you, formerly palaces or convents, Pisa, Ravenna, Ferrara, in the inaugural odor of plaster. Although you are only chance, as they say, while the paintings are absolute, I claim the right to love you along with them; to remember you with them; to affirm you and to carry you with me today, at sea, in this disquiet of the voyage which art contains and justifies. Yes, we must attach ourselves to the

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<sup>1</sup>Baudelaire wrote in the Salon de 1846 that ". . . to be just, that is to have a reason to exist, criticism must be partial, passionate, political, that is, it must be written from an exclusive point of view, but one which opens the greatest number of perspectives." It is noteworthy that this essay further develops the Baudelairian theme of poetry and voyage (cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 4).

places if we are concerned with the works; we must remember the light and a few real halls when we want to think, for example, about this sun and this night of painting, the Flagellation of Piero,<sup>2</sup> and the Profanation of the Host:<sup>3</sup> for they are also, light and halls of Urbino, the marriage of number and unity.

And it is true that profound complicities exist, here and there, between the works and their present lodgings. A dialogue between invention and secular teaching, between the spirit's ambition and the tangible evidence, between hope and the limit--that is what Piero della Francesca at Borgo, Vecchietta at Siena,<sup>4</sup> Tintoretto at the Scuola di San Rocco<sup>5</sup> continually save for us, in these stones which seem their birthplace, and despite the passage of time which obscures them. But it is not

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<sup>2</sup>Piero della Francesca was an influential Umbrian painter of the Quattrocento (ca. 1420-1492). Among his most important works are the Flagellation in the Urbino Cathedral (cf. "The Back Country," note 12) and the Resurrection in the Town Hall, Borgo san Sepolcro, which is mentioned in the next paragraph, and in an earlier text (cf. "Seven Fires," note 1).

<sup>3</sup>By Uccello (?1397-1475), located in the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino. Cf. "The Back Country," note 21.

<sup>4</sup>Lorenzo di Pietro, one of the most important painters of the later Sienese school (1412-1480).

<sup>5</sup>Tintoretto was a Venetian painter of the High Renaissance (1518-1594). There is a series of paintings at the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice, progressing from the Annunciation to the Ascension of the Virgin.



this first degree of accord which interests me today, nor the highly privileged museums which I would like this evening to make the center of my book; today, as I slowly approach other shores, where all the museums are new, where Italian paintings survive under neo-classical peristyles, I know (you must forgive me) that I love to find Veronese in London,<sup>6</sup> or a particular Botticelli which is infinitely alive and entirely vibrant, behind the red brick walls and the lovely white-painted wooden columns of New England;<sup>7</sup> and Piero della Francesca, again, in a great marble mausoleum at the borders of Massachusetts and Vermont.<sup>8</sup> I am happy when the bonds are loosened between the painting and the place. It is not that the unexpected appeals to me--the word has

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<sup>6</sup>Veronese was a Venetian colorist of the High Renaissance (1528-1588).

<sup>7</sup>Botticelli was a Florentine painter of the Renaissance (1444-1510). The catalogue raisonné lists a number of paintings in three Boston area museums--the Museum of Fine Arts, the Fogg Art Museum and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Although none of these fits Bonnefoy's description of red brick walls and white wooden columns, it seems likely that he is thinking of the Fogg, since he will later choose the Fogg's Crucifixion to illustrate a passage of "The Back Country" which describes his encounter with Italian art (cf. "The Back Country," note 37), and their Pietà in a similar passage from Cross Street (cf. "Rome, the Arrows," p. 328).

<sup>8</sup>Piero's Virgin and Child with Four Angels is at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

little meaning--but that I remember the essential mode of these Italian paintings which are immediately and always metaphysical; it is by intuition or illusion of their inalienable unity. Italian art always makes the same demand. Always it wants to compromise the Idea, which it feels too distant, in this place, our world. And it is clear that painting best expresses this difficult desire, even in its failure, for the ambiguity of painting is that it presents the real object in a space without depth; and this ambiguity earns it the right to simply evoke the object, and to easily rejoin the horizon of the most joyful plenitude; but also means that painting may only grasp the appearance, and must be separated from the heart of that wealth which it has found in its freedom. The painting's surface, at least in Italy, is not the means of an analysis, but a category of absence. The rigor of the perspective in the Quattrocento was not to define the figures with more exactness, but to use all the resources of number to exacerbate the essential failure of being in images. It is different, of course, with architecture and sculpture, which coincide with space, and so can better signify a presence. For these to be arts of exile, as is the case with Michelangelo, the artist needs a second degree of consciousness, and that resolute intellectuality which is so often the inmost future of sorrow.

For now, I will simply recall the real task of painting, which meditates, even in its technique, the relation of the absolute to the world, and hopes to find the points of passage between the two--while in the work of the greatest painters, there is the fantasy of a half-seen solution. Unique enterprise, which restricts, in the unfolding of history, the art of the Idea--Italian painting, but also El Greco and Poussin, perhaps Manet--<sup>9</sup> to an eternal dispute at the closed door of the temple, and a wandering--for there is no logic to the approach--a passionate word, too pure to be warned against itself, a night; so that the modern diaspora of art works (and this is what I wanted to say) is in my mind only the consequence of this basic inadequacy, its clarification and its necessary result. Is it not right that the place assert itself in the face of the arts which so fiercely contest it, enamored as they are of the Intelligible; that this multiple oppose the arts' uncertain thesis of the One with the reality of chance, in its faultless

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<sup>9</sup> El Greco was a Cretan artist who painted in Spain (1548-1614), developing a distinctive Mannerist style of elongated forms and unusual color. Poussin, on the other hand, was a leader of the Classical school (1594-1665), though he also "exiled" himself to Rome (cf. "Painting, Poetry: Vertigo, Peace," note 2; and "The Back Country," note 2). Manet (1832-1883), as an early exponent of Impressionism in France, was especially fond of painting images of Spain.

evidence; and so create a tension between the painting and its place of exile, a tension which will intensify our consciousness of Being? Perhaps the only true liturgy of which our time is capable is one in which these opposite poles of intuition are brought closer, even to the point of rupture. It is true at any rate in paintings, that knowledge refused or repressed can become a light; and the great demand which is always frustrated comes to consume, in this new horizon, the values and goals of our distracted modernity, and to recall other objects or images to the word which they speak. Who knows to what extent this sort of encounter can overturn a culture, or our life? Quests have no other hope but this, to lead a spirit to this moment of birth. It is in this sense that I see a labyrinth in the material dispersion of paintings, in this questioning of their incomplete intuition: a labyrinth we must follow to an absolute situation, at Benevento, at Aberdeen, at Seattle, how could I know: where the last door would be opened. I want at least to set forth an idea for your consideration: the idea of a painting lost, or forgotten in some storeroom, dirty and full of holes, having been repainted several times, in several places, in the course of the centuries, but necessary like a step on the long route which we have

to travel. Only before this painting, as the witness of its solitude, would God deserve to exist.

Once in any case, long ago, at the Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce in Florence, pausing before a faded Annunciation which had been set on the floor--before the admirable vase, of a blue and a form which no longer tolerated the universe--I understood what aid could be found along the way. And I have always been fond of "attributions" as one of the rare true sciences, because it is one of the few that are metaphysical, re-inventing the sacred--this absurd attempt to reconstitute the work of painters who are almost entirely unknown, this concern for the most completely forgotten, even the most mediocre works from the countryside of The Marches or of Tuscany. To know where paintings are located, that is well worth a life's work. I would have given my life to it, much more willingly than to many other things; and it is one of my regrets that this knowledge escapes me. At least I can propose that it accept the power which out of modesty it has refused. I ask scholars to understand the instinct which makes them love catalogues. It is one of the oldest and most profound: the hope that at the end of time--but at no

special point of the search--chance will become the throw of the dice.<sup>10</sup>

I remember departing once before, the first time I left for the great western land, home of the dead--or if not, then of the men who live closest to the great threatening deserts. The ship set sail in the last minutes of the day. It was already impossible to see anything of the grey cement quays except their poor contested lamps, the headlights of cars, cranes which drew back, and extinguished their colored lights. And if they still spoke on that shore, if there were words called out to those on board, already we knew nothing of those few dark speakers. While I, certainly a stranger, absent from these cares and labors, but present to the smell of the sea, to the clouds which gathered, still touched with red, to the ship's passage--I imagined a Madonna dal collo lungo, not by Parmigiano but of his school,<sup>11</sup> with hands whose paint has scaled on the blue canvas, a work of uncertain quality and dubious ambition, reflection of a reflection: but carried in our wake by

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mallarmé's experimental poem, which Bonnefoy edited in 1976: "Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard," or a throw of the dice will never abolish chance.

<sup>11</sup> Parmigiano was an Italian painter of the Lombard school (1504-1540). The Madonna dal Collo Lungo is at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

one of the harbor tugs, as far out to sea as it could go. The painting rolled in a case or nailed on the bridge, near a lamp. Mouth-to-mouth of an absolute evidence and an absolute desire, oil and the word, water and the night.

I believe two things: a work of the "third order," a copy of a copy, the anonymous work of a school--and precisely because it is anonymous, because the flood of the unknown has penetrated its form--can be nearer the inaccessible center towards which all art turns than the most conscious works. On the other hand, works of art are cryptic. We need a grid--chance, our own place, our existence--to read them. Will you refuse me these two principles, will you hold them to be imaginary? Then I will remind you that in geometry, the most real figures can always pass through two "imaginary" points; and I will confess that I feel myself unable to define a real art, the painting of Tuscany and of Northern Italy and Rome, between 1300 and Guardi,<sup>12</sup> in any other way than by these mirages.

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<sup>12</sup>Francisco Guardi, the eighteenth-century Venetian landscape painter (1712-1793), painted Venetian scenes in a nervous, shimmering light.

## THE SECOND SIMPLICITY

I do not want to disavow the extravagance of Baroque art. I love it, even when it verges on bad taste, because I understand it as a heroism, the reaffirmation of tangible being at the vibrant heart of the forms' self will. So it is with these bodies which are a prey to space, in the heights of the Transparente at Toledo,<sup>1</sup> as if it were necessary to give evidence of another reign--of the dark carnal gravity--in the pure world of the law. The Baroque is a passionate realism. It is the fierce, unreasonable, blinded desire that earthly existence accede to the rights of the divine, and surely it is not by chance that this art flourished as one began to doubt the real presence, when one no longer understood that this bread and this wine could make all things sacred, beginning with the place where we are, and our moment in time. The Baroque loves whatever passes, is limited, and dies. While the Gothic church seems to have been lost in the countryside, forgotten by some vast enterprise of propaganda, the

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<sup>1</sup>In a masterpiece of illusionistic architecture, Narciso Tomé constructed a chapel of light, in which the Blessed Sacrament could be exposed and venerated from the choir and from the ambulatory.



Baroque building, rediscovering the gravest thought of Romanesque art, regathers the sparse being from the fields and the hills to raise it at the center of the place like a flame which suddenly grows brighter. In profoundly the same way, it has been said of a church which Bernini gave to Rome: it is like a heart beating.<sup>2</sup>

So I love that space become substance. That the broken pediments signify "the earth's imperfect joy"; that the polychrome marble, so soon blackened, the wreathed columns, the faded and fallen stuccos disclose the tragic, secret lack in the impetuous expense of the feast.--And yet I especially love Baroque art for a quality in which it seems to contradict itself. When in the village churches, in the churches of small communities, still more in the most knowing works, the most conscious, works of architects who have grown a little old, the forms' disquiet is dispelled, the conflict appeased between ornament and number, then is a second simplicity established, where the agitation has been consumed. What are the great circles of grey stone on the façades, and this rugged material, like an intuition of silence? Is it the return to abstraction, as has been said of one or another building; is it a classical taste that forms again in the exhaustion of the dance? And is it

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. "Seven Fires," note 7.

the betrayal of a cause, the dissociation, once more in human history, of the desire to construct and the consciousness of death?

It does not seem so to me. It seems that, of all the arts which have tried to bend the Idea to this absolute and unyielding presence that we love in the stone, it is this simpler Baroque which in its clarity or its wisdom comes closest to the impossible unity. If we only remember Doric art! The number and the bright marble are both sustained with an admirable candor, but the first would cure the other, draw the other within its law, and suggest that, being immobile, it has access to the intemporal--though it must then denounce our shadows moving on the stone-paved terraces as an enigma and a scandal. The Baroque, the "late" Baroque, the destitute, does not contest our shadows. In it the two contraries have consented each to the other, without denying each other, in a repose without illusion but full of joy, which we can call a grace. The law would like to inhabit the uncertainty of time. Grass grows on the volutes and the sculpted forms prepare the grass, the scaling of the paint, the rupture, by reviving in their sinuous economy the trembling gesture of what lives.

I am thinking of the campanile of Saint-Yves-de-la-Sagesse.<sup>3</sup> And I think--a great deal, recently--of the touching church of Agliè in the Canavese,<sup>4</sup> where the most musical, the most accomplished art still desired the warping of the red brick. I think of painted furniture, of bright colors. It is these which we should call "country," as they have the happy vivacity as well as the unquiet ignorance of death which animals and plants have also. They are all the joy of which man's glance is capable, and they equal, finally, the light which comes to them.

And thanks to these, and to the idea of a slightly reddened chest, and of a window where the chest is framed, with the summer; thanks to the half-seen brilliance of a golden age beyond Christianity--but which

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<sup>3</sup>There is a seventeenth-century parish church of Saint-Yves (the comprehensive Dictionnaire des Eglises de France does not use the full title by which Bonnefoy names the church) in the parish of Plouneour-Menez, département of Finistère, in Bretagne. It is dedicated to St. Yves of Bretagne (1253-1303) who vacated his judgeship in order to become an advocate for the poor. Patron of lawyers, his feast day is May 19.

<sup>4</sup>The red brick church of Santa Marta in Agliè is unusual in its elongated plan constructed by three centralized units: the first hexagonal, the second square with internally convex walls, and the third circular. The three are fully integrated into the undulating movement which even includes the tall campanile. Both Santa Marta and Saint-Yves are included in "Dévotion" (cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 3).

would remember Christianity, source of its melancholy which has and has not been cured--I find the comparison which nearly expresses the thought I wanted to convey: repetition, according to Kierkegaard, is what is most similar in desire, which is sometimes revealed as substance, to this second simplicity.

## HUMOR AND THE CAST SHADOWS

I.

I am looking at the enormous hats which Piero della Francesca invented in his most deliberate paintings, at the church of San Francesco in Arezzo.<sup>1</sup> In Heraclius Returns the Cross to Jerusalem, they are true edifices, which start as a cylinder, prolonging the form of the skull, and then widen very high up like some kind of vase, before closing suddenly with a flat surface approximately two handspans above the head. These hats are something like a church built on a centralized plan, but also like a hot air balloon. Precise in form, perfectly defined, they are related to those regular bodies, crystalline in proportion and symmetry, which the greatest painter of number wanted to see in all things. One could almost believe that the bearded man, who dreamily raises his hand to his marvellous head-dress, says that the Cross is only a new epiphany of the

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 2. The medieval church of San Francesco in Arezzo (Tuscany) is famous for Piero's frescos, The Legend of the True Cross. Other paintings by Piero which are mentioned in this essay are: the Madonna del Parto, at the chapel of the cemetery in Arezzo; the Baptism of Christ; and the Nativity.

universal harmony. But his gesture--and these head-dresses--lack something of the absolute. A Pythagorean spirit must be disturbed by them, and sense a sacrilege. Piero himself has taught us to associate number and stone, immobility and geometry: and so these tall volumes which move, suddenly changing shape, askew in perspective; these scaffoldings we know are hollow, these light frames hung with cloth seem to exalt the virtue of the Intelligible only in order to laugh a little at it. Nor is it good that the perfect bodies which Plato considered in the Timaeus, and which Piero himself studied in one of his mathematical treatises,<sup>2</sup> come too close--though in this form, less pure--to these bushy eyebrows, disordered hair, this pelt which the Parmenides claimed, and not without reason, was one of the most obstinate elements of the specificity of the tangible world.<sup>3</sup> It is as if one made the Idea run too great a risk--and we are uneasy. Could Piero have let himself go astray, this time, having placed too much confidence

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<sup>2</sup>Libellus di Quinque Corporibus Regularibus.

<sup>3</sup>Platonic dialogue, on the One and the Many, in which Socrates argues with Parmenides (cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 6). Socrates admits, however, that it would be too absurd to suppose that hair or mud or dirt had a Form. In The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 924.

in the forms; is it possible that he did not know how to distinguish, with enough precision, the mysterious line which separates the sacred from the profane; or how to protect his geometrical hypothesis from the explosive proximity of the everyday world? Fortunately, these hats have been placed at the very center of the painting. It is not the cross but the hats which irresistibly draw the eye. And from a painter whom we know is used to the disciplines of self-control,<sup>4</sup> that must signify an intention, itself central, at the most difficult point of his thought.

I believe in this intention and will define it, if you will forgive me for introducing a second English concept in this discussion of a Tuscan painter--but Piero has surprising resources--as a sort of humor. There is, of course, no burlesque in this hidden extravagance, but neither is there tragedy, nothing to discredit a faith. And if there is irony, it is not at the expense of the forms but with them, as if to make them live more fully, while still adhering to what they have of the absolute. There is humor when values are examined without being devastated; when it is above all a question of testing one's resolution and courage; and that is what Piero does

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<sup>4</sup>In English, in the original text.

in this painting. In bringing together the affirmation of the form and the evidence of matter, he does not want to destroy this vast and rational place which he has so resolutely built. But he does want to set its limits, as Plato did in the Parmenides, or more exactly its mystery; and other small indications scattered through his work testify to this same spirit. I see, again in this painting at Arezzo, an old man approach in the distance, between the magnificent, peaceful castle and the hat in the foreground which obscures it. He has one of those long forked beards, at once comic and substantial, that Piero loves, for reasons we can now begin to understand. And if he is late for the ceremony which is taking place, it is because--smiling calmly to himself, his eyes half closed in the excess of his corporeal opulence--he signifies for Piero the resistance of matter in the unfolding of the Idea, the incurable tardiness of the lowest element.

In his own easy-going, understanding way, isn't this old man a little like the stranger in the Sophist, who has come to remind these speculative spirits of the aporias<sup>5</sup> of their doctrine of being--and of life's truth?

Everywhere in Piero's work, there is that which maintains this truth, which recognizes the presence of

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<sup>5</sup>Logical difficulty without solution.



non-being without fearing it: the oblique planes in the calm recession of parallel horizons, a thousand tiny irregularities which bring to life and deepen the apparent regularity. Finally there is the Madonna del Parto, at the cemetery of Monterchi. On a perfectly symmetrical background of angels and curtains, in a space without depth, in this flat place where the intemporal has always haunted painters, the Virgin points with a surprising irony--almost imperceptible and yet, if I can use the word, cosmic, a little Chinese this time--to the growth in her womb which is certainly sacred. There is no immodesty in this suggestion so exactly transcribed in terms of pure space, but nothing is idealized, either. In this Madonna, I recognize and salute Piero's unswerving attention to the contradictions of what is: life or number, accident or law, shadows or distances filled with a reassuring light; attention which is the vocation of the highest consciousness, and the principle of the greatest art.

## II.

And to restore them to their place in the perspective of such an approach, I will define the enormous hats of Arezzo, or the old man approaching, or the paradoxical icon of Monterchi as plastic metaphors, since the painter requires aspects of the earthly object to signify

the spirit's intuition, in this case the large refusal of the pretensions of the Intelligible. This morning sky reflected in the troubled water, in the Baptism of Christ, is another plastic metaphor which only the Form makes possible, and yet is in conflict with the form; a metaphor which indicates that God offers the earth his love, but also that the earth remains itself, with its clay where the dead are lost, though in the light of the new day. And we can see, moreover, that there is much more, where painters use such metaphors, than the intellect's reminiscence of the existence of a matter, existence of an ultimate element in which the Idea is denied: so true is it that these metaphors suppose empirical reflection, and therefore the most active foreknowledge of a "rugged" experience,<sup>6</sup> and its truths without a priori. Reciprocally, it is the wealth, the liberty of the concrete experience, evidently personal, that allows great artists to bring all the weight of existence to bear on this questioning I evoke. How much is gained, not only in metaphysical clarity, but in the artist's presence, too, when the oxen's horn, in the Nativity, is placed so as to prolong the line of the angel's guitar! It is true that it is his optimism, this time, which Piero makes

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<sup>6</sup> Rimbaud, "Adieu," Cf. "Second Earth," p. 127 and "The Back Country," note 51.

the oxen bear, but it is still the same dialectical thought, suggesting that music and matter are opposed and in harmony, in this tension which he ultimately identifies with the real.

And it is noteworthy that this double intuition can take many aspects, from one spirit to another; so that it can either be a decided affirmation, or the involuntary play of dark forces, beneath the uncertain sky of memory. Thus the metaphor will express the painter's disposition, his courage or skepticism, his desire to witness for the truth or to lock himself into a passionate claim which Piero himself, in his serenity where there is yet a hint of sadness, would incite us to define.

What is the opposite of Piero's enormous hats, what is the sign with analogous resonances in other painters' work, the sign which will express--not, this time, an ataraxia<sup>7</sup> superbly tested--but the blows of hope and despair, which are endured with more or less difficulty?

I am sure that it is the cast shadow. In the work of Giorgio de Chirico,<sup>8</sup> on the horizon of the admirable

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<sup>7</sup>Freedom from disturbance of mind or passion, which the Stoics thought was the privilege of the gods and the goal of the wise man.

<sup>8</sup>Chirico was an Italian surrealist (1888-1978). Exaggerated shadows, especially of architectural elements, play an important role in his early works, especially in the Mystery and Melancholy of a Street (cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 8), to which there are several allusions in this text.

paintings of his first style, there are the palaces, the terraces and the arcades which evoke, if they do not achieve, that architecture of harmonious proportions in which the affirmation of the Intelligible has always been promised--and has always been lost. In the immobility of these places, a little girl running, some men who have met very far in the distance, and who talk, an open cart which seems empty, throw vast shadows on the ground. Shadows which are, as we must first remark, conceivable and even fatal in an "absolute" art derived from the theory of numbers: as they can be measured with these angles and compasses which Chirico solemnly represented--but from the outside, as mysterious instruments, whose purpose has been forgotten, so much as the ambition of salvation become incomprehensible, which Classical art had associated with their use. All Chirico's art is the passage from the interiority of an earlier project to the meditative contemplation of its wreckage, and of the ambiguous categories which will have dismembered it as completely as was allowed: perspective which expressed the number latent in all things, but also indicated the relativity of the observer's position; petrified gestures which the Tuscan fifteenth century had

already adopted in that heresy, the predella,<sup>9</sup> and which reintroduce the instant in the attempt to fix the intemporal; and you, shadows which testify to an obstinate opacity in the law of geometry, and the unity it assures. Born of the chance conjunction of volumes with the sources of light, the cast shadow maintains the irreducible chance on the scaffolding of number. One can see that the shadow forces time--the being of this furtive moment which the shadow marks with its length and direction--to live with chance on that scaffold, as it was asked to do again on all the sun-dials of Classicism in decline. And it is not without cause that Chirico has also represented pendulums, and these trains that can tell the hour as soon as the place they pass is exactly known. The cast shadow, like the needle on the dial, profoundly designates this place in this instant, and beyond the impenetrable substance of this metaphysical pole of our spirit, the reality of an encounter, which has no name in the Idea. In a word, it is finitude. It is the mystery of a being's presence, and our melancholy to see it barred from the coherence of numbers. Like a demon in broad daylight, the ontological imperfection of

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<sup>9</sup>A predella is an elongated rectangle below an altar or retable, which is filled with carved or painted figures. The series of scenes may suggest a narrative, and therefore the passage of time: a heresy, if the intemporal is orthodox.

the human being haunts the category of space in Chirico's works. And it is only logical that the sun which determines these shadows--now so heavy with meaning--is by choice the sun of evening, withdrawing as the Intelligible seems to do from this world where its vanity has been proven with angle and compass. After the early morning of Piero's work, where the shadows are soft and transparent, and the Idea is thought to grow stronger from moment to moment; after the noon, a little empty and faded, of Classical art, this light without a source which seems to coincide with the envelope of things, and to consume their matter; after these, comes the western glory of an intuition of the void.

The platonic enterprise soon emigrated to art, which in its double concern with essence and appearance offered its élan and assured it a language; but Chirico represents the last time in history that this enterprise unfolds all its levels, and here it is only to confess its renouncement. From this time forth, the way is overgrown, and doubtless closed. It is elsewhere, far from the seductions and traps of a philosophy of essence, it is in the affirmation of the being of what passes that we must carry forward the spirit's soteriological ambition. We may of course love the cast shadow, we may love nothing but the cast shadow, but not in thinking that its source is a star. We must forget the intelligible

mirage and with it the form of shadows, which is the daughter of proportion. The new hic et nuc<sup>10</sup> does not appear in the prism of a metaphysics of number, but in the immediacy of an emotional adhesion. And Chirico, who does not, like Piero della Francesca or Raphael,<sup>11</sup> attempt to construct the essence on his canvas, who limits himself to suggesting the essence like a deserted city on the horizon: it may be that he has such power over our modern consciousness only because he also clings to a glove, a mannequin or a piece of fruit, brute objects, where the reflection of the arcades' alignment is lost forever.

But what strength, of invention and poetry, this tenacious Platonism will have represented in western history, if it is true that the new intention surged from its body, from a shadow suddenly become presence, from a form that trembled, from a "melancholy" changed to resolution and ecstasy! Platonism, which sustained the illusion, also maintained the hope: imprisoned, but allowed to deepen, and to seek its free future in a thousand difficult situations, themselves attenuated but

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<sup>10</sup> Latin, "here and now." Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," p. 37: Bonnefoy says of the object in its presence, "It is here, it is now."

<sup>11</sup> Raphael was a luminous Umbrian painter (1483-1520) who played a leading role in artistic and Neo-Platonic circles in Florence and Rome.

rich with possibility--like the crises of an existence-- which are more and more certainly the necessary threshold of new eras, between the great art, Renaissance or classical, of consciousness, and the Romantic art of passion. Pontormo, Parmigianino, El Greco, inaugural surf on the shore.<sup>12</sup> And Neo-Classical art, still so little known despite its strong unity, which is of exile and meditation on exile. It is this art which Chirico resumed in broad strokes, by an intuitive act of Oedipal sympathy; and he could legitimately do so, without anachronism or dishonesty, because one can perpetuate the nostalgia which this belated sensibility carried in itself, while it is impossible to sustain the heroic illusion of what is called a great epoch.

I imagine an architect's study, perhaps at Bergamo, around 1780.<sup>13</sup> There are plaster casts set on the floor which is an inlaid pavement, precise and worn, of grey stone. There are plans and blueprints in rolls under the tables. It is six o'clock in the evening, towards the end of summer, and the room is empty.

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<sup>12</sup> Pontormo was a Florentine painter (1494-1557) whose work spanned late Classicism and early Mannerism. For Parmigianino, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 11; for El Greco, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 9.

<sup>13</sup> Bergamo is the capital of Lombardy, and is known for (among other things) its eighteenth-century palaces.



Elsewhere, no doubt, they are eating ices under the arcades. The music of Cimarosa struggles as well as it can against the folds of shadow in its depth.<sup>14</sup> And I am thinking, too, of the first Hyperion, by Hölderlin, in which Greece, the sparkling, is loved in the evening hour;<sup>15</sup> and again of Gérard de Nerval, who tried on the slopes of the Posilippo to tear his eyes from the inextinguishable black sun.<sup>16</sup> Neo-Classicism was much more than historical accident; nor is it the deflection or the academism that it is thought to be, but the culmination

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<sup>14</sup>Cimarosa was an Italian composer of comic operas (1749-1801).

<sup>15</sup>Hölderlin was a German Romantic poet (1770-1843) whose mind failed in his thirty-sixth year. His Hyperion (1799) is a prose elegaic novel set in an idealized Greece: the "first," because earlier than Keats' Hyperion, reconstructed in 1819, or Longfellow's, published in 1839. Yves Bonnefoy chose a phrase from Hölderlin's novel as the epigraph to his second book of verse, Hier régnant désert.

<sup>16</sup>Gérard de Nerval, a French Romantic writer (1808-1855), created obsessively beautiful and mysterious fantasies from the dreams which haunted him in his madness. Like Hölderlin, he used Greek imagery. Bonnefoy is alluding to the initial quatrains of his best-known sonnet, "El Desdichado":

I am the Shadowed,--the Widowed,--the Unconsoled,  
The Prince of Aquitaine in the desolate Tower:  
My only Star is dead,--and my glimmering lute  
Displays the Black Sun of my Melancholy.

In the night of the Tomb, You who consoled me,  
Give me back Posilippo, and the Italian sea,  
The flower which gladdened my sorrowful heart,  
And the Vine where the Leaf is joined with the Rose.

of the eternal ambition to make our reality coincide with the form; it was able to express, in this illusion at last sobered, the movement of the soul which is still illusion's captive. A subjectivity declares itself at the heart of the most objective art. And men are converted to memory. The double star, rising sun of the Intelligible, setting sun of the real man, has passed from its east to its fall, and in its ruddier light has shown this face with half-closed eyes, and surrounded by rays, consciousness a prey to finitude, which so consistently obsessed alchemical imagery. . . . Happy the men of the rising sun if they, like Piero, can dwell in wisdom, but truer those of the shadow. They glimpse another reign, real, and illumined far off in their night; and the opposite of Piero's enormous hats may be above all this moment, almost absolute, in Mozart's Don Giovanni, when the masqueraders advance over the dark threshold of the feast: O belle maschere, cosa chiedete?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Bonnefoy is probably quoting from memory. In Act I, scene 4, Don Giovanni asks his servant, Leporello, to invite three masqueraders to his ball. The masqueraders are Donna Elvira, Don Ottavio and Donna Anna, who have come to Don Giovanni's house to discover whether it is he who assassinated Donna Anna's father, and who is seducing all the young women. Leporello calls, "Zi! Zi! Signore maschere! (My lady masks!)" and Don Ottavio answers, "Cosa chiedete? (What do you want?)"

In Pierre écrite, Bonnefoy's third book of verse, the title of one of the poems is also taken from this scene. Don Ottavio accepts Leporello's invitation, and ushers his companions into the house: "Andiam, compagne belle. (Let us go in, beautiful companions)." The poem assigns this phrase, however, to Act I, scene 3.

An art which no longer attempts the impossible construction of being, an art of existence and of destiny.

## A DREAM IN MANTUA

Early in the summer of 1961, Jackson and Marthiel Mathews<sup>1</sup> arrived in Paris. They were going to Egypt and then to Greece, and Sylvia Beach<sup>2</sup> had decided to go with them on this voyage. One evening, Jackson asked me, "Couldn't we meet in Athens?" I found that I was able to leave, and happy at the idea of joining them.

Sylvia in Greece was indefatigable, though we sometimes thought that she was not so much incapable of fatigue as--from this time on--beyond it. She kept going, always the first, and silent; she perched on the stones, looked, and clambered higher, in the sun, in black, with an unblinking attention. She disappeared early in the evening, but then she left so early in the

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<sup>1</sup>Translators and editors of René Char, Benjamin Péret, Charles Baudelaire and most notably of Paul Valéry. Jackson and Marthiel Mathews also edited the memorial volume offered to Sylvia Beach (Paris: Mercure de France, 1963).

<sup>2</sup>Sylvia Beach (1887-1962) was the American living in Paris who first published Joyce's Ulysses (Paris, 1922). She opened her English language bookshop, lending library and gathering place, Shakespeare & Co., in 1919. In 1921, she moved the shop from 8, rue Dupuytren to 12, rue de l'Odéon, where it remained until the Germans closed it during the Occupation. Cf. her account in Shakespeare and Company (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

morning! Once, in Nauplia, I watched from my window as the port first awoke. And among the fishermen, still mute in the folds of shadow which were still blue, passed a hatted Sylvia, stepping rapidly over the coiled ropes, slender silhouette and tiny foot that barely pressed the ground, no more than an intrepid subtlety.

And I can still see the vast dark room, a restaurant at Delphi, where it is again very early in the morning. Not even any instant coffee. Little help can be expected from the few waiters in the distance, indistinct, soon invisible. "Never mind," says Sylvia. She had caught sight, God only knows when! of a tin can on a shelf which does, in fact, hold ground coffee; and she puts a little of the powder in the lukewarm tea, stirs, and drinks. "It's not so bad,"<sup>3</sup> she concludes without illusions, but with that unyielding resolution which is the most discreet aspect of humor.

I have never seen a traveller less mindful of herself, or more cheerfully stoical, and I truly admired her confident fragility--wondering sometimes from what profound need she drew her resources. What did Sylvia expect from Greece, which came to her so late? I remember that at Mycennae, she wanted to go down into the great well,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>In English, in the original text.

<sup>4</sup>Secret well-house which the Nycenaens contrived under their citadel, in order to withstand a siege.

in which one descends, holding a slender flame, the endless steps of a spiral staircase. The stairs are slippery, the walls close, the water at the bottom will have only a narrow, silent shore; but I felt that Sylvia was courageous as she went before me, a little surprised but very attentive; and I could recognize the eternal girl in her, faded but intact, sister to that water which slips away: the slightly British girl who goes off, for a moment of release, with a pack on her back, sleeping under a tent, taking notes in the museums (which she no longer did, though sometimes she wrote a word on an old envelope), passing early in the morning through the small village streets. Sylvia Beach was ingenuousness, which is the intelligence of free beings. She travelled from childhood to the travails of old age, without consenting to see the mournful profile of things. Like the kores she so much admired,<sup>5</sup> and who all look straight ahead, intact without prudery; like the robust and melancholy art of the pediments at Olympia, showing the decisive battle,<sup>6</sup> she decided to subject the hills, the

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<sup>5</sup>Ancient Greek statues of young girls.

<sup>6</sup>The western pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia represents the marriage feast of Peirithous. The Centaurs were invited, but as they were unused to wine, they became drunk, and attempted to rape the women who were their hostesses. There was a great battle, which the Centaurs lost. Apollo stands over the fray.

debris, the sad undergrowth of life to her inflexible ideals.

And perhaps our chauffeur understood that Sylvia was of the race which is not magical, which refuses the labyrinth, and reascends towards the light, for each morning he brought her a bouquet of the heavy jasmine of September, all shining with dew. For myself, I said in much the same way that she little resembled Joyce, at least in her moral choice, though she sought his memory everywhere in Ulysses' land. One morning--Sylvia certainly belonged to the rising sun--I was wandering through the National Museum, and I saw her from a distance, as she came towards me. I had a camera with me. "Yves," she said, "look, it's just like Joyce. Could you take a photograph?" The funerary stele which she pointed out to me,<sup>7</sup> had preserved the likeness of a sixth-century warrior, helmeted, nude, imperturbable, muscular, and yet--how the devil, and by what resource of the mythic consciousness had Sylvia seen it?--it is true that Joyce was there, even in the forehead bent by myopia.

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<sup>7</sup>A stele is a monolithic monument, formed from a stone set upright, and ornamented. The Greek funerary steles showed a likeness of the dead, sculpted in relief and painted.

Of course, Sylvia cherished the idea of going to Ithaca,<sup>8</sup> and it was a great disappointment for her to discover, in the last week, how inaccessible the island remains today, and that she had let the last boat leave which would have allowed her to go there. She had to defer this ultimate visit to another year. Sylvia bore this mischance badly. She hastened her return to France. Suddenly there was no more time, and there has never again been time for Sylvia Beach.

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A few days later, I also left Greece, on the boat for Venice. I had decided to stop at Mantua, in order to see the Mantegna exhibition;<sup>9</sup> and I was soon there, travelling one night by an accelerato. I wanted to stay near the station, but there were no rooms available in the nearby hotels. I entrusted myself to a taxi, only to discover that the other hotels, and even the pensions, were full as well; which surprised me, as it was October. "Why are there so many travellers in Mantua?" I asked my driver. "Why, because of the great Mostra,"<sup>10</sup> he told me.

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<sup>8</sup> Ithaca was Ulysses' home, where Penelope waited during the Trojan war and Ulysses' subsequent wanderings.

<sup>9</sup> Mantegna was a Paduan painter of the Quattrocento (1431-1506). The exhibition at the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, October 1961, collected all of the artist's most significant works.

<sup>10</sup> Exhibition.



This answer filled me with an extraordinary contentment. It seemed to me that I myself, come to see Mantegna, had been multiplied to infinity, and filled the rooms of this city. In the meantime, we descended by degrees, still in vain. All that was left in Mantua was a little locanda<sup>11</sup> which my guide hesitated to propose.

But at the locanda Al giardino, there was an enormous room for me, approached through the darkness of the stone stairs under the trees. The massive opaque furniture of the Ottocento shone in the faint light, under chromos illustrating scenes from Verdi's Otello. I hurried to see the two churches built by Alberti.<sup>12</sup> Then I slept, and had one of those beautiful dreams which are sometimes detached, with a poem's clarity, from the blind scribblings of the unconscious.

Here is the end of the dream. It was spring or the first days of summer; I entered a low white house hidden in the depths of a garden, and there I took a staircase which descended in wide spirals, but without losing any of the brilliance of the late morning, where

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<sup>11</sup>Inn. The locando Al giardino is the inn in the garden.

<sup>12</sup>Alberti was one of the great architects of the early Italian Renaissance (1404-1472). He designed the church of Sant'Andrea in Mantua with an impressive vaulted interior and a dome over the crossing. San Sebastiano, now dramatically altered, was built on a Greek cross plan.

the green of the foliage was dappled with dancing flecks of orange from the ripe fruit. Suddenly I was in a room which was hardly less brilliant than the day. A French window opened into the same garden, at what seemed to be its lowest level; and this diminutive room was a kitchen, furnished as was once the custom with polished wood and copper. Several little girls crowded, laughing, around the vast stoves. And a delicious fragrance of fresh oil rose from the black skillets in which eggs were cooking slowly. I watched these tiny suns as they sizzled in the fragrance and the shadow. And I saw that from time to time, one of the young girls took an egg in a skimming ladle, and threw it into a bucket on the floor, where there were many others, smoldering or ready to go out. I was amazed at this extravagance. "But what are we to do with them?" they asked me. "We are fairies, we have no needs. We cook for our pleasure. This is the house of immortality." And still laughing, with the plump and mobile faces of a childhood that must end.

Then I was in a crowded street, or rather a road whose walls, with their arcades of grey stone, were riddled with small shops. And there, in front of a shop, with people passing all around her, was Sylvia Beach. She held a book, or a journal. Someone explained that she had suffered from a publisher's ingratitude. I saw that

she was pale, infinitely old, menaced. And I told her that she must leave that place, and come with me. I even took her by the hand and pulled her along the street which turned and gradually descended, towards the house of the young girls. Yes, I knew that she had only to enter that house to escape death. But it was also clear to me, and more urgently so with each passing moment, that we had to be quick. A new and mysterious reality--the day, finitude, awakening?--showed through the trees on all sides, effacing them and this street along with them, and all this place of hope. We ran, and the door was in front of us, and I fought with all my soul for these appearances to remain, at least another minute in the growing whiteness, and at the moment when everything was engulfed, our feet touched the stone of the threshold. Had I succeeded in bringing Sylvia Beach into the house of immortality? Waking al giardino, to a sunny morning and the tufted song of the birds, I could almost believe that I had.

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But a year later, on a morning of cold fog and rain, I joined Sylvia's friends in descending the steps of the Colombarium at the Père-Lachaise cemetery, towards a dilapidated garden. On that day, all reality was black and white, perhaps with yellow reflections, as there are in old photographs. And it was at that moment that

someone who had known James Joyce well in his Paris years, turned to me in alarm and pointed abruptly to an old man, thin and bent, with a high forehead, his eyes poorly covered by thick, small glasses in a style I did not think was made any more; a man who stood apart, as if without color between our group and the trees: "It's extraordinary, look! I'd swear it was him." In fact, though I had not been think of him, I recognized him immediately.

It was not James Joyce. But that we saw him in this man who was leaving, seemed to me full of meaning. Of course it meant that his memory, at least for some of us, was obsessive in that sad hour. But more profoundly and above all, how easy it was, on that morning, to accept this passage into the fluid world of dream, to forget the hidden anchor which holds our world at port, to believe in our hearts--a thought which is certainly culpable--that there is no reason to shield the narrow domain of what we live from the assault of symbols which come from another place. When we follow a loved one to the edge of the void, one who has been, as Sylvia Beach was, so present to us, and so naturally a source of the truest works of an epoch, we can almost accept that reality is only a dream. Wasn't it our existence, in its essence illusory, that my dream in Italy had tried to indicate, by the effacement at the end of every appearance?

A changing sentence, where different words are erased, where the horizon has no reality; a fog like the fog today, with nothing but the beating of a small Delphic bell. And the true world beyond, in the inaccessible awakening which my awakening in Mantua, to the concerns of poetry, could only imitate.

And I remembered, too, the few photographs I had taken of Sylvia Beach, at Delphi, at Mycenae, in Arcadia, understanding better now why they would become, like all those from another time, this silent epiphany, corroding the objects which are their horizon, or perhaps only their decor. The humanity in us, our ancient will to be a person, knows the plenitude of Being only from inside, in the faith which bears us towards unity. Seen through others' eyes, in the unceasing past, how immobile the gesture, how mysterious: she advances towards the camera like a spirit of the evening hour. Yes, what drives the concept's broad avenues through the things of this world--our interest, always lively, in their appearance--is also what makes them look so unfamiliar to us, because of that other shaft, that other passing, this time at the very center, and which is the emptiness of the name we give. I take a photograph, I eternalize an instant of Sylvia Beach and the trees change, as if they followed some procession

through the summer; and suddenly looking higher, I saw them again in and through the uncertain movement--like the movement of a boat lifted by a noiseless wave--of this black statue, smiling, crumbling a little which we carry far under their branches.

PAINTING, POETRY: VERTIGO, PEACE

I.

To write, even one word: and already a language is there, going about its work, and with it all the ambiguities, all the false semblances--all the past--of the common tongue. There is never any immediacy for the writer, even if he is passionately attentive to what has no name, or distinct features. He knows, intuitively, the quality of truth, as if other, which a flowering branch proposes, or a stone rolling from edge to edge, in a ravine. But to recreate in words its infinite density, or its pure emptiness--that is only, and from the very beginning, a senseless wish, which poetry, though this wish is its life, must abandon page after page.

To paint, as some do even today, taking to color which rises above meaning as soon as it has been placed on the canvas, which dissolves our memories, which, one supposes, is nothing but itself: one can think that this is the immediate, and that the veil has been torn.

No need to look further for a reason why many writers are as if fascinated by painters. It is not

that they judge painters to be more aware than they are themselves of the breaks that exist in the screen of our representations, breaches through which one can see the origin; but they imagine painters to be favored with a privilege that they lack themselves, forever.

It is a fact, easily verified: the more specifically poets have desired the immediate, the more they have been interested by the technique, in their eyes miraculous, of painting. When his word is snared in the lies, the fears, the lassitude from which he suffers as from a fading of the first innocence, Baudelaire, for example, praises Delacroix' color, as "explosive," he says, as it is "dark"; or sets his own rose and black, which he believes equivocal, beside those of Manet, limpid as minerals. In his night which "deepens," which will be a "dividing wall," he finds that color, more than any beauty of words, is a way to return to the "deep-lying years" --the pure color which can intensify, ignite, and so consume the always troubled figuration. And it is as a painter that he tries, then, to hold the "rose clouds" of twilight, or the red glare of the coal, against this bare and black background. And it is again as a painter that he notes, in the Fusées--silent words,



it is the angel of color who passes: "The green shadows  
in the moist summer evenings."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The latter part of this paragraph is a potpourri of Baudelairian citations. The references which follow are to Claude Pichois' edition of Baudelaire's complete works (Paris: Edition de la Pleiade, 1975).

Baudelaire describes Delacroix' revolutionary use of color in notes he took while viewing Prosper Crabbe's private collection. In June of 1864, this Belgian stockbroker introduced Baudelaire to Lacroix and Verbroeckhoven, the publishers whom he hoped to interest in his complete works. Crabbe owned a Chasse au Tigre (1854) which inspired this note:

Delacroix alchemist of Color. Miraculous, profound, mysterious, sensual, terrible; color that is explosive and dark, penetrating harmony.

The crystalline rose and black of Manet's painting are evoked in the epigraph Baudelaire wrote in 1863 for Lola de Valence.

Among so many beauties one can see everywhere,  
I understand, friends, that you balance your desire,  
But see how in Lola of Valencia there glitters  
The unexpected charm of a rose and black jewel.  
(I, 168)

And this quatrain echoes the "equivocal" language of an earlier poem, "Tout entière," written in 1857. The Demon asks which is sweetest to the lover,

Among all the beautiful things  
Of which her enchantment is made,  
Among the objects, black or rose,  
Which compose her charming body.  
(I, 42)

Black and rose are the colors of the paradoxical churches of the Jesuits in Belgium, as well, which charmed and perplexed Baudelaire in his last months. Bonnefoy comments on Baudelaire's description of these churches, color of mourning and color of living flesh, in his lengthy meditation on Baudelaire's work. "Baudelaire contre Rubens" (in Le nuage rouge, pp. 34-35).

The night which "deepens," the "cloison" or dividing wall, the "rose clouds" of twilight and the

The same frustration explains the principle of equivalence, which writers tenaciously reaffirmed throughout the epochs, called Classical, in which rhetorics predominated: Ut pictura poesis, painting and poetry are the same thing. For under cover of the statement that both arts describe the same scenes, both having recourse to signifying, and therefore secondary elements, poetry in fact colonizes painting, shackles it to mediation, and to the forced labor of the concept; prevents it from stopping--as did the "primitives," who knew the meaning and value of what cannot be spoken--at the purple stain of a coat, or the phosphorescence of gems. It is with color, with the violent red of a sun that he saw, beyond

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red glare of the coal may all be found in "Le Balcon," a poem which dates from 1857.

The evenings illumined by the ardent coal,  
And the evenings on the balcony, veiled with  
rose clouds. . . .

The night deepened, like a dividing wall. . . .  
(I, 36-37)

In the "Poème du hachisch," which dates from the period of 1857-1860, Baudelaire speaks of the spirit which has expanded its perception of time through use of the drug, looking back with a certain melancholy delight through the "deep-lying years" (I, 432). Again in his fragments, or Fusées, he uses the phrase once in the sketch of a narrative, where the lover returns towards the past he shares with another, and once in an apocalyptic prophecy, where the poet as prophet can see before and behind--though not with pleasure (I, 664, 667). Intoxication, love and poetry are often endowed with similar powers in Baudelaire's thought.

And lastly, the green shadows are also noted in  
Fusées (I, 650).

all symbolisms or solar allegories, that Delacroix put an end to centuries of narrative--and therefore subordinated--painting. And Poussin: there are some blues which deliver him as if by lightning from reason, in which he knows that he has lost his way.<sup>2</sup> While the principle reigned, painting was valuable above all for its frustrations, its nostalgias, its revolt.

Is it from jealousy that writers attempt to subjugate painting? From a desire to destroy what one does not have, and loves too well? And from a hope, sometimes, that the immediate, repressed there where it would have had its proper place, pressed like the grape in the vat, would rise again in the forms and the figures, intoxicate them, crown them with vines, lose them; and that it would also lighten the destiny of the poets who were allied with these painters.

And yet, is there the least reason to envy the painter's technique?

I spoke of reds which were opposed to meaning, and brought to the point of combustion where everything

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 9. In "The Back Country," Bonnefoy refers to the blue in Poussin's Bacchanale a la joueuse de luth (The Andrians), painted in 1631-1633, as having the "stormy immediacy" that is so necessary to us (cf. p. 138 below). The crown of vines and other imagery of wine and intoxication in the following paragraph may be a continuation of this allusion.

seems to be consumed, that is not the intense beyond of words. But red is only one component of the spectrum; and since we use them all, in their interrelations, here too a language reigns, there has been no transgression. Is it for this reason that Garache has chosen, at least during long periods, to paint in only one color, his rose-red which is so singular?<sup>3</sup> The single color would in the end annul the effect of structure created by the play of colors, would free our vision from all memories, all fables which haunt this "dictionary" of color, even reduced as it is to a few words.

Then to draw would be to rejoin, in this field of one color lit by the sun of the simple, not the "essential" in the object--the essential comes with the concept--but, specifically, what cannot be read in the object, what corresponds in the object's being to the instincts most rebellious to analysis. To succeed, with one stroke, in washing a contour of the mist of notions.

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<sup>3</sup> Claude Garache is a contemporary artist whose monochrome figures, faceless, bent or crouched, are shown and published with a group of artists and writers, of which Bonnefoy is a major figure. Cf. Argile (Paris), 5 (Winter 1974-1975), pp. 40-48, and Derrière le Miroir (Paris), 213 (1975), which is the first, and illustrated publication of this essay. Bonnefoy has written another essay on Garache ("In the Color of Garache") which precedes this one in Le nuage rouge, and which like this one was written for an exhibition organized by Maeght.

To see what the animal sees, without words, to be this presence of everything to everything which the animal is while hunting or mating. And that would explain what is repetitive, relentless, inherently single in tone as well as in color in the work of artists who paint nudes; that would clarify Garache's meaning when he speaks of expressing the relations of the interior and the exterior in his consciousness of bodies. The interior is the immediate, if there is an immediate; the exterior, the image which turns against the primordial intimacy, flaming as much with illusion as with life. And as this representation is not only the oldest, but also the most obsessive; as it is the closest ally of that "self" which seeks itself in us at the level of culture, it follows that we must lose a great deal if we risk ourselves there. To draw, therefore, in order to be free of the mirror, to look in the same way that the beast springs, devouring the appearance--to follow relentlessly, that is the word. To do as Degas does in his last years, when, faithful to the body's anxiety as it moves towards its end, his sight--not diseased--disillusioned with the dreams that the young eye pursues in appearance, he attempts, in his pastels, what we feel is a passage.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In his last years, troubled by failing eyesight, Degas (1834-1917) lived more and more alone, not even showing his work. This is the period in which he drew his celebrated pastels of dancers and nudes.

And if several colors are still glowing there, we feel that it is in a fire, and only for the light.

But what of the values? What of this opposition, light and shadow, which even in the eye that "devours," expresses what the beast, devouring or devoured, cannot know: that there is a here and a beyond, nothingness, being? The light, the dark, their soft continuity or the violence of a light behind the subject, that is what the child first perceives before the most babbling word, it seems that is what comes before the first human sign in things; but no, it is already a structure, and the most significant and restrictive there is, since the defeat and the hope are inscribed in the dual figure, and their battle decided. Nothing but a little black against the white, on a page, and already all the decisions of ethics, all the foliage of words are rustling in our ears.

There is no immediacy where the painter begins, and none where his search ends. He has of course refused the conventional decoding, and replaced it with his own, but in the single fact that he wants to vanquish the code he maintains it; and in the end, he only adds to the intricacies of the sign's transformation of being, doubling the common tongue with the language of his genius. Reciprocally, a fragment of poetry--"I saw the

low sun," in "The Drunken Boat"<sup>5</sup>--can be as brutally "red," despite the words, as a painting by Van Gogh, so ardent in its desire of what is beyond sight.<sup>6</sup>

There is no immediacy, there is only this desire of the immediate, which so many feel. And Delacroix, the last Degas, Van Gogh, all those I've mentioned and many more, Garache if it is true that he is taken in by this dream: they all lay bare a torment which others prefer to ignore or to censure, the torment of thinking that in speech we lose the unity that is the only place to live; that in drawing, painting, writing, we force being, a power never again understood, to limp more awkwardly than ever on the crutches of the sign.

## II.

Yes; but another observation seems just as useful if one wants to understand poetry, painting, Ut pictura

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<sup>5</sup>Along with Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Rimbaud has been a guiding spirit for Bonnefoy, an "intercessor" (to use Baudelaire's word) with whom he maintains a constant dialogue. Cf. his monograph, Rimbaud par lui-même (1961).

<sup>6</sup>Having established himself at Arles, Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) wrote to his brother: "For instead of rendering exactly what I see in front of me, I use color in a more arbitrary way to express myself forcefully." Letter to Théo Van Gogh, early August 1888. Quoted by John Rewald, Histoire de l'impressionisme, vol. 2 (Paris, Albin Michel, 1955), p. 200.

poesis and many other things as well.

And that is that at times these images which we suspected so feverishly seem to be established with a new certainty, seem simpler, from now on--seem more natural than the elementary modes of existence. And the painter's torment seems to have been appeased in them; they emit, icons, what we experience as a meaning, if we can use that word, not now to refer to the labor of the sign in the world's substance, but to express the emergence of that substance, positive, restructuring, in our transfigured words. A meaning? Something more satisfying than any truth yet formulated, more interior, more breathing. Something which invites us, just by being there, in the peace of the painting open now to the murmurs of the world beyond, to a table laden with fruit in the half light; which dispels our fears.

Look at a few canvases, some drawings, sketches, a few prints as well--the print, with its poverty of means, maintains such an intimate relation to light--and for example what Garache has gathered here today. The values, I said, the irreducible sign that we have recentered all there is, around a hope or a doubt unknown to nature. . . . But in these works, the dark and light poles where the idea of the void, the idea of salvation were caught--took form--have not been forced, as a language with its inflexible structures would force



them, to collide or be reconciled, substituting the formula of a pessimism or the word of a promise for the immediate. They contend, but at the same time they accept each other. It is beyond logic--but wasn't I forgetting that certain spirits can bring themselves, by conversion (or simply a natural inclination), to feel the equivalence of being and non-being, of hope and despair, and to feel this in a light, a light that is lived, as in the "experience" which Buddhism seeks, and for the same reasons? And as for the colors, that "language?" Well, what Piero della Francesca or Titian or Rubens shows us, and, perhaps, what Garache suggests, is that the colors sometimes allow a fundamental identity to appear beneath the disparity which they unfold for our dilatory senses, a unity which is, suddenly given, the inaccessible substance. Yes, the color, tragic in the work of so many lyric painters since the Renaissance, tragic because it has been divorced from itself, because it has wandered in the concept, can now be one again, the red and the blue can, laughing, crying, put off their masks, know each other again<sup>7</sup>--and even what separates

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<sup>7</sup>The Winter's Tale, V, i. The first gentleman reports the scene of reconciliation and reunion: "There was speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture; they look'd as they had heard of a world ransom'd, or one destroyed. A notable passion of wonder appear'd in them; but the wisest beholder, that knew no more than seeing, could not say if th'importance were joy or sorrow; but in the extremity of the one, it must

the tones, cold and warm, has been carried off in the same flood which also teaches us the non-duality of the values. Far from devoting sensory perception to the givens of the mediate, the values, language of hope and despair which yet are reconciled in a wisdom, have gathered in their peace and have set all around us, appearance closing its wheel, all the beautiful sparse plumes of the world's presence.

Some painters, for example Delacroix or Van Gogh, feel their heads spin over the gulf which the sign opens in what is; and, bound to their work by the thousand chains of fear, of the imaginary, of passion, they reach desperately in their dream towards the impossible shore. Others follow their path with abandon, though it leads over the void; follow the sign which is the way, if one has only understood that to continue with a simple heart, despite the choices which language seems to impose, is already to pass everywhere, to be everything.

And so it is not in its positivity, as a conflict surpassed, that the opposition of the mediate and the immediate can convey the difference between poetry and

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needs be." Cf. "The Back Country," p. 150 and the transformation of this scene in Dans le leurre du seuil (Poèmes, pp. 291-93).

painting. This break between two levels, and the thought it summons, of reparation and of peace, do not lead to certain arts, or techniques, but to beings, among whom there are, on both levels, both painters and poets.

And in conclusion? Must we think that if the poet envies something of the painter's art, it is because in the West the artisanal origins of painting, the tasks of another time in the cool cloisters and the silent churches, the work later in the open air, on the roads, under the trees, and always this body, alert between the pots of color, set on the pavement, and the image--accidents of history, nothing which would separate the Chinese painter from the poet--have made painting more "physical," and so less proud, less mad than the bent back, the clenched hand tracing words on a page; and help, when the man is tired, like a mother's hand?

Ah, it is not so little! And the world could well end, absurdly, for not having understood the value, in the only real search, of the smell, nearby, of wet grass, an ant running over the page, an owl's cry at the door--suddenly filling with light a sign that is still sealed.

## SECOND EARTH

Dear Norbert Pierlot, this summer when you offered me the rooms of Ratilly for an exhibition,<sup>1</sup> wanting to open to poetry what you had given to painting and sculpture in the years before, a word immediately forced itself on me, a word which I spoke to you, and of which I dreamt for several days: civilization. To gather, in a place which I knew intuitively would be propitious, a number of objects, or works of art, drawn from different countries and different times, but which one could see had come from the same spirit, almost the same blood, as each, in its first condition, would have answered simply to simple needs--to those needs which alone enable the experience to subsist of belonging to the earth, of living according to its rhythms, of having one's being in the earth's being. "Simple," and the "earth," to say nothing of "experience," which is dismissed today as subjective--these are uncertain notions, as I know well; nor do I forget that these imprecisions, these lights glimmering in the distance create the danger of a

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<sup>1</sup>Bonnefoy curated an exhibition at the Château de Ratilly in the summer of 1976. This essay introduced the exhibition.

nostalgia for the golden age, of pastoral fantasies, with which one loses the taste for truth. But a certain relation to life, to being--yes, I insist on those words, they are inadequate, but they point the way--a relation at once of non-illusion and of plenitude, ripened to itself like the heavy bunches of grapes on the vine, at the end of summer: that has certainly existed, in societies of which a light still comes to us, and is still to be found, here and there through the world; and the exhibition would have had this precise task, to reveal the virtue of such a relation without further recourse to the word, but only through the obvious affinity which function long meditated in form and matter would suddenly have established there. Vessels so pure in their contours that nothing can come between the drink and the thirst--or so, at least, one is tempted to believe. Bowls carved from the gnarled wood, but faience, too, fragile as the plant that grows in sand. Photographs of peasant walls, of roads among the rocks. And without any contradiction, a Bodhisattva from Japan, a Ramanesque or Baroque Virgin and Child, and a painting by Poussin,<sup>2</sup> even a painting--oval, from around 1913--by

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 9.

Mondrian,<sup>3</sup> because the most elaborate works of art, in relation to the most beautiful objects used every day in archaic societies, are only the same economy carried to a second degree of consciousness, the same thirst quenched with the same invisible water. From the most humble to the most conscious, if we ignore, in passing, the unripe fruits of the imaginary, only one question resounds, and only one answer is begun. In the depths of your silent summer, that unity would have been rekindled which our predecessors on earth sometimes knew was the only reality, among the shadows.

But soon I had to resign myself to the thought that to gather in this way a few figures of truth would

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<sup>3</sup>In the works painted around 1913, Mondrian (1872-1944) transformed his perception of the world into grids heavily influenced by contemporary cubism. Cf. Bonnefoy's description in "Quelques notes sur Mondrian" (le nuage rouge, p. 118):

In the admirable paintings which he multiplies between 1910 and 1916, great ovals sometimes, mirrors where the tree dissolves, and the sea, the body, even a façade which he must have judged without rigor, the incarnation has been removed like a husk from the object, reduced to its kernel which is, he believes, this musical virtuality, called here to witness to a life in us, in the intemporal, a life he could have called the spirit and which is, in fact, a transparency and a light, since the perception in a sense most immediate--this red, this vibrant line, this light sparkling on the sea--is also, now, the very pure note in the scale.

also have been a lie, as these too beautiful presences could have hidden, with their apparent facility--with what was "natural" in them, at the moment they were produced--the terrible obstacles which our epoch encounters when it follows a similar path. Such balanced forms, such far-reaching resonances in only a few rhythms, a few pigments, could have prompted repetitions from the outside, in our time of lesser evidence, imitations of the result and not of the act which gave birth. Rather than glimpse the purity of another time in reflections we cannot seize, I thought it would be more appropriate to our preoccupations today, to discover whether the source, muddy or not, is still within reach of our hands.

We may easily doubt it, it is so clearly in these years the major concern of so many.

For example, a young critic wrote recently that any attempt to write poetry will be burdened, now, with an irresolvable contradiction.<sup>4</sup> He knows, as one must know, that poetry is "incarnation," in other words that it must, if it is to claim its truth, be sought and lived in those ever-recurring situations--suffering and joy, birth and death, but also, simply, walking, questioning the sky, lighting a fire, watching it live--through which

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<sup>4</sup> Georges Formentelli, "Une poesie juste," in Solaire, 10-11 (1975). [Author's note.]

the earth speaks to us. And poets, he remarks, have always meditated on fire, they have nourished their experience of duration with its evidence, and their knowledge of good: "but," he immediately makes clear, "that is something which we, the youngest, know only through memory." The fire, and much else besides--he mentions the tree, the cloud--which assured an intimacy with the earth, a prescience of the immediate, and which would no longer be, for these new consciousnesses, only a lesson no one hears, but what has disappeared, or will disappear, in the most concrete sense of the word, from the majority of lives, in the suburb that covers everything. And it follows, this witness of penury continues logically, that the only poetry which is still valuable in a sense, the poetry which insists on recalling, amidst this growing abstraction, the conditions necessary for a justified existence, the poetry which still seeks to practice these conditions and which can even do so, at times, thanks to a last opportunity, has become, despite itself and as if against its own specific intuition, a sort of idealism. True, it designates a place, but one we cannot find; it is a new form of transcendence. And if, as it reconstructs the meaning there is in building a fire, in maintaining it, in thinking of life and death, and needs, true or false, through its precariousness,



its resistance, this poetry makes an authentic attempt to approach being, yet it must immediately betray its vocation to the concrete, to life here, to this experience, because it forgets that the fire, the "real fire," the "familiar god," has disappeared from the world. Clearly this accusation is not aimed at certain works, in opposition to others, as is usual in the development of poetry, nor does it expose an inconsistency which can be resolved elsewhere; no, it incriminates a moment of the human condition, in which an insurmountable obstacle would appear before each poet. And it says that this break between two historical epochs destroys even the power to hope, and invalidates all spiritual ambition. We hear the anguished question, "perhaps we will lose the 'thirsts,' the 'hungers,' the ancient desires?" Hunger and thirst would disappear with the bread and the wine; with the earth's gifts would also vanish the human presence: a demand, and in this emptiness where only a vague desire of desire would endure, only a hunger for forgotten hungers, all that would remain is this joyless play of signs--the signs of our language, of course, but no longer the star, no longer the lighted window, the cloud--a game which, as we know, has more and more appeal for so many beings,

and which is valuable in any case as testimony.<sup>5</sup>

I listen, and I know only too well on what real facts this disquiet is founded. It is true that a world is coming to an end before our eyes, and it seems that there is no new world to take its place. I walk in the last countrysides, but on all sides I see the roads which followed the hills--contradicting them only as they understood them, appropriating the ground to our need, making it speak in our legs, and ferment in our weariness, become in us the wine of evidence, the depth from which the light comes; these roads are disappearing one after the other, under the asphalt. And the houses, which for so many thousand years have been so true, which like the roads were the ground's emanation, the earth's advent: now they are hideously rouged or disguised, and in their places proliferate these grimacing masses and colors, like masks for a celebration of death. A certain relation to the animals, the plants, the horizon, the lights, which had been defined perhaps as early as the Neolithic age, and had endured, deepening at times, until yesterday is not still this morning, is breaking

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<sup>5</sup>A whole current of French thought is evoked here, of which the most prominent exponent is Jacques Derrida. The symbols which Bonnefoy offers in contrast--the star, the lighted window, the cloud--are drawn from his own most recent verse, Dans le leurre du seuil.

down and will not be rebuilt; one cannot travel through France, whose genius was of every day and of silence-- the low walls always repaired--without receiving an impression of disaster. And elsewhere and everywhere the links are breaking, in the chain of species, when to lack one may already be to deprive the earth's phrase of meaning. What do we gain by setting land aside for preserves and for parks, when it is only the work in the field, apprehension of the storm, the shelter rebuilt for the goats, the tool rusting in the grass, life in short, which made the place, which in turn made us live: and once we have bought our ticket, and even if those who enter are careful to throw their garbage in the receptacle provided, still we will no longer encounter the earth, in these deserts, but only a wax model of the tree, of the dead leaves, of the thrush leaping among the bushes. A music is lost, which we thought was a mother, always present. And it is lost in an hour when the evil we asked it to cure, or at least to explain, is growing so madly in the world that we almost doubt whether, even intact and understood, it could have been enough to guarantee a hope. Yes, I understand the anxiety signified by this obsession with the lost fire. But I do not draw the same conclusions, not yet.

For although the depth has been wounded, ravaged, it still makes itself heard. I admit that we longer know what the tree is, and that the forests are becoming parks, at best, and that the parks are lies: but if you follow the suburban roads, in the evening, through the labyrinth of stoplights, at the edge of cities which are in no particular place, and there, suddenly, in the endless expanse of cement, this dusty tree which rises before you at a crossroads, is in its laceration--but still intact, absolute beauty, bringing peace--all the lost earth. The black knot of a branch, where a few leaves still cling, and it is the One which has been brought back to life among the many, and in a way even more violent and alluring because the solitude is greater, the precariousness more marked. And if there were no longer a single tree growing wild in the limitless urban network, yet the dawn, seen from a world's end window as it rises above the flood of distant panes, would remain, in its red glow and its fogs, a physical presence until the last day; kindling a back-fever of life on the low walls, and the hard peaks: so that there would be adolescents high up in the apartment buildings, who would still listen with emotion, on their cassettes of that time,

to the ancient raga of the rising sun.<sup>6</sup> There will always be purple clouds moving slowly in the sky. Reflections will always speak of the appearance and the good, even in the most troubled and oily water. As for the fire, how can we say it has vanished from our lives? More or less discredited in our fireplaces, I agree--Mallarmé is the last in history to tend it "fervently," and that is only a theater<sup>7</sup>--it begins again, with the precision of a star exploding, on all the wastelands where children who have no hearth or home, as we used to say, gather crates: illuminating their loves, calming their violence. The fire will be as much the last power as the last desire, in the seaweed and the driftwood, at the edge of the sterile sea. It is the fire's joyful presence which has been lost--I mean by that its capacity to speak without haste, to tell us in silence of its analogues to other things in this world, to incite us to metaphor. Its tragic presence remains.

And this is already, in my mind, a more precise formulation. It is true that we once had, it seemed, the privilege of an earth leaning over us, patient to signify,

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<sup>6</sup> A raga is a form of Indian music in which a given set of notes is used exclusively during a performance. The performer creates a mood or atmosphere which is appropriate only to that raga. Each raga is suitable only for a certain time of day.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. the last stanza of the last poem in Poésies, "Mes bouquins refermés. . . ."

even loving, maternal. And it is also true that the book she held is torn, is burning, page after page curling into ash, and it is suddenly difficult, discontinuous to read. But the things, the words, the signs--how should I put it?--are not yet effaced. I see them less coordinated, less transparent, they are like the inscription of a language of which much has been lost, and we are irritated, discouraged. But if they speak less, in return they have become more immediate, cruder, and now they all have the intensity we sought in the infinity of broken stones, or where the pure color catches fire at the cloud's edge, in the evening. So, although I too am afraid for the fire or the tree, or any other hieroglyph in our book, I never forget that I have often experienced this color, this stone, even what cannot be defined in color, or in stone; that I have felt these as the culmination of being, outside our places, and beyond our words. For, yes, I love the things of this world, I imagine nothing else, I would not want anything else, and I even hear their words, at times. But at other times it seems that the meaning which comes to me through them is as if confused, become an enigma, in this intense light which comes from the distance. It is as if the very presence, our only good, had been wounded in its origin. And don't we hear anxiety as well as confidence, in our poetry through the centuries, fear as well as joy?

clearly we have wandered a long time, and doubted, among the signs. I would hesitate to speak, even for times which were more aware of the earth than is our time-- Greece, for example, or the Romanticism which reawakens it, Hölderlin, Nerval<sup>8</sup>--of an unbroken reception of this voice from the depth, without mingling echoes, or a painful obscurity.

Isn't it true, moreover--and isn't this all the drama--that where this voice is heard, where its words are articulated, and speak perhaps of meaning, it is our words, and how relative, which immediately transcribe them? I hear some speak, with nostalgia, of the fire. But if we today were the ancient poet, intent on calling the fire by its name, even caring to give it birth, concretely, of a winter night, in the cold, then our thought of the fire would be mingled with our fear of the coming night, with our awareness of the close vault of the walls, the idea of the hearth with its legends, legend of the vigil which speaks of wisdom, that of the dawn which reawakens hope: and what would remain then of the blind flame, of the primordial force of destruction, in this little god of vigilance? A representation, an image, have refashioned the unknown. We speak, and we change the aspects of the world, even create them. We have words

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Cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," notes 15 and 16.

with which to know, but they refuse as well, that is a tension almost as primitive as the first word. And if some societies have striven to keep alive in their practices--in their speech, which is the sacred--a sort of reverence for the priority of being over the word, how many others came soon after, and these are our own, still, to accept instead the propositions of the image? We have so many good reasons to attach ourselves to our dreams! So many reasons to give ourselves a place, to want the place coherent, and soon we are scandalized by useless suffering, by the drift of hazard: the idea of evil is kindled, hopes are awakened. Reality is refused, and in its place are fantasies we want to be real. Doubt, now, and violence to repress it, in ourselves and in others--the first true violence. And religious speculations, the idea that this country all around us is only an envelope, which will be torn, by epiphany of another world: but disinterest, on the other hand, in the natural depth, which is abandoned to science. . . . Even if today the crisis worsens, which is our fall from unity, our forgetting of the earth's substance, we must not think it is new. And reciprocally, we must not fear that the consciousness of poetry, long used to these contradictions and these sorrows, can be disconcerted so suddenly, and forced to retire.



I believe instead, I believe simply, that the moment has come to propose a task for poetry, and not so much because of our worsened conditions, as because of the events which made them worse, and which we should still understand better, in the future, so that we need not relive them. Earlier I was recalling the existence, in societies which were nonetheless dissimilar, of objects which I tried to evoke by their simplicity, their silence, I will say now their distrust of languages and of a language's dream. We cannot doubt that these beautiful taciturn objects have a relation to the earth which differs from that which we suffer, and the proof is that if the dangerous evolution has recently become so rapid, it is because peasant civilization is now disappearing completely from those places where we could still ascertain its presence. These objects have been the expression if not the act itself of the sacred, which does not forget that the earth is more than our words, so that the experience of the One, what I call the meaning, requires an attention of the body as much as of the mind, a respiration, an equilibrium that is lived, what the dance will express. But to recognize this quality of memory in them, should be to have done with that illusion, itself one of the forms of dream, that they were an easy response, in their epoch, to the earth's instigation, an obvious gesture which can be made

spontaneously, a first stable solution which was then thrown off balance, God only knows why. Today if we gauge the high moral quality of so many Romanesque churches, the pure intellectual quality of so many Renaissance chapels or palaces, we will be tempted to believe in golden ages of the mind and heart; but there is other testimony to remind us that those who lived in that light were as much preoccupied and altered by folly, pride, sin, and avarice, as other beings in other epochs. Similarly, the "simplicity" we recognize with joy in a fabric of two colors, in the resonance of a cup, this brilliance of the multiple which speaks to us, however, of the One, which calls beyond words--that simplicity was born among words, and even as they turned to speculation, to chimeras; and those weavers, those potters, certainly needed the wisdom to fight, needed to relearn their own truth, which was always menaced, a thousand times: they acted alone, finally, in the fatal drift. Spontaneity? No, a mastery of self, which is still necessary in our divided condition. The simple, in its natural effusion? No, a teaching, which is that we must simplify. And this apparent peace in fact calls us to battle--as, later or elsewhere, other artists could understand.

Poussin, I was saying, or even Mondrian--before the years of anxiety. The conscious creation placed beside the peasant bowl, the work of the rarest moments summoned to the duration of each day. . . . I will be accused of underestimating the importance of these elaborate, difficult languages, which so clearly distinguish great art from the artisan who writes at the level of ordinary words.

But how could painting and the other arts, which have "represented" so much, directly or indirectly, and which work therefore on an image of the world, the image their time has chosen--how could they not be concerned with the being appropriate to image, that is, with its capacity of evasion, where what I call the meaning is lost? And isn't it possible to conceive that a few clear consciousnesses, at the least, could decide that this alienation would end, at moments in the search which we have every reason to suppose the most decisive, the richest, since they are already proof of the truest thought of the problematic of being? As for myself, I believe that creation has an end, and I can even see, throughout its history in Europe, a line of artists who still tried to cure the image, inventors of images though they were, and how aware of their disproportion; who tried to dissolve the imaginary, to revive, in these

mediations, what we could call the origin, which would take the form of a simple sacred, its broad characteristics diffused in what each of us can live. This is the tradition, in its essence diverse--since it depends on the distances which it must reduce--of the Greek icon; of Piero della Francesca mastering the Florentines' perspective, through which the appearance is externalized, and will be burdened with phantasms; Bernini who dispels the lasting acedia<sup>9</sup> of the Mannerists with the surging beauty of his robust joy; and yesterday Bonnard, in the early light of his small garden, leading all the work of modern writing to, simply, the presence.<sup>10</sup> And at the edge of this experiment which we may call alchemical--a transmutation, a dissolution, the invisible which clots--we must hear all the murmuring desire--"these curses,

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<sup>9</sup>Latin term meaning "torpor." Cf. Bonnefoy's criticism, later in this essay, of the contemporary artist who only stirs the void, trying to catch us in his torpor.

<sup>10</sup>Not a unified tradition in the art historical sense, these artists have, in Bonnefoy's mind, found meaning in this world where we live. For the Greek icon, cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna" and "Byzantium." For Piero, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 2. For Bernini, cf. "Seven Fires," note 7. Bonnard was a postimpressionist painter (1867-1947) whose still lifes, landscapes, gardens seen from the window, and nudes all demonstrate his satisfaction in light and color.

these blasphemies, these lamentations"<sup>11</sup>--of those who suspect this good and want it, but cannot attempt the act, because too much hope that is too secondary remains in them, too much incurable hope and too much anger, too: Delacroix, for example, Goya, even Michelangelo, the majority of those Baudelaire named. A "testimony," Baudelaire says, the cry which in its anguish confirms the accomplishment of the strongest. A search which has gone astray, except that in building desperately on what it lacks, it may win the instant of a sort of grace in which the lost simplicity is suddenly given, all freshness and clarity of dawn, in tears of appeasement. It is a peace, that is the word I want to keep, which has created the unity of the highest art in the West, since it first sought itself. And this peace has been so assured and as if so vast, at certain hours, that one wonders why our unfortunate societies have not returned to it as to the land, have not re-formed themselves under its mantle of light.

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<sup>11</sup>This line is taken from "Les Phares," which Baudelaire wrote in 1857; and Bonnefoy continues to hold this poem in his mind as he discusses the "counter-tradition" of Delacroix, Goya, Michelangelo. Baudelaire speaks of the testimony to human dignity offered by these artists: Delacroix, "lake of blood haunted by evil angels"; Goya, "nightmare filled with unknown things"; Michelangelo, "vague place" where "powerful phantoms" rise.

And now I can try to formulate the thought which comes to my mind when I hear those words of fear and doubt--a thought which also inspired my desire, in the first moments, to gather, silently, a few examples, chosen almost by chance, of the eternal civilization.

May we not hope that these missed chances, the great moments of artistic creation, announced at least that sometime, in the future, the chance would be seized? And that the earth, which the image has always betrayed, which it attacks even today, would take on new meaning in this way, thanks again to an image, but one which would be transmuted by the poetic intuition--shall we say, instead, that by the grace of the poetic meditation, this image would at last be convincing, and suddenly recognized as the true thought, the true experience, the true religion without gods, the true work, generalized, of those who create icons, mandalas, retables, frail and infinite paintings, in our time beyond myths?

It will be said that this is a utopia, and that it is bitter to hear of it: but I cannot keep myself from making a few more remarks, or if you like, from dreaming a little longer, as long as anyone still reads my words. And to begin with, I must admit that this is the first time, this epoch we are living, and tomorrow, that the earth's presence is--I do not say altered by the verbal excess, I already explained that this was always

the case--but manifestly altered, wounded, and so more brutally eloquent, more apt to remind us, even obscurely, that it has its misunderstood truth. The fire is becoming tragic, it is true, its voice is becoming irrational again, wild: and therefore conceptual thought is weakened in the very moment of its triumph. This fire, or the tree or the wind, which we miss, and which therefore we seek, here they are, in their censured being-there, as if suddenly indicated to an approach of the spirit which would not, this time, be the ideation that externalizes. On the other hand, the threat itself could allow a return of lucidity. If poetry and what it awakens in art have always tended to this function I've named, yet for a long time it did not know how to articulate it, or, at times, even to recognize it; but now poetry must understand, announce, demand: helping the silent arts, discovering the true meaning of "ut pictura poesis," that proverb, so long obscure, which would have painting and poetic creation share their consciousness. . . . And this consciousness deepening, its word becoming more eloquent, energies will be released, the voice of meaning will grow stronger, and alliances more effective--human action will change its orientation. A dream? But the evil we suffer is certainly spiritual, and so we will only be able to fight it in its place of origin, which is our most intimate relation to the murmuring voices that come

from things. There can be no response to the depredations of the concept, except in a practice as much of the mind as the concept: the practice of the sign's other life, the poetic sentiment. And even if it is not enough, this new watchfulness of the spirit--so much have our societies been contaminated, and our institutions become tyrannical--at least it is necessary, though it never reigned before, and we owe it to ourselves to subscribe to it; besides, there is no alternative. . . . Who knows whether the events of our time are not taking place, despite the devastated lands, the unmade symbols, the pollution of the elements and of our hearts, at a point very far inside, very secret--and dialectical--of consciousness? Whether it is not necessary to reach, during an entire season, the worst, which is itself a revelation, for the good to appear in silhouette, and perhaps to open? Whether it is not the moment to hold out against the "evidence," taking up again, in the interest of the earthly place which is at risk, the "senseless" demand of immortality which Chestov proclaimed in opposition to the resignations of conceptual thought?<sup>12</sup> After unforeseeable

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<sup>12</sup>Bonnefoy discusses the influence which Leon Chestov's ideas had on his work, in his interview with John E. Jackson, pp. 400-2 of this volume. There are traces of Chestov's thought, as well, in Bonnefoy's dream of a train which will leave when the passenger wills it ("Seven Fires," p. 4, and in the characterization of the Christ of Sopoćani as "our inmost future. What we can be if we know how to decide that death is not" ("Byzantium," p.49 ). Chestov claimed that we can "will"



peripeties, it may be that a single word in a single poem, a single harmony of colors in a single painting of flowers and fruits will bring down the scourge that we feel is hovering over us today.

Except that it may be, and this in fact is my most deep-seated reason to believe, it may be that the only successor to the peasant's work, interrupted now--to this time lived in effort and in hope, which alone tended to meaning, there where reality is "rugged," and which loved the earth, which held the earth to its obligations, under the plow and the seed; which delivered it, too, in its eternal births--is another labor, in our necessary countrysides, a true labor, that is hazardous, uncertain of its future, concrete in its grasp of things: so that beyond the parks and their lie which I denounced, we will certainly have to understand, one day, that the only possible heir of the laborer is the artist, who will be able to find, in the life of minerals and of plants, and of animals if any remain, the largest and still virgin canvas on which to attempt the resonant

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or "decide" to change our world and our past; that if we deny the scandal of evil--if we deny, for example, that Socrates was condemned--then he will not, in fact, have been condemned. Cf. Bonnefoy's preface to Chestov's Athènes et Jerusalem (Paris: Flammarion, 1967; reprinted in L'improbable, 1980, pp. 271-83).

forms, and to place the harmonies which keep all living. Art is the only labor on a scale with the horizons we must recreate. On art, therefore, must depend the future countries, which will have to be rethought in their being, and proclaimed in their evidence, as has hardly been done until now, except for colors and forms: but at those prophets, Poussin and other landscape painters, foresaw for the earth which in their time was already exiled in the image. Here the sown furrow in its brown ochre which is life, there a new chapel for the strange dances and cries of the still unknown feast--and the factory which will return, poetically, into the telluric depths, as Nerval, with a vision like Poussin's, indicated with such lucid force in his Voyage en Orient.<sup>13</sup> Ah, that will be the end of the "natural" park, which photographs the void: the intervention of art, which reveals, will no longer hesitate to mark the ground as deeply--as sacredly--as did the antique plow, or the medieval clearing. . . . Everything is possible, once nothing seems practicable. And it is high time to wonder whether the artists of our time have not already had

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<sup>13</sup>The Voyage en Orient is a largely fictional account of Nerval's journey (1851), based as much on the poet's readings, his meditations on mythology, and his dreams, as on his actual adventures.

concerns, needs, intolerances, alchemies, which would start us on the way. This question, in sum, is the best answer I can imagine this year, for the walls which are offered to poetry.

Art, today? Must I say that a good part of what it dreams can only touch me intellectually, like an invention, by its audacity, but on planes where I can see that the artist only stirs the void, as waves stir the sand; he wants only to catch us in his torpor, to carry the desert further. More is forgotten, for example, each time the artist prefers the signs at his disposal to the referents which they were made to know, each time he lets them play, renouncing all idea of meaning. Does he sincerely believe that language alone is real, although sooner or later he too will be covered by the falling of the world outside; or is he only distracting himself? This is what Plato condemned, if we reread him, we need only realize this to understand--it is a question of words--that he was not attacking what has become our poetry, like him given to anamnesis.<sup>14</sup> And when

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<sup>14</sup> Republic, X. "And similarly, I suppose, we shall say that the poet himself, knowing nothing but how to imitate, lays on with words and phrases the colors of the several arts in such fashion that others equally ignorant, who see things only through words, will deem his words most excellent. . . ." Translated by Paul Shorey in The

one turns, as happens so often in these years, to uncertain forces, to the play of surf which is matter, yes, it is intoxicating to fix one's eyes on the endless swirls, and it could even lead to some profitable understanding, but I believe all the same that this is to betray hazard, which can be the key. For it is not in the abyss where nothing of ours remains, it is not at the level, almost, of molecules, but where the unforeseeable enters our projects, thwarts them, delivers us from our pride, returns us to the indifference of being, and opens that indifference like the ultimate secret, it is there that hazard truly teaches, and delivers. To turn away from that field of the possible is to refuse the real tasks.

But in the search which goes on today there are other resources, allusions to things that are near, to beings who fascinate us, or simply the color, the rhythms, the traces which can vibrate, and help the painter's writing remain true to its memory of the world, where it opens its breach. Such signs of attachment are time that is lived, are life, and that is not without virtue. If two colors are brought together, or simply an intense black and some white on the virgin page, and if we are only sensitive to the rustling of a foliage, to the moment of immobility of a fire that lasts, to the scattering

of stones on a crest, then this consonance or this stormy contrast will lead to much more than the simple representation of an object: for we will see there the enigmatic light. In materiality the meaning is foreshadowed. In the image as it is born, the absolute is signified, that testifies against the image.

And in fact, I know artists of our time who seem to have wanted, in one way or another, to question the sign's pleasure in itself, which soon becomes concept, becomes dream, in which I see what has always deprived us of the near earth. One, whose eagle eye seizes the detail of the valleys of stone, and carries it alive to a nest of geometric space, high in what one could believe is the most unbridled ambition to recreate the world, in the tradition of Quattrocento perspective, in fact allows the tension of black and white, of being and nothingness, which I evoked just now, to intensify in the image, so that a lightning zigzags, it is "the hour of superior lightning,"<sup>15</sup> of rumblings: a thunderbolt will disperse the infinite herd of signs, the absolute rises in the figure that evaporates. It is clear that the "figuration," as we say, once it has attained poetic quality, does not

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<sup>15</sup>Rimbaud, "Michel et Christine" (Derniers vers), l. 10. The poet is exhorting the black dog and brown shepherd, along with the sheep they guard, to escape the storm, in which his own spirit flies.

tend to repeat what our language has already said of perception; it meditates, both iconoclastic and idolatrous, this setting of snares, culpable when it accepts itself, dangerous when it dreams. And another painter also works to abase the image, though he seems to be at peace with it--a body asleep, or watching by the fire, immobile fruits in the basket--but he has gathered only what he loves, only what he has felt as the true and the good, so that it is the idea of the sacred if not even its voice that vibrates in the figures. The imaginary has been dissipated, we are silent, we listen to the meaning breathe, which the form veils.

And I will express my gratitude, again, and my affection for those painters who seem to take, as the starting point for their reflection, as the object which is not designated but ambient, this radiance of what is beyond the image which the artists I first mentioned tend rather to rejoin in a dialectic, as we saw, of representation and presence. These new witnesses, reserved, even silent, seem not to know that figures exist, that others have interrogated, and worked them; these artists remain as if to one side, they gather rhythm and color at their birth which is still untroubled by the notion of the thing, and then they let their own being respond, not in the sketch of an object to be represented, but in their accord, musical, with these colors and rhythms:

one would say that the world and the spirit are in harmony, in these moments offered by the reaped fields, or a tree's branch. And so I find, once more, that there are two musics, even among painters, and this would be as true of poets. The music which, from the first moment, imposes a single phrase on the entire orchestra, for it is the full horizon, all that is lived, all thought, that its intuition seizes, in the project of an earth where we could live: this is Titian, or Rubens, the heirs of Carracci, or a Monteverdi oratorio, a Haydn mass, a Beethoven symphony, Mahler. Then these approaches through silence, which bring back the tide of what is beyond sound, which extend the instant of participation in the invisible, widening in circles to infinity, outside time: from the quartets, in Europe, where the individual reality is still a wound though in salvation, to the strings vibrating in India, playing with the sounds, yielding to them, enveloping them and dispelling them, and in the end allowing the absolute to cover everything with its grassy water full of insects. And in this other country, which itself has two poles, which pole is closer to these painters who refuse space but are not abstract, these painters who are our friends: is it the distant sitar player, is it the late Mozart, late Beethoven?

But now I must not pose any questions which belong rather to the historian or the critic, making art the object of study, then of aesthetic appreciation, transforming the works I have gathered today into an overview of our epoch. Need I say that I did not think in those terms? I did not refer, for example, to all the painters I love. I went, as by the habit of each evening, to those I have learned to love as I watched them work, and sometimes as I collaborated with them. The essential, it seemed to me, in this epoch of a doubt which is well founded, is to show that there are also answers. And even that the earth, which is being taken from us, has begun there its second existence.



PART III

## THE BACK COUNTRY

A phrase from Plotinus comes to mind--concerning the One, it seems to me, but I no longer know where it is, nor whether I am quoting it correctly:

"No one would walk there as if in a strange land."<sup>1</sup>

I.

I have often felt uneasy at crossroads. In these moments, it seems to me that in this place or nearby: there, two steps further along the road I have not taken, and which I am already leaving behind--yes, it is there that a land of a higher essence would open, a land where I could have gone to live, and which I have now lost. Yet in the instant I made the choice, nothing indicated or even suggested that I should take that other

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<sup>1</sup>For Plotinus, cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 7. This epigraph is printed in a facsimile of Bonnefoy's handwriting (as are the title page and one of the notes, cf. note 52 below). The illustration is a fresco by Giovanni Martino Spanzotti (before 1456-1526/28), in the church of San Bernardino in Ivrea. The fresco shows Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden. The Skira edition of this essay is accompanied by thirty-five illustrations, keyed to evocative phrases in the text. Much of the information given below concerning these illustrations is taken from the Table of Illustrations appended to the essay.

route. Often I could follow it with my eyes, and ascertain that it did not go towards a new land. But that does not restore my peace of mind, for I also know that the other land would not be remarkable for the unimagined features of its monuments or its terrain. I do not take pleasure in dreaming of unknown colors or forms, nor of a beauty surpassing the beauty of this world. I love the earth, what I see delights me, and I can even believe, sometimes, that the pure line of the peaks, the trees' majesty, the vivacity of the water's movement at the bottom of a ravine, the grace of a church façade--since they are so intense, in some regions, at some hours, can only have been meant, and for our good. This harmony has a meaning, these landscapes and these categories are, although still frozen, and perhaps enchanted, a word; if we will only look and listen with all our force, the absolute will declare itself, at the end of our wanderings. Here, in this promise, is therefore the place.

And yet, it is when I have reached this sort of faith that the idea of the other country can take most violent hold of me, and deprive me of all happiness in the earth. For the more convinced I am that the earth is a sentence, or rather a music--both sign and substance--the more cruelly I feel that a key is missing, among

those which would allow us to hear it. In this unity we are disunited, and action cannot approach or accept what intuition foreshadows. If, for a moment, a voice rises high above the sound of the orchestra--well, the era passes, the one who had spoken is dead, the words' meaning is lost. It is as if we could only distinguish one of the locutions, and that one of the simplest, among the powers of life, the syntax of color and forms, the tufted or irridescent words which the natural perenniality repeats without end; and therefore the sun, though it shines, is as if black. Why can't we look out over all that there is, as for the edge of a terrace? Why can't we exist, not at the surface of things, at the turn in the road, in chance: but like a swimmer who would dive into the flux and then reascend, covered with seaweed, his shoulders broader, and his brow as well--laughing, blind, divine? Certain works do give us an idea, nonetheless, of the impossible virtuality. The blue, in Poussin's Bacchanale à la joueuse de luth, has all the stormy immediacy, the non-conceptual clairvoyance which would be necessary to our consciousness like a whole.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Painted in 1631-1633, and now located in the Louvre, Paris, the English title is The Andrians. Bonnefoy reproduces a detail showing blue sky among the clouds, behind the crowned standing figure who pours the wine. Cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 9; and "Painting, Poetry: Vertigo, Peace," note 2.

And with these imaginings, I turn back towards the horizon. Here, we are therefore stricken with a mysterious sickness of the spirit, or it may be some crease in the appearance of things, some lack in the earth's manifestation which deprives us of the good it can give. There, thanks to the more evident form of a valley, or the thunder immobilized one day in the sky,<sup>3</sup> perhaps a more nuanced language, a tradition preserved, a feeling we do not have (even if I wanted to choose, I could not), a people exists, and a place in their likeness: a people reigning secretly over the world. . . . Secretly, for I do not conceive of anything, even there, which would strike directly at what we know of the universe. The absolute nation, the absolute place are not so far removed from the ordinary condition that in order to dream of them, they must be surrounded by walls of pure ozone. We are missing so little here, that I suppose the beings of that place are distinguished from us only by the little noticed peculiarity of a simple gesture, of a word which my neighbors, in trading with them, would not have tried to interpret. Isn't it always what is most obvious that escapes us? As for me, however, if chance had opened the way, perhaps I would have been able to understand.

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<sup>3</sup> Another painting by Poussin, Landscape with Hagar and the Angel, n.d. Rome, private collection.

This is what I dream, at those crossroads or a little beyond--and it follows that I am troubled by anything which can favor the impression that another place, which remains other, still offers itself, and even with some insistence. When a road rises, disclosing other roads among the stones in the distance, and villages I can see; when the train slips into a narrow valley, at twilight, passing in front of houses where a lamp may suddenly light up a window; when the boat passes close to the shore, where the sun catches on a distant pane (and once it was Caracol, which I am told can no longer be reached by roads which were long since eaten by brambles), right away I recognize the very specific emotion, I believe I am approaching, I feel I must be vigilant. What are those villages called, over there? Why is a fire lit on that terrace, who is signalled from our shore, who is called? Of course, once I arrive in one of these places, the impression that I have "gotten warm" is dispelled. Not, however, without first intensifying for all of an hour, because of the sound of steps or voices, rising through the closed shutters to my hotel bedroom.

And Capraia, so long the object of my desires! For long moments, especially in the evening, I could not detach my eyes from its form--a long modulation of peaks and plateaux--so perfect it seemed to me, once it had

emerged from the fog, on the second day of the first summer, far higher than I had thought the horizon would be. And Capraia belonged to Italy, nothing linked it to the island where I was myself; they said it was all but deserted: so that everything coincided in this name, which reduced the island to a few shepherds wandering endlessly in the jasmine and the asphodel (and in the hollows a few olives, a few locust trees) of the rocky plains which were on a level with the sky: this name which gave the island the quality of an archetype and made it, for my desiring thought, the true place. At least for a few seasons, then my life changed, I no longer saw Capraia, I almost forgot it; and other years passed. Until I happened to take a boat one morning in Genoa, on my way to Greece; and towards evening I brusquely felt myself urged to climb onto the bridge and look towards the west, where a few rocks already appeared, a shore, passing on our right. A glance, a sense of shock: a memory in me, deeper than consciousness, or more alert, had understood before I knew. Is it possible; but of course, it is Capraia which rises in front of me, Capraia from the other side, the side I had never seen, the unimaginable! Its form changed, or rather annulled by our proximity (we were passing barely a hundred yards from the shore), the island came towards us, spread open, revealed itself--a brief coast, land of nothing, all one

could see was a small wharf, and a road leading away from it, a few houses here and there, a sort of fortress on a cliff--and would soon disappear.

And I was seized with compassion. Capraia, you belong to the here of this world, like us. You too suffer from finitude, the secret has been taken from you, too: so draw back, fade into the night that is falling. And there keep your vigil, having established new ties with me, ties I do not yet want to acknowledge, for the hope is still calling me--the hope or the lure. Tomorrow, I will see Zakyntos, Cephalonia, names as beautiful as yours and lands more vast, preserved by their depth. Ah, how well I understand the end of the Odyssey, where Ulysses returns to Ithaca, knowing already that he must leave again, with an oar over his shoulder, and penetrate still deeper into the mountains of the other shore, until someone asks him what is that strange object he carries, showing that he knows nothing of the sea! If the shores attract me, how much more does the idea of a land that extends in depth, protected by the span of its mountains, sealed like the unconscious. Walking near the water, I watch the movement of the surf, sign which seeks to take form, but in vain. The olive tree, the heat, the salt which forms a deposit on my skin, what more could I want--yet the true path is the one, over there, which recedes into the distance, through



rocky passes which grow more and more narrow. And the farther I go towards the interior, in a Mediterranean country, the more strongly the odor of plaster, in the vestibules, and the sounds of evening, the rustling of the laurel, which changes in intensity, in pitch (as we say of a tone that is already shrill), will become, even to anxiety, the evidence, although sealed, and the appeal, which I cannot understand.

And I can never look at the labyrinth of small hills--easy roads, but infinite background--of the Triumph of Battista by Piero della Francesca, without saying to myself: among his other concerns, this painter shared the one which haunts me.<sup>4</sup> But by this same token, I also love the great plains, where the horizon is so low that it is concealed by the trees and almost by the grasses. For then the invisible merges with what is near, elsewhere is everywhere, the center may only be two steps further; I have long been on the way, just around the next bend I will see the first walls, or speak with the first shadows. . . . In fact, the sea is favorable to my imaginings, because it protects the distance, and also signifies, for the senses, the vacant

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<sup>4</sup>Diptych of Federigo da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza, after 1472. Detail from the back of the left panel, showing a crowned head against a distant hilly landscape. Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

plenitude; but not in any specific way, and the great deserts, or the network--itself a desert--of the trans-continental routes, can fill the same function, which is to permit a wandering, long postponing the glance which embraces everything, and renounces. Yes, even the highways of America, its slow trains moving as if without a goal, the desolate zones which they have carried before them--but this, I admit, is to dream too much, which is a bad thing to do. Again this year, plunging into western Pennsylvania, through the snow, I suddenly saw--over sad factories, but in the trees of a dismembered forest--the contradictory words, Bethlehem Steel, and it was the hope again, but this time at the expense of the earth's truth. No longer imagining that being is heightened in the intensity of its appearances, must we not demand--almost here, in some side street, even the most sordid--a backyard in the coal, a door: and everything, beyond the threshold, mountains and birdsongs, and the sea, resurrected, smiling? But this is how one forgets the limits, which are also the power of our being-in-the-world. I understood, as I approached Pittsburgh, how the gnostic refusal could have penetrated the Greek language little by little, though it was born of beauty, and had risen to the notion of cosmos.

And I understood it that much better because in its blackest moments, my nostalgia is also, of course, a

refusal of the world, even if nothing, as I said at the start, touches me more than the words, the accent of the earth. Yes, it is true, our countries are beautiful, I imagine nothing else, I am at peace with this language, my distant god has only drawn two steps back, his epiphany is the simple: all the same, it is enough that the true life be over there, in that elsewhere which cannot be located, for the place where we are to become a desert. I can see it in what I do to the things I love, when I am in the grip of this obsession. I believe in the light, for example. And so much so, that at one time I could think that the true country had been born, by chance, of the light: I mean by the accident of a season and a place where the light would have been more intense. Night and day, as in every other place and every other epoch. But in the morning, at noon and in the evening, a light so total, so pure, in its revealed modulation, that men, dazzled, seeing each other only against the light, dark forms hemmed with fire, no longer understood psychology, no longer had anything in them but the yes and the no of presence, and communicated in the same way that the thunder gathers--and from this would grow unspeakable tendernesses, an inspired violence, the absolute revolution. But if this is my dream, what is the light of here to me, the light today,

and what I find in it? Only what is missing, and their grandeur must be to desire, their company an exile. How beautiful are these façades!<sup>5</sup> How close Alberti is to me, when he elaborates a music at Rimini, or in Florence!<sup>6</sup> But though he captures the sun of here, he gives its light to the horizon, and as I look over there where its brightness gathers again, I wonder what it is that he seeks, and what he knows. And why, in Byzantium, these plates of silver or pewter? There are reflections, in these plates, so simple and so devoid of envy and matter, one would say that they speak of a threshold, illumined. In a very worn mirror, too (why did they choose the fragility of silver foil, the softness of silver leaves?) the fruit, piled high on the table which rises in its abundance at the other end, as in an "inverted" perspective, and the face as well, have the insistence of a memory. Mysterious objects, which I encounter sometimes in a church or a museum, and which make me stop as if once more at a crossroads. As beautiful and grave as they are, I fill what I've seen

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<sup>5</sup>Monastery of Nonza, Corsica.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. "A Dream in Mantua," note 12. Alberti's major work in Rimini is the Temple Malatestiano (1447-1550); and he left many buildings in Florence, including the Palazzo Rucellai (c. 1445-51) and the Rucellai Chapel (1467), the facade of Santa Maria Novella (1456-70) and SS. Annunziata (designed ca. 1470).

of the earth with them: but in a movement which dis-possesses the earth, each time. . . . In truth, it is enough that something touch me--and it can be the humblest object, a pewter spoon, a tin can rusted in its images of another era, a garden glimpsed through a hedge, a rake set against a wall, a servant's song in the other room--for being to be divided, and its light as well, and for me to be in exile.

One night (long ago, I was still going to high school), I was turning the dial of a short wave radio. Voices replaced other voices, swelling a little, and disappearing in the ebb and flow of the signal as it faded, and I remember having the impression that it was also the star-filled sky, the empty sky. There is a speech among men, an endless word, but isn't it a matter as vain and repetitive as the surf, the sand, or all those vacant stars? What poverty there is in the sign! And yet, with what certainty, at some hours, we advance in the sign as if at the front of a boat, or of a bus in the dunes, existing more than the sign since we can see its form, and as if open, then disappear! And with these thoughts I continued to turn the dial. And at one moment I felt that I had just passed something which, though I could not tell clearly what it was, already roused my fever and forced me to turn back. I restored the signal I had missed in its precarious primacy--and what was it?

A song, but also the tambours and fifes of a primitive society. And now the harsh voices of men, then a child's voice, intensely serious while the choir is silent, and the ensemble again, jarring rhythms, concussions, rumblings. All around these sounds there is-- whether subjective or not, I do not know--but there is an extraordinary sense of space. And I understand. These beings are very high up in the solitude of the stones: at the threshold of an amphitheater, at the end of mountain passes barred by enormous rocks. Above them the walls which the water has hollowed, and the saxifrage dislodged, from which the eagle soars, who climbs still higher. On the horizon, on spurs or basins of rock, their villages with heavy façades, closed and sometimes ruined, under the towers.<sup>7</sup> But where we are now is an encampment, with fires in the falling night; why this nomadism--though it is true their wandering is circumscribed--in societies which are conscious? And these countries, this music, is the Caucasus, Circassia, or the mountains of Armenia, of Central Asia--except that for me these words, as they emerge, have the mythic value, the mass (which cannot be located, at least not on modern

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<sup>7</sup>Photograph of the fortified village of Vanetia, in the Caucasus. Cf. Architecture Without Architects by Bernard Rudowski (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), pl. 64.

maps), of a sort of pole in the absolute; the Mount Ararat of my ark which, though it carries the universe, is surrounded by these sounding waters, this black and bare horizon, this rapid undecided current.

Soon the song ended, someone began to speak in an unknown language, and then I could only hear static. The mysterious country had drawn back, I had given the other side of the horizon one of the riches of our side. Yet it was from that moment that I could appreciate music. One of the riches, one of the alchemies from over there had been caught in our experiences of here, had been added to my limited powers. . . . And in truth, I may say that my gnosticism, which I confess, is limited in two ways. Even when my dream is strongest, our bank is not simply or always stripped bare, to profit the other shore. What leaves in spirit, remains in body, and this undermined presence has an intensity, against the background of a deserted nature--it is like an increase of being in nothingness, as insistent as it is paradoxical. Exiles, testifying against the place of their exile?<sup>8</sup> But as I said, at one time or another the least object can join this ambiguous category and remain there, extending,

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<sup>8</sup>Tarasco Indians in fancy dress for a procession, Mexico. Photograph taken from Geschichte der Menschheit, Masken (Atlantis Verlag, 1970).

illuminating its ties; in the end it could be this entire earth, loved at first as a music and then dissolved as a presence, which returns as a second presence, restructured by the unknown, but alive and in a more intimate relation to me. It is from over there that we have learned the arts, poetry, the techniques of negation, of intensification, of memory. And these let us recognize ourselves, and love ourselves--but also, as we listen to the primordial music, let us insert some of our own harmonies, to which, however, the things of this world answer. Isn't it only, after all, that being is incomplete, and the dark song of the earth a fragment which we should not study but continue, the missing key less a secret than a task? And isn't the elsewhere, which I dream, the future, in a profound sense, which one day--the coagulation achieved, men, beasts and things called to the same place in the same hour--will be revealed as here, the absence casting off its disguise as pastoral comedy, in laughter, with tears of joy, for the supreme reunion--a world which was lost a moment ago, and now is saved?<sup>9</sup>

And to this I may add that I am only haunted by the other earth at certain moments, in certain places,

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<sup>9</sup>The Winter's Tale, V, i. Cf. "Painting, Poetry: Vertigo, Peace," note 7.



the crossroads--in the true or metaphorical sense--of the experience of living. It is as if only a part of this experience lent itself to the volatilization, the fever, while the other part retained me in the enterprises of here, for a duration engaged with itself, distracted from the horizon, in truth sufficient. A hesitation, in the end, between gnosticism and faith, between the hidden god and the incarnation, rather than an irretrievable choice. A refusal, but a refusal which feeds avidly on the acceptance of what it devalues. And then, if the obsession remains, still an evolution began long ago. I go along, and beside me there is, indefinitely, this unwinding of a long crest, broken by fires, which crosses everything with its line, high or low, which abandons everything as I approach, and returns after I leave to take it all back; but, how shall I put it--the point where the glance is lured grows, in a mental space, further away; the moment when the horizon closes is, in time that is lived, less abrupt; it is as if my valley widened, and grew brighter. And I also feel the need to better understand the double postulation which, at times, I have only been able to suffer. Most of the memories I have just evoked of the back country (for me it is this word which best expresses the enduring aspiration, the uncertain intuition) are old, because these are the only ones that are "pure"; more recent memories are increasingly

colored by reflection, perhaps by a lucid denunciation, in any case by a design which believes it can surpass the opposition of the two reigns. Yes, there is a knowledge which comes late in life, and which must be aided by reflection even if the reflection is contradictory, and shackled; the clarification is not accomplished by reflection, but little by little in reflection, also in reflection, because of a movement of the entire being, more vast, more conscious than words.

## II.

And first I will say that if the back country has remained outside my reach--even if, as I know well, as I've always known, the back country does not exist--it can nonetheless be located: I need only give up the laws of continuity, which govern ordinary geography, and the principle of the excluded middle.

In other words, the peak has a shadow, where it is hidden, but this shadow does not cover the entire earth. It will not surprise anyone that I am susceptible to travel guides, or at least to those printed in minuscule type, in tangled paragraphs, where almost every place that is named can propose an enigma. And when I read, in the Italian Tour Club's admirable guide to Tuscany (page 459, it is the second edition, from 1952):

a S e a E, la malinconica distesa delle colline cretacee,  
che cominciano di qui,<sup>10</sup> my heart beats faster, I dream  
of leaving, of finding this village; these words may be  
for me, these shimmering lights may be my trial. But  
it is not every guide that I question in this way. Cer-  
tain conditions must be met for my hope to be awakened,  
for my reaction to be irrational and profound. What  
place does Tibet have, for example, or the Gobi desert,  
in my theology of the earth? I think of these countries  
because they have, more than any other in the world, a  
quality of distance, of abruptness, of the unknown.  
And nothing touches me more than the tales of wandering  
through Central Asia, such as Beasts, Men and Gods by  
Ferdinand Ossendowski, or the long and monotonous nar-  
rative of Alexandra David-Neel. When she describes  
coming to Tibet in the spring, among the tufts of  
flowers so abundant and so tall that the porters seemed,  
she says, to swim through them; then in front of the  
glaciers crisscrossed with valleys barred by "huge clouds";  
and when at last she looks out over all the sacred plateau,  
"void and resplendent under the luminous sky of Central

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<sup>10</sup>"The melancholy expanse of clay hills, which  
begins here."

Asia"; I listen, troubled, I am ready for the miracle.<sup>11</sup>  
 It remains true, however, that if these plateaux and these deserts are so attractive to me, it is only because a childhood incident, as I know well, added to their seductiveness all the enchantment and the appeal of an entirely other place of the earth.

This incident was a story, which was called In the Red Sands. I use the past tense because there may not be any copies of this book left, except in a few attics which themselves cannot be found. The Red Sands-- a simple brochure, in fact, sixty-four small pages--had been part of a children's series published every week or two weeks; the publisher, located in the rue Gazan, does not seem to know anything more of its existence; and as for me, I lost it, strangely, before I reached adolescence, and have forgotten the author's name. But it is possible (so I often thought, its conception seems so perfect to me, even today), that this ephemeral text was only a demarcation, or the synopsis of a full-length adventure story which would by rights be a classic, with which others would be familiar.

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<sup>11</sup>Beasts, Men and Gods by Ferdinand Ossendowski (New York: Blue Ribbon Books/Dutton, 1922). The "long and monotonous narrative" is Magic and Mystery in Tibet by Alexandra David-Neel (New York: Crown Publishers, 1932), with particular reference to page 44.

I want to retell it, in effect, because of the impression it made on me, which was profound and enduring. For I identified myself with the archeologist, its hero, and looked through his eyes; his astonishment, and his grief at the end, gave me a foretaste of life's contradictions. He was making his way--this was the first vision--through the Gobi desert. Together with a small group of explorers and guides, he had even left all known trails behind him, and was searching for ruins which some aviator, no doubt, had located, and which it was his mission to understand. And so each evening they camped hundreds of miles from the nearest human habitation. Hence their stupor, one morning: there was a clay tablet lying at the entrance of their tent, which had certainly not been there before. Besides, the inscription on the tablet had been freshly etched, it seemed, and in Latin! Do not go farther, they decipher. They are troubled, disconcerted; they explore the area all around, finding nothing; but night returns and in the first dawn another tablet, with the same command, still more urgent, and the Latin. This time they set watches. And the third night, the archeologist, a very young man, catches sight of a shadow in the stars' light, and rushes towards it, sees it pause, stop: it is a young girl, dressed in the style worn in Rome, as he knows, in a

certain period of the Empire. Paralyzed with astonishment, he calls to her, if it is true that the words could escape his throat. But yes, she turns, looks at him. . . . I had lived with such terror through these days of anticipation--with such joy, too. And with what emotion did I also see--and recognize--these shining eyes, this smile, this hair loosened in the star's rays. But when the archeologist was about to speak again, all at once, and without his understanding why, there was nothing there in front of him, except the sand, and another clay plaque. He picked up these few words, and in spite of everything, he doubted his vision.

He had not been dreaming, however.<sup>12</sup> When they returned at dawn to the place where the apparition had vanished, the explorers found, hidden under the sand, a stone slab, which they lifted, and then stairs, galleries and rooms, lit at times by a light which came from the vaulted roof. Beyond surprise now, they advance in what gradually reveals itself as an entire city, inhabited (there are signs, a fire, an ovenful of loaves on the ledge of a shop) although apparently deserted; and they recognize the forms, the objects as Roman. Moreover,

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<sup>12</sup>The illustration is a detail from Piero's Flagellation (cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 2), showing the central of three on-lookers in the right foreground.

they are brusquely surrounded, arrested, and the work is done by centurions, in sword and armor. Once they are arrested, the sounds of life begin again, the population reappears. The archeologists are led to where the prefect is sitting, surrounded by officers. He tells them that they have found their way into what had been, up above, under the sky, one of the outposts of the imperial expansion; then when Rome, grown weak, had abandoned that course, an isolated and menaced colony, which had found salvation only by digging into the earth. It is in this way that these Latins have survived, in Asia, through centuries which they have ceased to count. The isolation which had weakened them at first now preserves them--that and their secrecy, so that those who have penetrated the secret must die. Why hadn't they taken seriously the warnings which they had received these last nights! The prefect speaks, and the archologist who listens, recalling his Latin with great difficulty, suddenly glimpses the young girl, behind a pillar. She is pale. Again she sought his glance.<sup>13</sup>

And now they are led to a jail, knowing that they will stay there only a moment before they are executed.

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<sup>13</sup>Portrait of Irene, daughter of Silanos. Encaustic painting, middle of the first century A.D. Stuttgart, Wurttembergische Landesmuseum.

The archeologist explains what he understood of the prefect's speech to his companions. They try, but in vain, to devise a plan of escape. They talk--and meanwhile the minutes pass, and the hours. Why doesn't anyone come? Why this silence which grows deeper, when just a little while ago the guards were walking in the corridor? Amazed again, seized with a strange hope, the prisoners listen: is it true, is there nothing? But no, they hear a key turn in the door, the young girl is there, on the threshold. "Leave," she says. Ah, what a look of exchange, what compensation for the poverty of old, and the enslavement of childhood: the "leaves of gold" regained!<sup>14</sup> The two children know that they love each other, and for a second time in time which has opened, which stirs, return of the origin, the man starts to speak to the woman, but--"Lost a second time!" She knows the place too well, they can only grope their way through the labyrinth, which is empty.

I no longer know how they came to understand that the Roman girl had convinced her father, the prefect, to spare the strangers and to flee, escaping once more with all his people through the corridors to another

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<sup>14</sup>In two prose poems, "Enfance II" from the Illuminations, and "Matin" from A Season in Hell, Rimbaud uses this term to evoke an impossibly happy childhood.



city, still underground but more withdrawn, the ultimate Rome in the folds of the desert. The archeologists leave through the vaulted galleries which open occasionally into a round room where there is a painting, a lamp, and behind them the door has closed again, has even disappeared: since the young Frenchman, who would so much like to know and who searches everywhere in the city, cannot find it in the faultless walls.

Mass of this desert, rising and falling to infinity before us! I cannot forget that the place where destiny would be fulfilled is there, though we can never find it. And so I listen to all the rumors of reunions, of ordeals brought to an end, of returns. It happens that Alexandra David-Neel travelled to the edge of the red sands, and told of the adventure that she was fortunate to have there, where two roads crossed at a small caravanserai.<sup>15</sup> A caravan of Mongolian monks had just arrived from one side; and a Tibetan came soon after, having followed the other road. The Tibetan had always known that he was not where he ought to be. In his dreams he had always seen the solitudes of sand, the felt tents of a nomadic tribe, and a monastery on a rock. And as a child he had left, though he could have no conceivable goal, and he had wandered for long years, always

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<sup>15</sup>Magic and Mystery in Tibet, pp. 128-30.

carried elsewhere by the vision and the fever. And so he arrives at this crossing, where the caravan has stopped. He feels himself drawn, irresistibly, towards these men, he asks for their leader, whom he recognizes. For the past--the past of another life--enlightens him all at once, like a thunderbolt. He had been the spiritual master of this monk when the monk was still young. They had passed this crossroads together once before, on their way back to the monastery on the rock, having gone on a pilgrimage to Tibet. He can recount the journey and describe the building. Such joy: for the monks were now on their way to ask the Dalai-Lama how to find their abbot, who had died twenty years earlier, and had been reincarnated, where they did not know. Alexandra David-Neel arrived at the moment of revelations, of exclamations, of tears. And the next day, at dawn, she watched the caravan leave, in the eternity of the camels' steps. The monks are returning to the monastery, the wanderer has accomplished his destiny.

And I try to look over her shoulder, and see the empty track. It was by chance, as I was beginning to write these pages a short time ago, that I came across this account in its English version, Magic and Mystery in Tibet. And because I was in a place which resembled a desert--immense bridges thrown from island to island,

countless silent cars, but also palm trees, large closed gardens, and fires in the grasses nearby, the smell of fire and even the sparks brought on the wind to the city where they were quenched in the sea--the idea of the high plateau, where monks and herdsmen wander, awoke, violently, the old temptation, though this time it was accompanied by a bewilderment, and a refusal. For I know what separates me from that man who sought and found. He desired his true place so that he could consume a life which he knew would be, even there, a bondage to the earth. He meant only to renew, in that place, the interrupted quest of total deliverance. And because I am anxious for a transcendence but also for a place in which it would be rooted, it is on this place, "vain form of matter," that I would confer the quality of absolute. . . . Why did I love the Red Sands so much? When I was ten, I did not have any specific knowledge of Rome, except this little bit, that all roads meet in that city; and I felt there would be monuments and inscriptions to announce this fact, and more than that, a vibration, a light, an explosion of purple and fire between the earth and the sky. To the archetype of the Sands, where the other place is hidden, the idea of Rome adds the dimension of a place, here, which proudly proclaims itself to be the center. And each time I sense this pride, whether triumphant in the facility of

the stone or beaten and as if bent in the vaults of mud walls, after leagues and leagues of broken stones and salt;<sup>16</sup> everywhere that someone has wanted to extend a wall, decorate a façade, raise a terrace, make a music appear and be heard in the rising or the setting sun, music of the dissolution of the illusory self but on the foundation of rock, in architecture which is a lived permanence; in all these places which are affirmed, yes, I feel I am at home, at the same time that I desire what--impossible to locate--denies them.

And so the ground is limited where I feel impelled to seek the back country. I could still dream of it in Tibet, but it was because of the spaces, and not the men who speak of detachment--I would have passed the frontier. And in Japan I was at peace with my old obsession, for that is the teaching of this architecture of wood, its vibrant floors, its fragile and effervescent galleries; it is as if human pretension were enveloped and dissolved there, in the rustling of the universal tree, which has no place, which does not exist. These countries of extreme Buddhism are too lucid, or too pessimistic (Mallarméen), they say that the places like

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<sup>16</sup> Photograph of a caravanserai built of "pisé" or mud walls, north of Qum, Iran.

the gods are our dreams;<sup>17</sup> they move too quickly, for me, to the experience of the void. But in the country of raised stones! Wherever wells have been dug or cisterns built, that the evidence might accumulate!<sup>18</sup> Wherever the palaces have been too grand and the statues too numerous around this small spring, unless some hyperbole of pure stone, as in the Romanesque arch, gathers and exalts, simplifies this adhesion to the earth. . . . The ground of the back country extends from Ireland to the far reaches of Alexander's empire, which Cambodia prolongs. Egypt, the sands of Iran with their hidden libraries, the Islamic cities of Asia, Zimbabwe, Timbuktu, the old kingdoms of Africa, these are all its provinces--and certainly the Caucasus, Anatolia and all the Mediterranean countries, although the rectangular Greek temple speaks to me in another way. For these civilizations that I associate, born of the desire to found, have as their sign the circle, the central plan and the dome. At the risk, of course, of being besieged by another circle, circle of the unknown horizon, the distances' call to the pilgrimage and the quest, the obsession with

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<sup>17</sup>The illustration is the statue of a Buddhist divinity, Horyu-ji, near Nara, in Japan. For the reference to Mallarme, cf. "Seven Fires," note 5.

<sup>18</sup>Photograph of an expanse of desert.

another pole, the doubt. The ground of the back country is pride, but also dissatisfaction, hope, credulity, the departure, the fever which is always near. And it is not wisdom. But perhaps, who knows? something better.

I am thinking of India, where this dialectic--affirmation that denies itself--has been lived so consciously. I only spent a few days there, but that was enough for me to hear the regular pulse--arborescent, arterial--of unreality in certainty. We were crossing Rajasthan, and the mountains opened, uncoiled, and closed in the augural silence which characterizes the beginning of certain dreams. We stopped in the shadow of a tree, where a drive led past an open portal to a large house in the distance, delapidated but plastered in bright colors, and decorated with stuccos; and some little girls came dancing in their indifference to offer us water, pausing at moments, not marking the sand. The summer, too, was immobile, deserted. Then a tinkling of small bells formed in this emptiness, and a peddler of iced drinks emerged from the sleeping countryside; the children came back, gave him a penny, spoke a little among themselves, fell silent, and he also remained a long time without moving, almost without desiring, in this light. Other categories, another experience of time? The depth of space merged with the depth of the gesture to give an impression of imminence--would it

have been enough to enter there, will it be enough in any case to continue, will the future be absorbed at a turn. in the road, will the misunderstanding be dispelled with a slight change in the forms? But it was not the object of desire that one found a little further along the road, only its more intense expression, and sometimes its transcendence. Did I understand Amber? Perhaps you will think that I fell asleep there, as the endless earth invited me to do, and the too heavy perfume of the unknown, the hypnotic complexity, too, of the Islamic writing in the light. And it is true that I left one of my shadows there: to wander in the cool rooms, to drink the water kept in the great jars. Unappeased, if it is true that time has not ceased, and that someday I must rejoin it, per fretum febris, with other shadows. Lingering, however, its face smooth, its lips a little swollen with the fruit's abundance.

I had watched from a distance, my attention already caught, as the ruddy fortress grew larger, its surrounding wall descending bizarrely, climbing the hills, crossing a ravine, settling awkwardly on the other shore. It seemed to me that this wall proceeded at random, for inside it I found the same ground I had seen outside, uninhabited and sterile. But we entered the enclosure and then the fortress above, and passing through shaded courtyards and dark rooms we reached the

terraces, where all at once I understood. The line of the ramparts does not enclose anything that anyone thought to defend; it coincides with the horizon, as one sees it from where I am standing. Everywhere the eye could follow the line of the sky in the stones, a prince had built this high defensive wall which does not hold what he owned, but what he could see. A place and the evidence have been identified, here is no longer opposed to elsewhere, and I cannot doubt that this was the first intent, as the line that rings nothing but stones, some meager trees, a few houses, the course of a torrent, does not contain the empty profusion of essences, as does the Japanese enclosure, but the presence, the fact of the ground, in its arc that forges a place. In the beat of the seasons, droughts and great rains, the king of this small quantity of sand no longer wanted to perceive the uneven pulse of desire. It was such an extreme effort, the greatest violence ever done to space, that the walls are low, in some places, reduced almost to nothing, as if exhausted by the audacity of having brought themselves that far. But from the strings of the sitar-player of this place, the knotted waves must have gathered, immobile. Existence must have risen straight up like a smoke untouched by any wind. I am convinced of this, as I turn towards each end of the ravine, and to the west,



which already casts its shadows. What a conclusion for architecture! Its abdication, its triumph. And I am sure that the gesture, the feeling would be refined by the slight energy which the resonant wall retains. I try to imagine that distillation, that transparency, but suddenly, what have I seen, it was like a slap in the face.

I have just discovered that the wall, first in one place, then in another (in fact, often), is detached from the horizon. The discrepancies are very slight, but as the sun falls, they are accentuated by the shadows and I can no longer fail to recognize them. Here it is a little of the outside world that appears beyond the towers, there one of the towers is missing, concealed by a distant hump. Did I dream the builder's intention, must I now wake up to my folly and my solitude? No, it is more that in the first glance I could not understand all his intent--and now I understand. He meant to affirm, but also to admit the affirmation's excess. Elsewhere was "abolished" in the first instant, but then lucidity followed, allowing the undestroyed depth to break the power of enclosure. The prince wanted less to fulfill his dream than to meditate on its illusion. But how does it happen that where the failure is marked, I have this feeling--where the disquiet, which begins again, is dispelled--of reality deepened, and rejoined? . . .

What would have been gained by sealing and censuring the depth, except a heightening of the enigma, in the immobilization of chance? While in allowing the affirmation to live with the doubt--plucking the horizon's vibrant cord--Amber's sovereign freed the impatience with the nostalgia, the ardor with the finitude, and permitted a music, less knowing than sweet, and compassionate, to begin again: an ancient music indeed, a song consubstantial with life, except that one would have called it, before, the surf of time passing, and that here, one suddenly feels it is a truth. Tremors, incompletions, delays, surges too, rhythms which rush and untie; at Amber the very earth lends itself to the hands which find the rhythm, to the words which want the heart's peace. It is the earth which asks us to discover why a taste of the eternal may be freed in time that is broken.

A little further along the road, at Jaipur. There another prince had built a famous observatory. In a grass-covered enclosure, the instruments which once plumbed the sky are converted to the earth, by which I mean that they have become no more than a place, which we rejoin, which charms us, and which we leave after an hour has passed, when we must begin again to grow old. After the few friends have visited the observatory, the palaces, they continue along the road, it is early morning. We take the last street before the back country

of dry and empty mountains, and the façades and the walls are rose plastered, ornamented with stuccos--the slightly rococo grace which is Jaipur's charm, in its dissonance with the odor of the unconscious, of sexuality, of death with which the jasmine permeates the air. And the light will not be heavy for another hour. I try to imagine, as I did for an instant at Amber, the lives which knotted and unknotted in these houses, their courtesies or their fevers, their tragedies, their joys: but I realize, a little late, that this question no longer has an object. The mountain has come so much closer, on both sides of the street, that the imitation façades are no more than a screen in front of it. There is only a thin curtain of leaves over the arcades, the niches, only the color of a bird, then nothing but the empty vertical rise and everything comes to an end. Jaipur, like Amber, was built so that here and elsewhere, which are everywhere opposed, could marry "here," in this place that falls away. The beauty has intensified, where pride is renounced, like a flame which grows brighter where it is nearly detached from the infinite wood. And those who questioned the empty sky, what deepening of our experience on earth did they have in mind as they set this marker? Why this need, which nothing fills, for another place; but why do we sometimes form this alliance with the mortal place, opening it to

the road for the grief of leave-taking, and the joy, the more than joy of returning? As I leave Jaipur, I wonder whether the world of cupolas, of fortified cities, of fires burning on the peaks, is not above all the world of a road leading away--not to the other place of which we still dream, but not to the edge of the great emptiness, either, which Buddhism suggests. It is a road of the earth, a road which is the earth itself.<sup>19</sup> A road which would guarantee, spirit, the earth's revelation, and its future.

### III.

I did not know Italian painting at all well until I travelled through Tuscany the first time.<sup>20</sup> I had some idea of the most celebrated painters, of course, and paintings by Leonardo da Vinci sometimes came back to me as if in a dream. But I was unfamiliar with the art that would one day touch me the most. On the whole, I

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<sup>19</sup>Degas, Landscape, pastel on monotype (1890-93), in the Ross Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

<sup>20</sup>The illustration which Bonnefoy has placed at the start of part III is a detail from a pen and ink drawing with sepia wash by Poussin (ca. 1660). The drawing depicts Mercury, Paris and Cupid, and the detail shows Mercury pointing to the left, in order to distract Paris (whose head appears in part) while he dips his hand into Paris' satchel.

had only looked closely at the works which Surrealism loved: the Profanation of the Host, by Uccello, and the paintings of Chirico's first style. Why hadn't I tried to know more? It was probably the result of a convergence. Because of the exaggerated, abstract use of perspective in Uccello's work,<sup>21</sup> space is dismembered, events and objects are externalized, the forms are fantastic, the colors distant, the entire image nocturnal; and so I was encouraged in my gnostic tendencies, but also deprived of a simple beauty which I already loved more than everything else, for all that I saw it in the distance, under the sign of another world. But while Chirico, sketching the broad outlines of his colonnades and plazas as if he were building a theatrical set, certainly spoke to me of an elsewhere, did he promise it to me? Surely not, and his elongated shadows,<sup>22</sup> his clocks which seemed to have stopped,

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<sup>21</sup>The Rout of San Romano (after 1450), at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Detail showing two soldiers in the background, lances and the tilled fields. For Uccello, and the allusion earlier in this passage to his Profanation of the Host, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 3. For Bonnefoy's own relation to Surrealism, cf. the "Interview with John E. Jackson," pp. 383-416.

<sup>22</sup>Chirico, The Poet's Departure, 1914. In the collection of Mrs. L.M. Maitland, Brentwood, California. For Chirico, cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," note 8. The introduction to this section briefly recalls the argument made at greater length in that text.

expressed an anxiety and spoke of an unreality which made me doubt the powers and even the validity of classic perspective. Determined by number, intelligible, wasn't this perspective a denial of finitude? The mystification, not the metamorphosis, of the temporal dimension? I dreamed, as I was saying, of another world. But I wanted it to be made of flesh and time like ours, a world where we could live, grow old and die.

But I did go to Italy at last, and there I discovered, in an hour I cannot forget, that what I had taken, in Chirico's work, for an imaginary world and, what is more, an impossible world, in fact existed on earth: except that it was reknotted here, recentered, made real and inhabitable by an act of mind which was as new to me as it was, from the start, my good, my memory, my destiny. I visited the churches, the museums, and on all those white walls I saw the grave and serene Madonnas who seemed almost to be standing in their faultless presence,<sup>23</sup> Madonnas of Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca. These painters had determined

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<sup>23</sup> In addition to Piero, whose work is discussed in earlier essays (cf. especially "Of Painting and the Place" and "Humor and the Cast Shadows"), Bonnefoy now cites three other painters from the same period: Giotto (1266-1337), Masaccio (1401-1429) and, a little further on, Domenico Veneziano (ca. 1440-1461). The illustration is one of two signed works by Domenico Veneziano which survive: the Virgin and Child in the National Gallery, London.

the course of perspective as much or more than Uccello, and had gone further than he in freeing the image from its medieval vault: but unlike Uccello, they did not deny the object's interiority, its being, its transcendence of all notional description. In fact, they assembled the sparse evidence, they brought the light and the unity of a sacred into our tangible experience; and they intended perspective, as I now understood, to accomplish this task: requiring it to delimit the horizon, to discover and gather the possible, to disengage the consciousness from its prejudices and its chimeras. What I had thought was a gnosticism, piercing the horizon for another sky, instead defined the place where we can live and the precise role of man, as the wisdom of the Greeks had done before. And as Jerusalem had come after Athens, with the promise of Christianity, this knowledge of the limits was also a faith, which discerned an end in the terrestrial condition and worked for the Incarnation. Ah, how it seemed that the long wait was ended, the thirst suddenly quenched, when I saw a few paintings from the first half of the Quattrocento, and the architecture of Brunelleschi and Alberti, who taught that thanks to the new knowledge, everything had

its place in the solar dialectic of the central plan!<sup>24</sup>  
 In truth, these first encounters gave me one of the  
 greatest joys I have ever known, a joy as physical as  
 it was of the mind. For the stone, the trees, the  
 distant sea, the heat, all the tangible categories which  
 before this had constantly shifted under my eyes,  
 shimmering of enclosed water, now came back to me as if  
 dry, it was my rebirth.

And yet the battle had not ended in me, against  
 the force of excarnation; and far from being my daily  
 support, the art of the Quattrocento came near, with  
 all its immense weight, to assuring its victory. Is it  
 true that we only desire another place where this place  
 is affirmed? Well, here is how an art of affirmation,  
 and a civilization founded on the assumption of the  
 place, can lend themselves, almost actively, to the  
 imagination of another place and the fantasy of an un-  
 known art; how they can lend themselves to the dissatis-  
 faction and the nostalgia, and help to depreciate that  
 very thing whose value they expressed.

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<sup>24</sup>Alberti's central plan churches include S. Sebastian in Mantua and the Tribune of the Annunziata in Florence, which boasts a dome by Brunelleschi (1337-1446). Brunelleschi built the Pazzi Chapel, Sta. Croce, on a central plan, as well as the unfinished Sta. Maria degli Angeli, both in Florence.



This dialectic is moreover very simple, and the evil grew rapidly. I had loved, in the work of a few great painters or architects, what one could call the synthesis of being in the category of space. And the clear color had touched me as much as the deliverance of the forms, the color with which Deomenico Veneziano, Piero della Francesca and a few others seemed to dissolve the old opacity in the light of day: opacity of symbolic representation, with its colors immobilized in their meaning. I feared the theatrical effects of perspective, the chiaroscuro: but no, the sun shone from all sides, although it cast slight shadows;<sup>25</sup> the light was born of the very color of things, and this space drenched with life was like the morning of the first day. A radical and substantial revolution, but very different from the revolution I had sometimes dreamed of, which would have been caused, in the violence and the enigma of a subject seen against the light, by the sudden aggravation of the solar presence. Here everything was explained, everything was resolved in a radiance as interior as it was soft--truly a new degree of consciousness, a liberty which a few spirits had drawn,

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<sup>25</sup> Piero della Francesca, The Baptism of Christ (ca. 1442) in the National Gallery, London. Bonnefoy reproduces a detail showing an onlooker behind a tree on the left.

directly it seemed, from tangible experience. But whether for the meditation of the form or for this alchemy in which shadow is made color, the greatest artists were not the only ones who gave me this impression of mastery. It was as true or more so of works they would have found clumsy, ignorant, repetitive--retables commissioned by peasant communities, the work of provincial studios. Even in the paintings of Piero della Francesca, after all, one can see that the imminence of unity in the figure of things is slightly flawed, betraying the intellectual, secondary nature of his act of affirmation. As empirical as he was at the frontiers of his science, as conscious of what number can organize but not retain, it is still true that he thought what he represents, and in this moment of intellection, it is as if an excess of appearance were indicated at the expense of true presence, which is grounded in the invisible. And once one sees that--it is Chirico whose doubt is heard again--one can no longer see anything but an image, where before one touched the earth. But in these rustic paintings, or in some village baptistry, some apse in an impoverished church, it seemed that consciousness had been delivered from itself, as if by the instinctive adhesion of accuracy to the notation. With these simpler fruits, these garlands of leaves and flowers naively borrowed from church rites, the youthfulness of a body expressed more

candidly, the archaism of a gesture--with these, a faith which had been preserved married the newly created space, and knowledge and peace were one.

But how did it happen that instead of remaining in this peace, which I loved, which I had been able to recognize, I quickly became nervous, troubled, impatient to leave, as if by staying there I lost an opportunity? Alas, it was through a reasoning which I knew was specious, but which I liked to follow, and which caught me in the end. How simple these works are, I began by thinking. With all my words, which would allow me to speak of the Sienese ambiguities, the Florentine ambitions, even Piero, I could only betray these works. But isn't that because they rest on modes of perception, on ways of being, perhaps on a category in the experience of the world which I no longer have? And yet these conscious societies were small cities, were villages. . . . But of course. Like everyone else today, I am the heir of Renaissance Italy, so it is not in Italy's great cities that the consciousness was different--in that case I would know it. No, we must think that this profound consciousness had its source elsewhere: that it was foreign to those cities which collaborated in creating our history, and to the lesser cities which gravitated around them; that it must have appeared in a distant village, in fact, in a valley all but closed, on a rocky

and almost deserted mountain--and there alone. One can recognize the movement of thought by which the idea of a back country has sometimes deprived me, as I said, of what I love.

But this time it began at the heart of a very coherent structure, which I had only glimpsed and was discovering little by little, which I already loved deeply: and at once the obsession intensified, so much more dangerous because the ebb and flow of my successive interests could give me the illusion that in the end I would know how to recognize the signposts along the way, and even to delineate a method. And in fact, after having discovered, and magnified, a work, I was more able to see its limits. This one was still too elegant, the other was marked--as I could see at a second glance (and it could be read in the expression of grief, of pity, of love), by a too ordinary psychology. Conscious, yes, but still fettered in some way,<sup>26</sup> and held therefore on our shore: they had caught only a reflection of what had shone in its plenitude, over there. Yet if I ascertain this difference today, which is a lack, won't I be able to measure other differences tomorrow, but in

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<sup>26</sup>The example is a Virgin and Child from around 1430, which is sometimes attributed to Masolino da Panicale (1384-after 1435). Tempera on wood, in the Museum of San Matteo, Pisa.

relation to this work I have before me now, and in the direction of a higher level? So that from work to work, I will be able to make progress towards the distant plenitude? At this point in my reasoning, I had to wonder whether the ascent would not end, in the best case, at a place deserted today, or in an abandoned village; but no, I concluded, this could not be. Where consciousness had found the key, how could it be lost? The man of truth has ceased to paint, for reasons I do not know, but he has not disappeared, it is only a question of learning how to recognize him, in his silent difference, and that is precisely the accomplishment which the paintings, the statues, the deserted rooms would have allowed. Yes, I am near the goal. Twenty or thirty miles from here, perhaps less,<sup>27</sup> since my tastes are concentrated in southern Tuscany, a portion of Umbria, the Marches, the northern part of Latium; and crude to the first glance, as it is a question of an unknown relation, in its purity this time, of spirit to appearance, the absolute work exists, and all around it the true country. . . .

Sophisms, of course, for I made art, which is an order having its own law, the simple epiphenomenon in

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<sup>27</sup>The photograph shows the Romanesque Church of Santa Maria at Portonuovo, near Ancona.

which a sign would be inscribed: while I knew that at the last moment, this negative appreciation would have to end, as the work would all at once recover its abundant existence. And in fact I wondered how I would be able, at the right moment, to reverse the sign of my reading. But this question only lured me further, for I tried to imagine criteria which could be read in two ways, like the chequered pavements which the perspective painters loved--and these specious hopes haloed the most ordinary predellas with a light of enigma. What could I use as a grid? The representation of earth and sky, since the back country is first of all a view of the place that is near? The base of the divine throne, that absolute edifice? In the end, finding nothing tangible, I arrived at the hypothesis that the hidden center had a sort of magnetism; that if I was searching apparently at random, it was because I was already caught in its influence; and that therefore I need only allow myself to be led, replacing weak thought with the impulses of the entire being, in whose depths is the truth. Those were the months when I played with the idea that I was guided, through the galleries and the cities, by a providence which had long been vacant, and which I had awakened. Even today, when I happen to encounter a familiar painting whose location I had forgotten, in some picture

gallery--as I recently rediscovered Rosso's Deposition at Volterra<sup>28</sup>--I am seized with hope, and for an instant it seems that I am recalled to the task. How many hours I've spent, not knowing whether I was serious or not, as I turned the pages of my Pistis Sophia,<sup>29</sup> old issues of Burlington Magazine, where the photographs are smaller and greyer!<sup>30</sup> I looked at a Madonna by Arcangelo di Cola da Camerino, and wondered, who more than he is on the threshold;<sup>31</sup> should I leave for Camerino, for the last steps of the way? But Arcangelo himself travelled a great deal, and in a mysterious fashion. He went to San Francesco in Pioraco and to Riofreddo in Latium. And there is also this hand--perhaps Piero della Francesca, at the enigmatic beginnings of his career--who had his reasons, or so one may think, to paint the expanse of Lake

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<sup>28</sup>Rosso Fiorentino (1494-1540), Deposition (1521), in the Picture Gallery at Volterra.

<sup>29</sup>Literally the "way of wisdom," the Pistis Sophia is a miscellany of strange fragments reflecting the theosophy of certain late Gnostic circles in Egypt. The fragments combine the mythological romance of Sophia's redemption with ritual and sacrament, nearly orthodox Christology with astrological mysticism--the whole permeated with a longing for esoteric revelation.

<sup>30</sup>The example is a very grey photograph of a Madonna and Child by Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1430-1516).

<sup>31</sup>Arcangelo di Cola da Camerino (active 1416-1429), Crucifixion, diptych in the Helen C. Frick Collection, Pittsburgh.

Trasimeno as it appears, they say, on arriving from Cortona, beneath an Annunciation of Fra Angelico,<sup>32</sup> still rather archaic, still haunted by a sky of gold. Should I leave for Cortona, for a family pension in a street chosen at random? A vestibule paved in green like the one in the Profanation of the Host. And the room with white walls where all at once a painting. . . .

I did not go to Riofreddo, in Latium, and I have always postponed the visit to Cortona. In fact, I have only travelled, in Italy's interior, through the important sites of what we may call ordinary art, the art which the play of my mind made into a distorted reflection of the invisible presence. And I even have to say that the fantasy of distant provinces did not distract me very much from the essential points of my study, which I took seriously, of Tuscan painting--fortunately, for this study freed me in the end. Though the fantasy did not affect my reason, still it endured in my perception like a task, like a halo around the image which troubled the

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<sup>32</sup>This is the Cortona Annunciation (n.d.) by Fra Angelico (1400-1455), in which the ceiling of the building in which the angel greets the Virgin is painted in a stylized imitation of the night sky studded with gold stars. The predella presents seven scenes from the Virgin's life, including the Visitation, with a large lake in the background. In "Un'ipotesi su Piero della Francesca," Arti Figurative, 3 (1947), pp. 82-83, Salmi suggests that Piero may have "had a hand" in this panel.



meaning with its irridescence, at certain instants. But when the halo was clearly marked, it penetrated the art in question with its bizarre light and an evidence rose from this art, illuminated as it was, and dissolved the clouds. An event, moreover, which could have been foreseen. How can we doubt that an ontological evaluation, and not the reproduction of appearance, was the profound vow of Italian art until the end of the Baroque era?

In this sense, my obsession spoke the same language as this art though it strayed as to the analysis of its message, and at one time or another I was bound to hear its word more clearly. A word which could greet me at the end of the dream, having accompanied me in its own way as I followed the dream's paths. An affirmation and an assumption of our place of existence, in the work of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca? But if the dream of a golden age, the ambition to profoundly refashion through number, almost the idea of another earth, for the spirit--if these will belong to Ficino,<sup>33</sup> we may already

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<sup>33</sup> Marsilio Ficino, of Florence (1433-1499), was the main representative of Platonism in Renaissance Italy. Influenced by Neo-Platonic thought as well as by Augustinian theology, he translated Plato (1484), Plotinus (1492) and other Greek philosophers. In his major work, the Theologica Platonica (1482), he presents a hierarchical universe, and argues for the soul's immortality. Man is at the center of the universe, and his life is an internal ascent towards God.

find them in Brunelleschi's cupola, in Alberti's façades at Mantua; and in what is meant by the hand at Arezzo, what it even expects to rejoin, as it designates the vanishing point in the Reception of the Queen of Sheba by Solomon.<sup>34</sup> And in fact, if I wanted to understand the affirmation which had touched me, to understand it in its depth made of contradictions and rebeginnings, of dream and science, of secret excess, then I did better to look beyond its moments of victory, to plumb, with my impatience like theirs, my illusions and disillusionments, my hope renewed so many times, the diffractions and eddies of this Tuscan ambition which is both extravagant and lucid, in which pride ceaselessly battles with wisdom, as the demand battles with stoicism. A contemporary, or nearly, of Piero's is Botticelli in Florence, whose painting is the source of Mannerism, which is the art of the desire that will not be renounced, art which sacrifices the earth--though it has just been recovered--to its desire. Soon afterwards, Michelangelo would leave his sculpture incomplete, by inaptitude for what is finished. And Pontormo. . . .<sup>35</sup> In truth, whoever has learned from

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<sup>34</sup>One of the frescos Piero della Francesca painted in The Legend of the True Cross, Arezzo (cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," note 1).

<sup>35</sup>For Botticelli, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 7. For Pontormo, cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," note 12.

his own desire, from an urge even if it is repressed, from a regret or a folly, to recognize the unity in contradiction, the almost imperceptible tearing of the beautiful images of peace, the music, too, of certain disorders, cannot doubt any longer that the affirmation of some from among the most assured, proceeds less from an aptitude for life on earth than from the persistence of a moral experience. Doubtful on the purely tangible plane and in the ambiguity of the standard which always remains external, this affirmation is recaptured, this time without flaw, as the acceptance of destiny. And it is even through this ataraxia,<sup>36</sup> in the light of its asceticism, that its perception is finest. I loved the pittura chiara, as I said, which released the colors. And interpreting it as a fact of pure consciousness, I imagined that it was, among us, the attenuation of a heightened quality of dawn, "over there." But I finally understood that it only reflected, at the end of a long battle--with pride, that demon of Uccello's--the heart's transparency. Yet what "immediacy," in the "purely" tangible notation! But it is so. Nothing is immediate, nothing exists even; everything is won in the course of a life, and first of all the beauty of a place which a life assumes.

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows, note 7.

And he who had travelled, in spirit, through the distant, secluded regions of Tuscany or the Marches, seeking in his idleness and his pride to twist the simple, to fracture the evidence, to escape the difficulties of the mortal condition, he could certainly learn a great deal on the road of return, and not only about art. One day the "traveller" realized that even if he had not seen Camerino nor truly desired to go there, he had still lived in Florence, where he served his apprenticeship to life--near the Night in the Medici Chapel. Florence, which at times is strained, impatient, black, and at other times is reconciled;<sup>37</sup> Florence which is often lost in its reverie but never without solicitude for those who suffer; incapable of Piero's wisdom, which is, however, unstable, but more tender as she wipes the fever's sweat from the brow--Florence had been his teacher, wounded,<sup>38</sup> remembering, knowing, the teacher he needed and sought. And she showed him, in a lesson he had never before understood, that one can love the images even as one recognizes the non-being of each image: so true is it that all these works together are not a mutual cancellation, but a

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<sup>37</sup>The illustration is Botticelli's Crucifixion (after 1500) in the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge (Mass.).

<sup>38</sup>Michelangelo's Night (1520-1525) in the Medici Chapel, Florence. Detail showing her head and torso.

potential deepening of one's self, and ultimately, the destiny. I remember that one morning, in a church at Arezzo, I tried obstinately and repeatedly to follow what I thought was the hand of Barna,<sup>39</sup> which my demon told me might be infinite, in the layers of scaling paint of a fresco. Then I felt a sudden weariness. Why Barna, why did I need that shadow? There was nothing concealed in the ruin of this wall, except the unconscious which my visions projected onto it, and which I should first try to understand. Leaving the church, San Domenico I believe, I emerged into the full sun of the parvis; and of course my only actions were the unsettled steps and gestures of one who has visited and who leaves again, dreaming, a tourist whether he wills or no, a stranger: but one thought made its way into my consciousness. The traveller, I said, returned to Arezzo. He wanted to begin again from a fresco where a few days earlier he had missed the path, or so he supposed. But he suddenly renounces (for a long time I did not understand these words) the

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Barna was a Sieneese painter, active towards the middle of the fourth century. Little is known of him. His major work is his contribution to the frescos on the right wall of the nave of the Collegiata at San Gimignano (1350-1355). According to Vasari, Barna died when he fell from the scaffolding while painting this fresco. A few other paintings have been attributed to him.

category of form. And he leaves the church, and lets himself fall onto the flagstones. A voice murmurs in his ear: Ma l'erba è sempre la stessa. . . .<sup>40</sup> And then he continues on his way. But, this time, at random.

What does this doubling signify; this "passage from I to He," this scrutiny of my phantasms, but as if from outside? First of all, that the demon had been vanquished, at least for a time. But also that the temptation had been strong enough, the trial sudden enough, harsh enough, that in this moment of respite I felt--or believed I felt--the need to understand myself. I formed the plan, in other words, of writing a book in which the "traveller" would return along his route, or rather would really follow that route for the first time, going where I had not gone, considering the works with more care than I had brought to the task: and so reliving the illusions which had been mine, if I may say so, only in dream; but discovering as well what I still did not know--the justification and the mechanism of this off-centering in the name of the center, of this glove turned inside out which I had made of my life. A book--yet another ambiguity. To begin the journey over in writing at the very moment that existence interrupted it--perhaps

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<sup>40</sup>"But the grass is always the same."

I only wanted to preserve it, and not to reduce it through analysis. But I might as well restore to the timelessness of writing what was wounding my life through its disdain of finitude and time; and I thought that if I struck against the impossible, I would question myself again. A book on two levels instead of an ambiguity. A book in which reason would finally circumvent the dream.

And particularly since I had a dream, not long after this morning at Arezzo, a brief dream which appeared to me like the end of a stage. I was in an octagonal chapel, and painted on each wall--by some confused dialectic of superimpositions and forgettings--was one of the Sibyls who announced the Incarnation to the world. The paintings were ruined, but my usual reasoning led me to believe that these erosions would be my test, for along with its finish, they had stripped an art of its external determinations, and so I would be able to re-discover the internal form which the painter had not been able to avoid losing among the forms and the colors to which he was bound. It depended on me alone that the presence appear in the work at last unsealed. And besides, there was a roving voice in the air, whose words I may perhaps interpret in this way: "If I erase what I write, as you see, it is because you must read. I am seated at the far end of the series of three rooms, which

open onto the garden; you saw a little of my robe, you came to me in the summer, a child wanting to love, anxious to learn: will you have the time to decipher me, you whose head I take on my knees, you who are crying. . . . " I looked at the Sibyl whose features had been effaced in the silent chapel; and I knew that it was summer outside, with the cricket's song, the deserted light, and the road. All my life retold and all my task, but I was not afraid.

Though I was not ready, despite my dream. And the tide I had hoped for flowed through symbols and a strained writing which I could not elucidate. I felt moreover that what was taking form in this way was only a fragment--an ill will of my unconscious having closed many of the circuits, and obscured many of the signs. In the end, I destroyed the notes I had taken and the pages already written. But I did not therefore forget them.

The first page, I remember, was missing. For all my efforts, I could never write it or even imagine it. I knew only that it must explain the traveller's origins, and the still accidental reasons for his decision to



depart. He rose, having made his decision, and left his room, a poor student. It was night, "in an Eastern city" (that was beyond doubt), humid and silent.

But at this point, or nearly, the second page began, which had been given to me all at once, as if in another life I had actually seen these events as I will recount them. Here again was the one who would become the traveller, and it was still the same night: he was walking slowly (and it was as if I could see over his shoulder) down a dark alley, where an impoverished grass grew between the uneven flagstones, to the edge of a canal which was equally without light. I felt--I still feel--this deep night, in a very immediate and physical way. There were some houses near the canal, but they were unlit and nearly invisible; only the vague reflection of a star on the water which did not flow. And yet the traveller had to wait there, unmoving, for what I knew would be a very long time, as if hidden forces had to make their way through a tangle of things forgotten, of useless intellections. "It may have been an hour that I waited by the water," the traveller would have said, more or less (for sometimes it seemed to me--and sometimes not--that I would write this book in the first person), "and I felt that my old path had its end here." Then a door opened "in the last house," a panel of light reached towards the water and even a little way over the water, an

old bent man had appeared on the threshold, disappeared in the surrounding night, and re-emerged in the ray of light on the bank. He leans over a boat, takes out a basket, and leaves again. He goes back to the house and closes his door. A simple, muffled sound, with no echo. And already in this sound the absence of sound, as if nothing had happened. Yes, the place exactly as it was before, the same uncertain luminosity on the closed water, and the same vacant relation of stone to stone in an immobile, unconscious reciprocity.

And the traveller wonders: doesn't the place keep anything at all of what nonetheless took place? Does being forget itself, instant by instant, is it my task, and mine alone, to remember? He goes over to the boat, which also seems to be waiting, withdrawn in its solitude. Larger than he had thought it would be, it is in fact a small barge, loaded with blocks of coal. There are some letters on the stern, but he cannot decipher them. Then he remembers that some pieces of coal had crumbled under his feet, in the alley. . . . And the author, in rewriting this page, recalls (as he had not the first time) the "moses baskets" of his childhood, those wicker cradles, those baskets which owe their name to the chosen one of God, who was abandoned on the river. I must have known this narrative and this explanation for a long time, though I know nothing more of it, because a

phrase haunted me in the early drafts: Help me Egypt, come to my aid, river; and later when I saw the paintings by Poussin, certainly his most irrational, his most inspired, I felt that they swept away this charcoal lying half crushed in the grass.<sup>41</sup> --And then, but this time beyond even the Traveller, I saw Father Time in a museum. An old man emerged occasionally from a sort of stall, he raised and lowered a scythe, vast gesture beneath whose fatality a minute should have fallen, but the gears were worn or rusted, the scythe jolted, paused, and slowly began again: the clock did not really serve the idea of time which we have made for ourselves. But I did not rule out another hypothesis, as I stood riveted to this display case. Perhaps, I said, this mechanism does not depart from what it was meant to do, perhaps it was the clockmaker's will that it mark the true time, the time we do not dare conceive, the time which has hesitations (or cracks), moments of suspense which are our chance--always lost, heightened precisions which one would say were miracles if they were lived. Alone in the

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<sup>41</sup>Poussin painted two versions of Moses Saved from the Waters, one in 1638 (Paris, Louvre), and the other in 1651 (Collection of Mrs. D. Schreiber).--Anthony Blunt titles these paintings "The Finding of Moses," but I have used a literal translation in order to preserve the force of the last words in this essay.

universe whose music we do not hear, this clock testifies to our powers. . . . And it was then that the memory of the canal came back to me.

Which proves, moreover, that it had stayed with me, ready to be awakened at any moment, even though I had abandoned the book. In contrast, I had forgotten all the notes which I had taken for the succeeding chapters as soon as I had destroyed them, and I will even say that as I wrote them, substituting them for others already abandoned, I forgot them page by page as if they were still without truth, despite all my efforts. I worked very hard, for example, to express the traveller's reflection on the paintings, in other words to formulate, to sound the depths of the hypotheses which had been mine, and my attempts at categories. But nothing remained of my earlier reasonings, already specious, except shadows which the words retained for no more than an instant. And as for my tangible discoveries, my admirations, my joys, they vanished, bizarrely, in the labyrinth of galleries and cloisters which my student from an Eastern city entered--though I had not explained how he did so. I wondered, saddened, why this writing was not my representative, my image. But it was a question of level. Where my feelings could have appeared, within the bounds of a particular consciousness, there the traveller disappeared,

in a cloud. And when he reappeared, it was in another space, a heightened world, where the light was more violent, the gestures stylized, the events and the objects manifestly symbolic against the golden background of a society which seemed asleep or absent. The traveller never showed himself where history and psychology predominate. My efforts to make him enter a hotel or a train station only led to their conflagration and consumption; and in the end, only one or two strained sentences were left. And meanwhile I saw a mysterious and abundant field ahead of him, which the impossible, limit and guide of my search, certainly should have foreclosed; for I could not doubt that it was on the other side of the crack, the first few steps on the fallacious slope which I wanted to forbid myself.

Here is what happened to the traveller. He had wandered through central Italy, up to the moment, that I had taken from my own life, in which he was overwhelmed, the moment of l'erba sempre la stessa; then he had left again, without a precise goal but in the direction of the Adriatic. And one evening he came to Apecchio. I had, of course, passed through this village myself, where one used to change buses, twenty years ago, between San Sepolcro and Città di Castello. A wait of an hour or two while the night fell, gathering the solitude of the stones above the roofs: an indifferent moment, a moment above all to be forgotten. But despite this emptiness, an

emotion apparently without object had immediately taken hold of me, and was still intense after days had passed. I had dreamt of returning to Apecchio; and so I did, in spirit. Yes, it is Apecchio, in front of me! But today the village seems deserted. No one at the mescita di vini to answer the traveller's call, and the houses are closed and silent. The traveller wanders in Apecchio while night falls, and still later. All he finds is a horse, wandering as he is doing himself. A piebald horse, I wrote, and I was very much attached to these words, which have stayed with me, in the street washed with shadows. . . . And then? Well, beyond this clear image of the lower world, of death, of the magics which abound at crossroads, pressed glimpses of full daylight, and even of high noon in the heat of summer. I extricated myself with a night of storms which the traveller would have passed in an empty chapel above Apecchio. As the absolute draws near, one has as much right to these rapid stereotypes as the painter of icons.<sup>42</sup>

And in the bright dawn, the washed light, the traveller would have set out over fields and broken stones,

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. the Manuscript de Mons which continues the narrative, interrupted by the death of Chrétien de Troyes, of Perceval's adventures while seeking the Grail. Through a night of supernatural storms, Perceval battles with the Devil's Black Hand for the right to purify an enchanted chapel.

walking at random over the hills and then, yes, there would have been a vast wall in the deserted countryside. He follows it, and around him the horizon is very low among the stones, the sky very blue as when everything is going to end. And an impression of blackness is growing inside him, despite the light, or rather beyond the light, as if the lines of the world were forced to bend in the thickness of a lens, tufts of color falling from the surface of things. Besides, he is cold, and hungry: the orangery is very near. An orangery, in effect! The paradox of an orangery in the French style, at the top of a hill in southern Tuscany: I know, and how profoundly, that this must be the end--the metamorphosis--of the book. A long, low orangery, its four great windows open to the sun all day, I know that this is the place where the traveller must stop, having left from the shores of the nocturnal water. But here is another "blank," except that this time it is a question rather of too much than too little. A sudden wave--of radiance, of heat--kept me from seeing the final vision. And if nothing was sparse any more, in the surrounding area, if I was on the step of a higher hypostasis, its law was hidden and I was reduced to suppositions. I made several of these, and to tell the truth I do not know whether I could have chosen among them.

First hypothesis, or vision, let us say that it is the major one: the exhausted traveller tripped over a stone, fell, rolled to the bottom of a hill and is seriously injured. Where can he drag himself for help-- but near him there is a low door in the wall, which he opens, and the orangery appears at the other end of the grass. And it is then that he hears a step, behind him, and hands touch him, the guardian of the place leans her face towards him. Anne, in the painting by Leonardo da Vinci, Anne (Mary) who leans, turning, has this smile.<sup>43</sup> But in the delirium, the fever, the last scales fall from appearance, the traveller is blind. He is almost unconscious, his eyes closed, as he feels that he is carried, he does not know where--though he has confidence. In a variant of this ending, the traveller is cared for in the orangery and he knows it, he hears the endless song of the crickets outside. But in another imagination he is uninjured as he enters the enclosure, and it is on hearing the step behind him that he is afraid, tries to escape--what face will appear, what terror comes to annul what desire?--he falls, then he will be lifted up. What fear is there in me, too, what prohibition

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<sup>43</sup>The Virgin with the Christ Child in the Lap of St. Anne (around 1506) at the Louvre in Paris. Detail showing the heads of Anne and Mary, whom Bonnefoy seems to have merged into one figure.



which the symbolic ascent cannot contravene? I listen, there are other variants, perhaps other figures. And in fact, the traveller had met a stranger one night in Florence. Markedly older than the traveller, this stranger seemed to know Italian art (though he did not explain anything clearly) as if from the point where the traveller had renounced comprehension. They had talked, obscurely, one would have said cryptically; it was at Orsanmichele,<sup>44</sup> and they were talking about the painting which stands alone at the center of the church, although one cannot see it distinctly, but also about the closed room which is above--the granary--and the quality of its emptiness, at this moment, in the winter night that does not end. After this conversation, the other (but what can I see of him, he is so high, or so far ahead?) would have attached himself to the wanderer's steps, asking here and there for news of him. And he arrives at Apecchio, where the houses have reopened, then at the orangery, where he speaks to the young woman. The stranger is there on the threshold, watching the horizon. The air vibrates with resurrection above

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<sup>44</sup>Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 3. The painting to which Bonnefoy refers is probably the Madonna fra gli Angioli, attributed to Bernardo Daddi, which is framed by the great tabernacle sculpted by Andrea di Cime, called l'Orcagna.

the dry stone. In the tuft of forms and colors which bends and straightens like a flame, a voice is crying that the long wait has ended. But I do not let myself go very far in this direction, it is too new--or too old. On the one hand, I can glimpse a density, a curvature which are beyond my means of expression, I would even say that they are beyond space; as the woman is also becoming two, now: this figure of day and another of night, who is younger, with tapered hands, an abrupt laugh. And on the other hand, I must recognize that these doublings, these four presences and a fifth which arrives to interfere, vibrating like the air outside--here again is The Ordeal, the "novel" I had written and then destroyed three or four years earlier,<sup>45</sup> because these bifurcations, these prismatic decompositions, certainly could not be reduced to any psychology or likelihood, and withdrew like water from the finished writing.

#### IV.

And it is above all because The Ordeal "came back" in this way that I destroyed what was left--or what was begun--of my new book. The reappearance of this structure, with its enigmatic demands, its infinite suppressed,

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<sup>45</sup>In fact, Bonnefoy published a fragment of L'ordalie, with illustrations by Claude Garache, in 1975.

its silent autonomy, signified too clearly this time that I had renounced my ambition to understand, although this ambition--yes, even after Apecchio and the orangery--still seemed to me the only legitimate design. I destroyed The Traveller because I did not want writing which was imaginative, and therefore sealed, but rather a conscious analysis, the condition of moral experience. And yet, surprising as it may seem, I did not make any serious attempt to use for this purpose the material which was available to me--not, of course, concerning an "Eastern city," but my own life, present or past; even though I did not lack for memories, observations, presentiments which could have served a coherent thought. Even the myths which took form under my pen, though they frustrated the discourse of reflection and memory, could become like the radiosopic image of the desires at play and, when compared with the facts of existence, could yield confirmations or clues. One such clue, at any rate, was obvious. Whatever the other meanings--or presences--caught in the nets at the book's end, the Oedipal component shines there in all its brilliance, marking a direction I could have taken; and at the last I would have found the first back country, not even disguised. For my childhood had been marked--structured--by a duality of places, only one of which had any value in my eyes. I loved, I refused, I opposed two regions of

France one to the other. And I made this confrontation into a theater, which exploited all the scraps of meaning I had at my command.

On the one hand, in the city where I was born, an experience which I needed to be negative, and which finally shaped my memory. All I can see of Tours before the last war is the deserted streets, and it is true that they were, in a profound sense, deserted. We lived in a neighborhood of small, poor houses. The men at work, the women waxed the furniture behind shutters which were almost always closed halfway, and the silence was broken only by the brief occasional cry of a child. As for me, in the small dining room with its forbidden furniture, I watched through the chinks of the exterior shutters as the water from the municipal street cleaner streamed over the burning asphalt of June. I was worried by my first realization that the series of numbers is infinite. And in the evening, at dinner under the yellow lamp, I tried to find the mysterious point in the bread where the crust ends--but all in vain. Still this labor gave me a foretaste of the night which was coming, the enigmatic and sacred night when I wondered, while the train rolled smoothly through the invisible countryside, or passed through a tunnel, or stopped for a minute on the silent approach to a station; is it here that the

world I am leaving ends, is it here that the other world begins?--One day, many years later, as I studied the unfolding of lemmas in preparation for Weierstrauss' theorem, which tends to define the notion of a point, and of the before and after on a straight line, I was suddenly stirred by a sort of exaltation without object, in which there was both joy and sadness; and after a moment I saw myself stretched out in the compartment of that train, my face buried in the folds of a jacket, trying to sleep, not sleeping. The obsession with a frontier between two regions, two impulses, marked me from my childhood, and forever. And certainly, since it concerned a space more mythical than terrestrial, led me to the articulation of a transcendence.

And so, on the other hand there are images of plenitude. We arrived in the morning, we passed through the low, discolored door which opened into the enclosed area (it was called "the park," and it is true there were tall trees) between the house and the church, and I ran to the end of the orchard which extended the enclosure to the right, towards the light, and which overlooked the valley. Some fruit had doubtless begun to ripen. The greengage and the blue plums would fall for an entire month, and later there would be figs, perhaps grapes -- the plums would have split open, and in that would be

evident, opening their being rather than their savor to the roving wasps, and I almost wept in my adhesion. The exile had ended. Zénobie would soon pass, a woman forty-five years old, fat, dirty, with the carriage of a queen, pushing the geese before her with the end of her curved stick, on her way to what was called the house of hens-- a vestibule, a kitchen, a parlor abandoned to their cacklings and droppings--and it would be the earth standing upright, girdled with fires, crowned. So much comes back to me, this time, of the thick grass, the wind, the house, the villages. Yet as Tours did not deserve my refusal, so Tourac only had merit in my eyes, as I can now see, because of what I thought I loved there, and that is what matters. Yes, I found this country beautiful, it even shaped my profound choices, with its vast deserted causses where there were outcroppings of grey stone,<sup>46</sup> and its storms which sometimes lasted several days, above the closed châteaux. All the same, what could I have deciphered, of these difficult beauties, without a quality which was added, as if by accident? When we left again in September, the first mists had barely begun to form; we often left the grapes to ripen and so it was an endless

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<sup>46</sup>"Causses" is the name given to the chalky plateaux of the Massif Central, in the South and center of France.

summer which greeted us the year after, it was--this valley, the river over there, these hills--the country outside time, the earth already a dream in which the security was preserved of these years that know nothing of death. Country where the flesh, as Rimbaud said, is still a fruit hanging in the tree;<sup>47</sup> where the stream which Mallarmé claims is not deep lies hidden still in the thick grass.<sup>48</sup> And so the country of a consciousness that can perceive the universe (with a naïveté which must soon be repressed) not in the collision of finite existences, but in the music of essences. The "leaves of gold" and this awkward writing,<sup>49</sup> which could have grown deeper, perhaps. . . . In truth, this "massif central," tinged with the absolute, was very like the back country of later stages. And when signs I had not wanted to see--an iron bridge beneath the poplars, a pool of oil, others, which signified the void--had coagulated in the first light, as my age required, I may certainly believe that

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<sup>47</sup>"Sonnet" from "Jeunesse," in the Illuminations. "Wasn't the flesh a fruit hanging in the orchard, o childhood days!"

<sup>48</sup>"Tombeau," which Mallarmé wrote for the first anniversary of Verlaine's death, in 1897. The maligned and shallow stream, of course, is death itself.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. note 14 above.

what was already no more than my dream, and now was longer attached to anything here, could simply glide to the horizon.

My grandparents died, moreover, and I remember the second funeral, which marked, as I could not doubt, the end of my childhood years. The catechism pupils had perched on the tombs, because of the nettles which scratched their legs, and they repeated the same Latin stanza over and over, as if they insisted--in the bustle and the indifference of the bells--at a closed door. As for me, I looked for the last time, but with what emotion, at a certain tall tree on the hill opposite, across the Lot river. I should have been here, in the small cemetery--no, I was walking towards that tree over there, though I stopped a few steps away, lost in the absolute of its form and the evidence of the void surrounding the tree and the stones. Today I can understand what it was to me. Isolated between the earth and the sky, an intense and well-defined figure, a sign, deprived of meaning,<sup>50</sup> I could recognize in the tree an individual like myself, and from that time on I knew that human existence is rooted in finitude. But if I decided to

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<sup>50</sup>Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867), Plateau de Bellecroix, Forêt de Fontainebleau (1837-1848). Paris, Louvre.



make this finitude my "rugged reality," my "duty" (yes, that was my thought, which persisted later),<sup>51</sup> I did not therefore interrupt my dream, which simply turned away from the place that was near, and recreated the unity I regretted of the relative and the infinite, over there, in the image. "The tree," as I later told myself (I thought of it at night, and wanted to see it again), was the first boundary to divide the visible. It was already the horizon above Apecchio, and I could easily have evoked and clarified its memory, basing my analysis on my Traveller, even though it was obscured by myth.

And more certainly because the day came when I would discover other signs--milestones, evidently, between the one and the other--and feel a first hope. It was again at Tours, a place I now wanted to make my own, though at moments I still felt the old disquiet return. I must have been about twelve years old, since I was learning the rudiments of Latin, and right away I was fascinated by these words which redoubled my own with an

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<sup>51</sup>Rimbaud, "Adieu," Illuminations. "I, I who had called myself wise man or angel, excused from all morality, I am returned to the earth, with a duty to seek, and the rugged reality to embrace! Peasant!" Cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," page 72. "Second Earth," page 127, and the "Interviews with Bernard Falciola," page 270.

unforseen dimension, perhaps a secret--but I was especially fascinated by the admirable and resonant syntax. So, with the cases, the declensions, one could dispense with prepositions for the relations between vocables. With the ablative absolute, the infinitive clause, the future participle, one could contract into one word, or one dense structure, second degree of the spirit, what French must untie to express. Far from weakening them, this contraction seemed to me to go to the heart of significant relationships; and thus to discover, if in a veiled way, something of an unimagined interiority (as of a substance) in the verbal matter. Of course, I did not think in these terms, and I had hardly any idea of what this depth could be. What caught my imagination was more like an image; Latin seemed to me a dark green, tufted foliage, a laurel of the soul, through which I might perhaps have perceived a clearing, in any case the smoke from a fire, a sound of voices, a rustling of red cloth. And I waited for what I did not know, when one evening I found myself confronted by the page, nearly square and a little yellow, with its mixed roman and italic type, which treated questions of place.

And I was dazzled as I began to read. The page penetrated me all at once, and when I was questioned the next day--the first, or the only student to be asked-- I professed the revelation in a sort of suppressed

ecstasy. . . . What had I learned? That to say where, there is ubi. But this word refers only to the place where we are, while for the place we come from, there is unde, and quo for the place we go, and qua for the place we pass through. Four dimensions to fracture a unity--an opacity--which must therefore be artificial. The "where," which French could only circumvent, and use as if from outside, revealed an unforeseen spatiality in its depths. And in the same way, the dim here, place of enigma, was opened to a memory, a future, a science. It was a little like the moment one learns the notions of differential co-efficients, of integrals, having seen used to the simple idea of a curved line. And just as these notions only appear, in geometry, in algebra, on the horizon of problems which they more than resolve, for they dissolve the plane on which these problems exist in a larger structure, so I could hope that Latin, this more conscious language, algebra of the word in exile, could help me understand why I felt that I had gone astray, and where I must search. In small print at the bottom of the page, it was further clarified that with ire (what a verb, without a doubt the most profound!), the place we go can again be expressed without a preposition, but simply with the accusative. Eo Romam! What magnificent transitivity! What a substantial adhesion

of movement to its goal! What proof of the word's power! These two words alone seemed to me a promise.

And I began to read Virgil, from whom this example was taken, and other poets whose syntax was obscure to me; and I was almost in dread of confronting the vestiges of a higher consciousness, now vacant, which would reveal its mysteries to me little by little. --But today I must recognize that my motives were ambiguous. For I quickly understood, or to be more accurate, from the start I also knew that nothing could be discovered in these forms and these works, as regards categories and modes of being, which was not already known to adults and in any case to the poets of all the world's languages. But I was glad to maintain this illusion, for it allowed me to give the first shape to a vast dream. Together with the Latin language, appeared the mysterious earth where its words had been used. And since Virgil evoked shepherds who were almost divine--fulfilling their destiny in almost musical fashion, burning time in space like the grass fires in the autumn, which enlarge the sky--so it must be a region of high pastures, of forests, the very heart of the Italian peninsula could be charged with being in my eyes, and could guarantee the perenniality of an enigma against my growing means of knowledge. The attraction of a language directed me in truth towards a horizon, and an

earth. And when I had to accustom myself to the idea that Virgil or Lucretius or even the old Ennius had betrayed the promise of Eo Romam, this second earth survived my disappointment and allowed me to compensate for it.

I already followed a "reasoning." Virgil, I said, had not spoken as profoundly, as differently, as Latin seemed to allow. He was even lured to an imaginary elsewhere in the mountains of Greece, before he died in that "place we pass through," and to which he returned, Brindisi. But isn't it simply that in his epoch the secret was lost? Mustn't we go back beyond this moment in poetry, simple vestige, first line of peaks, and return to an ancient state of the language if not even to the dialects which preceded Latin, either linguistically or in the valleys and woods of the neighboring regions? Marvellous hypothesis! The more Latin disappointed me, the more the roads leading to Rome were filled with enchantment, but now for their own sake. Another center had existed. There was still an elsewhere on earth--what am I saying, the elsewhere showed itself as such for the first time, having broken with the visible. And as I touched on the unverifiable as well, the dream could freshen, it would always come back, whether on light breezes or in the squalls. One day as I was reading--it was much later, I had already visited Florence--

the admirable Descendit ad inferos of Jarry, who quotes a line from Ovid's Fasti, I could confirm its lasting efficacy. These few words, Amne perenne latens, Anna Perenna vocor<sup>52</sup>--and it is true that this line has a magic, which partly explains my stupor, my adhesion, and even that my memory still recites it to me with the same insistence, twenty years later. But even more than the endless games which are played in its depth between the river, the power of forgetting, eternity, the word, and this goddess so little known who merges them all in her name we cannot seize, this goddess who is one with the Tiber's waters in the spring: what touches me even more than this is to see this river confirmed in its essence as the source of Rome's presence, and the primacy of an obscure back country marked over the simple visible center.

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<sup>52</sup>"Hidden in an eternal stream, I am called Anna Perenna." Fasti, Part III. l. 654.

Along with the translation he provided in a note, Bonnefoy added the first part of the nymph's speech: Placidi sum nympha Numici, with the translation and an additional comment, all in a facsimile of his own handwriting (though the other notes are set in type): "Nymph I am from peaceful Numicius.--And so I forgot that it was not the Tiber. Why? I must try to understand."

The illustration facing the half page of notes (all translations, cf. notes 10 and 40 above) is a sculpted medieval labyrinth in the Romanesque cathedral of San Martino in Lucca.

A back country, to finish, which has its ground not far from Apecchio. . . . I could well be moved, when I had to wait an hour or two in that small town, and even without apparent cause or precisely for that reason: for Apecchio was the place we pass through, but as if in its pure state, and in the fabulous regions where to pass is to pass near the center, though the center cannot be seen.--I could well be troubled (which is probably the better word) and I could have understood why; I should have understood (I soon thought), even better, I should have written why, in order to rescue the real from the eddies of memory, from the illusions of desire; in order to fix at the center of my thought that the fifth question in this structure of four, the one which cannot be located, the most dangerous, the fatal question explores time and not space, seeking a way out that is not. . . . But I have already said it: vorrei e non vorrei, something obscure in me, something unknown there, too, refused the task.

And I reproached myself. What had I gained by having decided to confront finitude, having read Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Chestov, having inscribed as the epigraph of a book some words on the life of the spirit and on death,<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>The words are Hegel's. Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 11.

which I knew were as much the truth of poetry as of a serious existence, if I were going to relapse, if not into the first dream (Florence, and my scruples, had delivered me at any rate from that), at least into an incessant regret of the dream, and an inhibition when faced with it? And since I could have put it to the sword, and yet did not, wasn't it that in my heart I found this ambiguity acceptable, and even that it was my truth? This was my darkest season. I wrote poems in which I allowed myself to be reproached by voices which came from the moral consciousness of having been afraid, of having allowed the fire to go out--if it had ever caught--on the table where I desired the presence, preferring a broken sleep which drowned everything in a troubled water; and the epigraph I chose, the new epigraph, almost a denunciation of the first, rebuked me as well, in a severe and menacing way, under the sign of an illusion--Hölderlin's obsession with Greece<sup>54</sup>--which I believed was related to mine. What I accused in myself, as a matter of fact, what I thought I could recognize, and judge, was the pleasure of artistic creation, the preference I felt for the beauty which belongs to a work of art, rather than

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<sup>54</sup>Cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," note 15. The epigraph to Bonnefoy's second book of verse, Hier régnant désert, was taken from Hyperion: "You want a world, said Diotima. That is why you have everything, and you have nothing." (Poèmes, p. 93.)



for the experience which is lived. I was correct in seeing that such a choice doomed the words to themselves, made them into a language, and so created a universe which guaranteed everything to the poet; except that with this choice, having separated himself from the opening of the days, having failed to recognize time, and the other person, he gained nothing, in fact, except solitude. But this judgment led me to conclude, without further reflection, that I should suspect all poetry which did not explicitly refuse this need to close, to create a form--or was not in any case so cruelly conscious of the pre-eminence of time that it always verged on silence.

Besides, everything seemed simple to me, everything fit together in these moments when I did not go far enough--though I reproached myself with my failure to go farther--in coordinating my fears, my accusations--and my writings. If the memory of the Red Sands came back to me, for example, I immediately "understood" the reason for my interest in this book. Of course, I thought. I cannot accept that Rome--an existence--could perish. And I have charmed myself with the idea that existence could endure in that very place where death seemed to have triumphed. But how revealing it is that this survival takes place in the desert: for death can only be vanquished in the depth of the lived, by a sort of faith,

and I had simply imagined its defeat, in the distance, in the solitude of the dream--in the vain liberty of words. And in this way, the last page was made clear, which had so moved me when I read it, though I could not then understand it. I must explain that the narrative did not end where I left it, with the ultimate retreat, and the ultimate resurrection, of the City in the transcendence of the sands. In love (forever), saddened (unto death), the young archeologist decided to return to France, and we found him again on a train which passed through Central Asia, where he awoke one morning at a stop, God only knows where. And there were many people on the platform, crying, calling to each other, jostling each other, selling their wares--he watched them distractedly, but all at once! That young girl two steps away, who is walking away through the groups of peasants--it is the same one, the girl who had nonetheless fled through the subterranean galleries, there in the desert. He leaps onto the platform, and runs, and almost catches up with her, but she has turned the corner of the station building, and on the other side, more peasants, more animals, so many baskets and bags, but no trace of the Roman girl, whom he seeks for a long time, calling, crying. "Lost a second time!" In fact the third time, and the third encounter repeated the first, but this time

without hope. I also had cried over this cruel ending. I had spun many hypotheses, but had failed to explain this extraordinary encounter, and so much injustice in destiny. And for a long time I had waited for a sequel to appear, as often happened, in which this misfortune would be reversed; though I knew all the while, alas, that nothing would ever come.

But now I no longer needed to wait for anything at all, I understood, I knew. Though it was inexplicable at the level which binds the facts of the narrative, and unjustifiable to a superficial psychology or a naive morality, still on another plane, that of ontology, this ending was all too natural; it was even obligatory, since it opened the crack which gave the book its meaning, and denounced the fault inherent in all writing. Had she been "lost" again (in truth for the first time in daylight), she who had only been glimpsed in any case, who had spoken so briefly, in her dead language, from the heart of a world at once unforeseen and known in advance, separated from life, from space itself, by a hiatus of shadow? Of course not, for she had never even existed. For the archeologist, too, this Rome had been no more than a vast dream. For proof there is the prohibition against going further, which was communicated to him in a profound language, symbol of the origin. And nothing is more ambiguous than this warning, since it could only

have betrayed what it sought to conceal: as the seed bears the plant, so did this warning bear all the events which followed. Surely this is the space of dream, where one is stopped and yet advances, where one already knows what is yet unknown--and where one pretends to brave a "mysterious frontier" because one wants, in fact, to escape the evidence of the frontier which the knowledge of finitude imposes on the mind. The two enigmas of the book do not follow one after the other, they are superimposed one over the other. And so they are dispelled. In ordinary existence, on the platform of time that passes, of opportunities lost, of luck, too, the scythe miraculously held back, the young boy glimpsed a young girl, whom he "could have" loved, but that would have been to choose, committing himself to incarnation, to death, and he preferred to "abolish" (to use Mallarmé's language again) this existence, refuse to know its contradictions, its limits which would have told him of his own limits, preferring to reconstruct her existence in its essence, in the infinite, outside time. And in doing so, he thought to deliver it from nothingness: doesn't he make her a queen? But she is a queen of a world without substance, without future, for he only used her to create his fantasy, his work of art, and so she immediately disappeared, through the crack of the writing--disappeared from his life in any case, which will be a

form, not a destiny. All and nothing. And again the terrible dialectic of aesthetic creation, which is like a precious shell where one hears who knows what other invisible sea, and which empties the content from all the moments of a life. And I admired anew that the author of the Red Sands had chosen Latin to signify the language, both original and secondary, which separates the literary invention word by word from the speech of each day. How well this little book suited me! So well that one could believe I had dreamt it as well.

But what if our readings dream us? What if it were necessary, at any rate, to wake up from certain readings in order to better understand life, and--first of all, at life's heart--writing, which may be more dialectical and more generous than these books suggested, whether or not they usurped it? I said that I understood, that I knew. . . . And yet! I had something very different, and completely opposite, to understand, and soon--with the last poems of that book I mentioned, and a return to Italian soil which I will evoke next--I had begun this new apprenticeship. An obscure and difficult approach, where several times I lost my way, an approach I still have not completed today, and perhaps impossible to complete--I mean for one who does not have the simple acceptance of himself (powers as well as limitations) as a natural resource.

V.

I was on a boat returning from Greece, and was due to arrive in Venice the next day. Greece, with its rectangular temples, subordinated to the great masses of the site, had again spoken to me of a simple accord--made of limitation, of immediacy as well--with the place of existence; but Greece was receding, was becoming an image again, while Italy, land of images, drew my thoughts more and more. And so it was with a divided mind that I spent the night writing. A memory haunted me, which I thought not unrelated to this contradiction, and to my desire to conquer it. In the little museum of Delphi, I had again seen the Naxian Sphinx, and its eyes had astonished me, as always before.<sup>55</sup> They are, of course, wide open in the surge of a glance entirely given to the joyful commencements of knowledge. But the marble has eroded as the centuries passed, and as frost followed the rain; the upper eyelid, which was only a sort of rim on the globe, has practically disappeared; and so one can also believe that the Sphinx has closed its eyes, one can even dream, since it is smiling, that it dreams, its eyes turned now towards an interior image. What does the Sphinx see--the stable form or the infinite

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<sup>55</sup>Naxian Sphinx, marble, sixth century B.C. Museum of Delphi.

metamorphosis? Or does it merge these in a new vision, in an absolute glance? But as soon as this question is posed, another takes form, as it seemed to me. The erosion adds so much to the work and with such limited means, one cannot conceive that the sculptor did not foresee it. He knew that statues finish in the dust of the goats, and he traced this slight line over the empty socket so that time could efface it, and a shepherd meditate. But could he use time in this way without reflecting on its being, its demands, perhaps its efficacy? And isn't it time's efficacy that he signified in the one element of the work which he allowed time to touch? Then I imagined that the Sphinx was the equation in which spatial knowledge and wisdom appeared in a definite relationship, intelligible beauty and another beauty which is, precisely, the unknown. And in order to calculate this unknown beauty, I covered my pages with words which were pushed and pulled, not for the first time, by my clumsy need for a coherent thought.

But perhaps I had watched too long, in the afternoon and the evening, as the waves knotted and unknotted at the stern, as the bays opened and closed, the islands dispersed, the clouds wheeled in the sky; or perhaps it was because of the sound of the motor and of the sea which enveloped my cabin: in any case, I did nothing but cross out word after word, and I had found nothing, nor

really rejected anything (which would have been enough), when I climbed onto the bridge, while it was still night, to watch the lights of Brindisi. I wanted at least to see a few boats in the harbor, some wharves, the lighted mass of the Cathedral. But I was mostly taken up with thoughts which were once again pessimistic. Here is the place, I told myself, where Virgil died, leaving his poem unfinished. And as for me, what have I accomplished this evening? I was alone with the infinite of the sea, the machine's insistence which signifies duration, the memory of the flagstones at Delphi, Italy in front of me, my entire condition retold. And once more I allowed myself to be taken in by this mirage, to plumb its depths in vain, and to escape myself. Suddenly the shore which the boat was beginning to follow, in the light of dawn, seemed truly menacing. I was afraid it was the labyrinth in which, lured by beauty, that enigma, and drawn like the birds of Zeuxis to the nothingness of the image,<sup>56</sup> I would finally lose myself, having moreover desired to do so. And the slow arrival at Venice, that afternoon, seemed to confirm my fears. For the sky, though there was sun,

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<sup>56</sup>Zeuxis was a Greek illusionistic painter, who flourished in the second half of the fifth century B.C. in Heraclea, Italy. None of his works have survived. It is said that he painted a bunch of grapes so like real grapes that the birds tried to eat them.



was black, and the sea, though opaque, was a very light green like absinth, and I already imagined that the low islands, the buildings, the churches--even Palladio's<sup>57</sup>--were only the negative, crossed by countless irisations, of what would be, in the positive, an inconceivable photograph, which could only appear in its full glory elsewhere, let us say in some other room.

All the same, it was certainly in a real city that I disembarked that day, and the proof was that there were posters everywhere, and even banners, announcing an exhibit of paintings. What is more, it was one of the few retrospectives of early painting which I would not have wished to find on my way through Venice: for it was "Crivelli e i Crivelleschi," Carlo Crivelli and his imitators or followers, and I had no respect for those works I had seen by Crivelli, essentially those in London.<sup>58</sup> But this refusal had no cause beyond the artist's mediocrity. I did not dislike this sort of black ring with which he burdens his figures, as if with a fin de siècle

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<sup>57</sup>One of the greatest of Italian Renaissance architects, Palladio (1518-1580) built several churches in Venice, most notably San Giorgio Maggiore and the Church of the Redentore.

<sup>58</sup>Carlo Crivelli was an Italian painter (ca. 1430-after 1493) who worked chiefly in the Marches. The altarpiece, in thirteen parts, which he painted for S. Domenico, Ascoli, is now in the National Gallery, London.

frame too rich for their autumnal color. And I thought, as I examined the poster, that if someone told me, simply, of these haughty Madonnas, at once hieratic and child-like, at times vaguely perverse; if one added that in this work which is primarily decorative, there are flickering reflections of Mantegna and Bellini;<sup>59</sup> and that it had been painted in different cities along the Adriatic coast, in the region, more mysterious than any other, of Ancona and Macerata; yes, if someone announced such marvels to me, and even with a slight reservation, because of that black ring, I would immediately have a surge of response, a hope would come to me, I would throw myself into the trap. And with these thoughts, I went to the exhibit where I continued my slightly ironic reflections, having found no cause to change my mind (for simple mediocrity does exist, without false bottom or secret). On the whole, I now thought, it would have been like an appointment to which the other person has not come. And one realizes little by little that one has never met this person, that one knows nothing of him, that one can doubt his existence--except that this fact

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<sup>59</sup>For Mantegna, cf. "A Dream in Mantua," note 9. This visit to Venice immediately preceded the visit to Mantua recounted in the earlier text. Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1429-1516) was a pupil of Mantegna's and a teacher of Giorgione (1477-1510), with whom his name is paired later in this chapter (cf. note 30 above).

remains, there was an appointment. . . . Thoughts which were not leading me anywhere when all at once my attention was called to a retable, or more exactly perhaps to its predella.<sup>60</sup>

I checked the catalogue and learned that they were the work of one of the painters presented as Crivelli's disciples, the crivelleschi: an artisan, as it happened, who was little known, whose attributions were disputed. The painting testified, however, to a talent which I judged superior to that of the master. The sad contour was gone and the color, as well as I can remember, was more transparent, brighter. But that was not the issue, or at least so I could believe, for it was a face, in its singular expression, which had caught my eye. There was one saint among the others, above and around the Madonna and Child (which one, I no longer know, as I look at the photograph ten years later), who was young, a little like an angel, and who smiled-- but was it really a smile, this rustling of irony, of

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<sup>60</sup>The retable and predella have traditionally been attributed to Nicolo Alunno, but are now assigned to Lorenzo d'Alessandro from Sanseverino (active 1462-1503), and tentatively dated 1494. The central part of the retable shows the Madonna and Child with four saints. Above, Christ is supported by saints and angels. The predella shows the twelve apostles and four saints. The whole was painted for the parish church of Serrapetrona (Macerata).

fervor, which hovered, as I thought, in his face? In fact, the image was very small, it had suffered damage, it was therefore hard to read, and it would only have been prudent to avoid questioning it further. But I was in Italy, my demon had reawakened, and whispered that I should decipher this imprecision from the other side, making its lacunae a plenitude--and an idea came to me. I told myself that in its smile (but it is not a smile), this face expressed an unknown sentiment. Not a sentiment which the defects in the image would prevent us from recognizing (the image has no defects), but a mode of being as significant as faith or hope, which yet escapes us, can only escape us, in truth transcends us, because the categories of our consciousness, or the categories of those societies we know from other epochs in the past, haven't the least relation, the briefest dark frontier with what it was. . . . The imagination, as one can see, was not precisely new (though I would not have dared, all the same, to make this sudden an identification, before, of a sign coming from beyond the earth), and I should have felt a certain weariness in forming it, and in yielding to it. Not at all; and it was even a joy, a sort of lighthearted hope I had never experienced before, that dawned in me, and I felt it would be profound and enduring.

But now I must make clear that the idea of the "unknown sentiment" had not come to me, this time, in

the same way that similar chineras had come before, that is directly, coming straight into my horizon of existence; a dream, as I could not have doubted, but also the desire to take the dream seriously, and to live it, in my most personal condition. No, the context, if I may call it that, was no longer my life, in its present moment. But an imaginative structure had appeared at the same time as the first idea, and had seemed as important, though slightly in the background, and of course still incomplete: in sum, a rough sketch, and even a plan, for a story. An unknown sentiment, when this Lorenzo d'Alessandro was painting, a variant of the spirit, forever impenthrable, which would, however, have affected the obscure region of San Severino, in the Marches (so close, what a coincidence, to Camerino), at least for a moment? Yes, but also a historian of Quattrocento painting, who one day. . . . No, it would not be this exact painting. I would describe, as it is certainly my right as a storyteller to do, a work which would be more difficult to attribute, if not even to localize, originating perhaps in Umbria as much as in the Marches, even in southern Tuscany, as can be seen from the echo, in its treatment of space, of the first great works of perspective. The retable had been forgotten for a long time. It would gather dust in an attic, or a sacristy. Then, rediscovered, offered for sale, it

had again disappeared, into an American collection, although a photograph was published first in Burlington Magazine. And the historian. . . .

It was as if three lamps (or four), arranged in a row along a subterranean gallery, were brusquely lit, were lit one from the other, and I found myself sitting on one of the benches, then in the courtyard of the Palazzo Ducale, taking notes on my knee. First idea, contemporaneous with the first glance: the historian saw the photograph in Burlington Magazine, and he was immediately convinced that it is a question, how could he doubt it, of an unknown sentiment. And in order to share his discovery and to solicit aid, other photographs for example, documents from archives, suggestions for a more precise attribution, he publishes an article in the same journal, which moreover ruins his reputation. For the article only elicits mockery, of course, and then indifference.

Except that one morning--and this is the second lamp, the gallery is already wider and the light more diurnal--he finds the answer in his mail. A linguist has written to him. Dear Sir, he writes, I happened by chance to read your article, and though it is disturbing, I also find it reassuring. For long years, I have studied the dialects of pre-Roman Italy. And little by little, through cross-references, comparisons with the

oldest Latin, with Greek, with the little we know of Etruscan, of Oscan, of Paelignian or Marsian; through the analysis of myths where at times there is something like a crack, a ledge--oh, certainly, almost imperceptible, as if the two borders of absence had been resewn; through a serious examination of the Iguvine Tablets and of fragmentary poems, even from a later date; through the identification of certain words, which I will share with you, strictly untranslatable, impossible to locate in our semantic structuralizations; I also have arrived at the conclusion that there existed, in an Umbrian dialect, precisely the one spoken, though well before the epoch in which your painter worked, in the region you mention, an unknown sentiment. We must meet, it is urgent. Together. . . . The historian does not wait to read the conclusion: enthusiastic, he leaves immediately. The linguist welcomes him in his beautiful and peaceful home, far from Paris, and begins to explain his hypotheses, his presumptions and structuralizations, he would almost say his proofs.

And I am now, although I am still scribbling, if more slowly, on the cover and in the margins of my notebook which has proven too small, in the light of the third lamp, as intense as it is soft, truly the dissipation of the vaults in the overabundance of the day. The linguist is seated behind his large table. There are four windows

in his library, divided into three by the sheaves formed by the shelves of books, and a marvellous warmth of late afternoon comes in through the windows,<sup>61</sup> no, an afternoon forever suspended in a garden filled with colored birds, with leaves. The linguist talks on and on, and the historian listens to his hypotheses, shares his presumptions and almost understands his proofs. He sees his intuition shared, and that is already a peace. Is it true that an unknown sentiment existed? Now that the words are there to confirm if not to understand it, will the doubt he felt (as he now admits to himself) come to an end? But why must it be at this very moment that the historian, if that indeed is what he is, allows his attention, on the contrary, to be nuanced with irony, and to return from the unknowable over there of the spirit to the network of thoughts--of words--which distance the elsewhere while they reveal it, and coagulate as they designate it, becoming this scaffolding of concepts, of images, of metaphors, whose light, while certainly strange, is less focused than diffuse, less from elsewhere than from everywhere, since the transcendence has permitted, in the end, and has intensified, distilled, a coherence, a discourse? It is a strange adherence he

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<sup>61</sup> Miklos Bokor (b. 1927), Composition, gouache on paper, 1962. Paris, private collection.



feels he must give, at once intimate and distant, confident and incredulous! It is as if he were looking at a painting prepared according to the laws of perspective, but as if he himself were not standing in front of it or at its level, at the point where its effects are knotted in the half-opened depth. And so, though he cannot yield entirely to the illusion, he hears the music of these ladders of numbers, and that appeases him, that is enough for him. For in compensation, the obsession he felt yesterday, spilt from the broken vase, rises again (he feels it, breathes it) from what he could not have suspected even this morning, the depth of the coming instant, the quality of the choices he must make, the marvel of existing in that moment. How will I express that, since in fact I only understand it very inadequately? Well, the great roads, which are amply drawn on the mountain's flank, seem when we are far off to seal this distance in the evidence of a sign which they trace beneath the clouds, a fixed sign, mysterious in the mobility of the sky and of things. But if we draw near, these roads flatten under the wheels, and become a straight line, disentangled from the sign which is destroyed, from the enigma--though the form continues to exist, but behind us, above, around, in the distance where the being of our passage is gathered, peak from which already streams the eternity of the instant, the freedom to love, here and

elsewhere united, transparent water of the world. And it is then a great joy.

The historian knows now that he is lost forever in the minds of those who read Burlington Magazine. But instead of feeling regret, distress, or a facile contempt for himself, he leaps to his feet, laughing, his hand held out. Thank you, he says, I will reflect on all this. Thank you, says the linguist, I will wait impatiently for you. Thank you, says the historian (but was he ever an historian?) for looking at this image. Ah yes, says the linguist. I had forgotten. An unknown sentiment? Perhaps you are right. But what has most impressed me, since I have been examining this image, is that it is, on the whole, ordinary. Why did you choose this one, rather than those around it, in the retable? Rather than the Virgin herself? Because it resembles you a little (yes, younger, of course)? In fact, I have often thought, since I read your article, that any face in a painting can pass for marking an unknown sentiment. Leonardo's Saint Anne, for example--what is meant by that smile? Oh, believe me, it is not so simple. We are surrounded, redoubled. . . . Thank you, the historian says. He is on the threshold now, looking at the light. He is filled with his new joy, which grows more intense with each instant. Does he wonder exactly what it is, what it wants? No, for it is beyond our words that it

has its garden.<sup>62</sup> It is as if he felt, will I dare write it, a sentiment destined to remain unknown.

I do not know whether I would have dared, for several hours later I had already given up the idea of writing this story. Yet all during the afternoon and into the evening, in the train which took me to Mantua, I strained my ingenuity to fill in the blanks left in the morning's sketch, since it was a text I wanted in the end; and the details came to me, it seemed that the experience would really continue. The title was obvious. Everything I needed to evoke the works of art flowed in abundance, and even in too great abundance, I felt that I could express, in the oblique writing of fiction, what I had never before dreamt I could say of my bizarre but intimate knowledge of Quattrocento painting. The discourse of the linguist (and this time due to my ignorance, for I thought that more was known of the ancient Italic dialects) did not frighten me either. I would simply have to study. I was surprised that I had not done so earlier, I thought with pleasure of exploring vast technical books on the derivations of questions of place or of such and such an irregular verb, and Ernout and

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<sup>62</sup>Titian, Adam and Eve (ca. 1570), in the Museo del Prado, Madrid. The detail shows Eve plucking the apple.

Meillet would certainly give me a few Etruscan roots. But everything became complicated where I could have expected the task to be easiest: when I started to construct the figure of the historian. How old was he, where did he live? Questions which should have been secondary, answers which should have been brief, only ensuring the pretext of a stage where the real protagonists, as it seemed to me, were the word and the image. But far from disposing of them in a few lines, I found myself groping among incongruous details and idle speculations. Hadn't the historian taken a night train towards the south, when he was a child? Did he or didn't he have a daughter? And wouldn't he go to Vierzon one winter night (this was only one of the themes, but it was insistent), in order to give a talk on the unknown sentiment? Then I heard a voice rising from this cold, this snow. The historian has finished his lecture, and a student approaches him, My name is nobody,<sup>63</sup> he tells him, and they will have to talk for a long time, walking away, losing themselves in a crowd. And so forth. I had pages and pages of it. And even if this matter was complex and increasingly contradictory, its origin rapidly became clear to me. The historian was myself; and all my past and all my potential, everything perceived and everything unknown

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<sup>63</sup>In English, in the original text.

were violently caught in this net. The story would have to be an entire book. To the dominant theme, left to intransitivity, to silence, I would have to link a thousand circuits of analysis, of memory, circuits I would have to follow patiently through my own depths. Didn't I have to justify, for example, the instant of intuition before the photograph, by evoking the memory of months in which imagination wandered through Italy; even by the evocation, who knows, of the Traveller? Solicited, I had to answer. Called to the simple, I had to bring the infinite offering of an existence. And the exaltation of the first hours changed, in yet another night train, to perplexity, to disquiet.

But suddenly, on an impulse, I tore up the second notebook and then I felt, as the train slowed, and stopped, if not the joy I'd felt at first, at least a clearer understanding, I would say an understanding again in the light of day, of my relationship, always difficult, to the principle of poetry. Or, to use an image which later came to mind, it was as if my eyes closed--to this sustained, significant, paralyzing text which I imagined myself writing--but opened in the same instant to a light beyond, a light still empty, but in which I felt there would be the outlines of trees, of birds, of real horizons, an entire world. No, I told myself, I am not going to write An Unknown Sentiment. And if I think of it once

more tomorrow, then tomorrow I will renounce it again. For to write it would be to betray the direction which has been given to me, and I know that, despite my demon, I cannot do it. The earth is, the word presence has a meaning. And the dream is, too, but not in order to ravage, to destroy the earth and its presence, as I believe in my hours of doubt or in my pride: always assuming that I dissipate the dream, having lived and not written it. For then, knowing itself to be dream, it becomes simple, and little by little the earth's advent. It is in my becoming, which I can keep open, and not in the closed text, that this vision, or this intimate thought must be inscribed, must flower and bear fruit if, as I believe, it has a meaning for me. This will be the crucible in which the back country, having dissipated, forms again,<sup>64</sup> in which the vacant here is crystallized. And in which a few words, to conclude, may glitter, words which though they are simple and transparent like the nothingness of language, will yet be everything, and real.

I had, in short, decided on the third epigraph, which three years later I set at the threshold of a new poem, on what dies, what is born, and the passage from

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<sup>64</sup> Mondrian, The Red Cloud (1907-1909), in the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague. Cf. "Second Earth," note 3.

one to the other.<sup>65</sup> --But only one more remark, now, to close this chapter whose object, or first metaphor, was Italian painting. Whatever has been the future, in me, of this day (a future which I very much need to examine, in its difficulties, its relapses), it at least marked an end, in that the obsession whose recommencement I had feared, between Greece and Venice, disappeared almost entirely from my thoughts. The next day, at Mantua, where the Mantegna exhibit had begun,<sup>66</sup> I heard this serious word as if it had been decoded, and other words--Piero, Bellini, Giorgione--answering it in the distance, their combined visions enlarging the place of exchange through which we who are born of the silence of the blood can accede to the real. And it is also that in this "holy controversy" which deepened and widened, a voice was growing louder which I had misheard if not actually muffled, although it was more conscious than any other of the question that obsesses me. Before, when I looked at the great Baroque churches, yes, I understood their intention, but I yielded to it in an ambiguous way. The

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<sup>65</sup> "Thou met'st with things dying, I with things newborn." Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, III, iii. Epigraph to Pierre écrite.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. "A Dream in Mantua," note 9, and note 59 to "The Back Country."

Baroque loves, transubstantiates, what is limited, what passes: what else did I want; and so I opened myself to this look, more direct and compassionate than that of any other art, for the one who draws near. But at the height of its will to transmute the void, the place is assumed, certainly not for the virtue it already has as a center, but as the ordinary earth, the earth of here; and this collided head on, at the epoch of the "traveller," with my postulation of another place. How could anyone want to root the absolute in Roman soil, since there is a source where pure being gathers? Why this cry of triumph, since here, where one has cried, the gold does not shine in the vase, as curved as the vase may be by the horizons of Poussin or of Claude? And so I reserved the knowledge I had acquired of wreathed columns, of broken pediments, of heavy statues against the sky, for the second and unbridled dream of a metropolis over there<sup>67</sup> (in the desert, or the high mountains, or on the stormy shores of some inland sea), and as I searched more concretely, in central Italy, for a minute back country, reduced to a fold in the land, a nuance in the light, a scaling fresco where a vault narrows, so I did not linger at Saint Agnes or Saint Peter's,

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<sup>67</sup> Degas, Small Italian Landscape Seen Through an Attic Window (around 1856-1857). Paris, private collection.



nor even at Rome, refusing their demand which I knew was unyielding, in favor of the undulation of painted drapery in Venetian scenography.

But as I said, the day came when, the obsession dissipating, Italian art appeared to me in its truth, which contained my "folly" as one of its moments, a moment which had, however, been confronted and at times surpassed. And soon the Baroque, the Roman Baroque, rose with the mystery in its hands, but this time in full daylight--mystery of the assumption of our place of existence. In truth, it is Rome as much as Greek space which prepared that morning in Venice. The one proposed to subordinate the human place and even the house of the gods to the curve, which alone is absolute, of the earth. As for Bernini's architecture, suddenly it told me that the being of the place, our everything, is forged from nothing, thanks to an act of faith, like a dream which one has lived so fully, and so simply, that it is as if incarnate. . . . Then I stopped at the Roman seventeenth century as if at the very theater of Presence. Borromini the gnostic, and my brother at many moments (when I questioned the other road, at the crossroads), reseals the dream, and loses himself in the labyrinth. Bernini, on the other hand, opens the dream, gives birth

to the life of this desire accepted.<sup>68</sup> And Poussin, who carries in himself all the postulations, all the conflicts, for the reconciliations, reunions, even miracles of a last act of the Universe, of the spirit, Poussin searches a long time for the key to a "knowing music,"<sup>69</sup> to a return through number to a source of the real; but he is also the one who gathers a handful of earth and says that that is Rome.<sup>70</sup> He walks along the Tiber, in the springtime, when the waters are rising, black in their depths, sparkling; and as there are women nearby, one of whom has bathed her child and now lifts him high in her arms, her eyes sparkling also--Poussin looks, understands, and decides, master of the golden bough if anyone was, to paint his great pictures of Moses saved.

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<sup>68</sup>In 1970, Bonnefoy published a meditative essay on Baroque art, entitled Rome 1630. Borromini (1599-1667) is the architect of the extravagant S. Agnese (1653-1655) on the Piazza Navona, which was mentioned in the preceding paragraph. And to complete the parallel, Bernini (cf. "Seven Fires," note 7) is connected to Saint Peter's through his baldacchino (1624-1633).

<sup>69</sup>Rimbaud, "Conte," from the Illuminations. "Our desire lacks the knowing music."

<sup>70</sup>This is a story told by G.P. Bellori in Le Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni (1672), p. 441.

INTERVIEWS WITH BERNARD FALCIOLA (1972)

I.

Yves Bonnefoy, what was your intention in writing The Back Country?

Certainly not, in the end, the intention I had to begin with. I had proposed, and a trace of this intent remains on the back of the published book,<sup>1</sup> in the short summary

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<sup>1</sup>Here is the summary in question:

The road one has not taken, at the crossroads, did not lead to another country. "Over there," one would have found the same horizons as here, the same threshold and the same men, at best some variations which would not have stood out, in the heart of a single reality. And yet there are spirits who will always be haunted by this illusory opportunity. They believe that they skirt a back country which, at a new crossroads--with the aid this time of chance, or thanks to a sign, suddenly understood--they may perhaps rejoin.

Why this aspiration, what does it conceal? And how is it related to our need for images, and what relation do "the images" have to the real project of art? I am trying to define the ontological refraction which keeps the unity from reaching us except through words that are externalized today: its light, deflected in their density so that its origin appears elsewhere than in existence, its substance other than the substance of our daily acts, its form troubled, irregular, shifting--though this dispersion is, all the same, our imaginary, this slipping on the peaks at least an incitement to desire.

of what the book contains--it is a sentence, a phrase which I did not suppress, for I do not despair of finishing the work, some day, along these lines--I had proposed, yes, to understand the need we have of images and the relation this need has, on the most general plane, to poetic creation. By "images," I meant and I still mean, not indeed the simple content of perception, nor even the representations, elusive, which form in our dreams: but what Baudelaire had in mind when he evoked "the cult of images, my great, my only, my earliest passion,"<sup>2</sup> and what Rimbaud also indicated, when he wrote in a poem, "After the Deluge," from the Illuminations: "In the great house where the glass is still streaming, the children in mourning looked at marvellous images." "Illuminations"--Rimbaud used this word, as you know, in its English meaning as well, a meaning he had placed in parentheses under the title: painted plates, illuminated pages. It is images of course that appear in our dreams, based on experiences already attempted in our daily life and on desires which simplify or intensify or transfigure these experiences. But images are also the frame, the page, the fixity of the trace, all that seems to make the elusive vision a fact despite everything, a fact

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<sup>2</sup>Mon Coeur mis à nu, XXXVIII.

originating in a place other than that of our life, and testifying perhaps to the existence of another world.

That this sort of image obsessed Baudelaire, Rimbaud and many others throughout the history of poetry, myself included, that is what I wanted to consider, and so to understand. And I would obviously have evoked and examined the religious background of this obsession.

Would you say that there is a relationship between religious aspirations and the attraction which images can have for us?

That is the question, and it would therefore have been necessary for me to determine what God is at the source of this cult, if it is a God. . . . In fact, I would have evoked the profound ambivalence of Western religions, or perhaps of all religions, I don't know, when confronted with the power of the image. Look at the evolution of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, until the eighteenth century when there is a great crisis of the imaginary, which moreover places the existence of God as much in doubt as the possibility of images, in the sense that I've used that word. The Apostles had left the Church their teaching of a personal and transcendent God, in his essence impossible to represent even though he was

incarnate. And in the catacombs, they scarcely dare suggest the Good Shepherd's invisible presence, with the aid of faint lines and simple colors, which seem more than anything else to express their own fragility, and in any case hardly draw anything but symbols. And yet it is not long before the need of images irresistibly seizes the Christian consciousness. Christ's face is represented with the terrestrial means of beauty, as is the long procession of virgin martyrs as well, and the palm trees of the heavenly Jerusalem. Even the joy of believing and the need to adore are diverted to images, until theologians are forced to be constantly warning the faithful against the attraction of painted figures, telling them that while such and such a Madonna in such and such a church, with her touching face or her air of majesty, can indeed evoke the idea of the Mother of God, and so incite one to prayer, yet she is nothing in herself. And during a long moment in Byzantium, where the cult of images was as intense as in Rome if not much more so, the emperors, acting as witnesses to the divine transcendence, even wanted to burn the icons. But the pontiffs in Rome have never wanted to go that far. They felt that too much could be lost in erasing the walls, in the internalization, if carried too far, of the experience of God. And there was even this extraordinary moment in Western history, this moment, which is too little known,

when a Pope, on the verge of disaster in his wars, and having no alliance open to him except with the iconoclastic emperor, chose to fight against him as well, in order to save the faith and the images together, in a sort of all or nothing. Are the images therefore on God's side, despite everything? So one might think, faced with the Greek icon, with its strangeness and the abstraction, which lends itself to meditation, in its writing of forms, but it is all the same more difficult to think in this way of those vast sensual representations from Italy, precisely, Italy which has always cherished the memory of Classical statuary, which has always foreshadowed Raphael and the great quasi-pagan illusionists of the Roman seventeenth century: and a question arises. Isn't the image, if it is the mystery of a sort of religion, if we must really understand it in that way, the word not of the Roman Catholic Church but of an insidious rival of the Christian God, a rival who can moreover be located in God's own world, where Lucifer was certainly the most beautiful of the angels, and the one whose enchantments, whose appearance, we must therefore be most careful to suspect. . . . There is matter here for reflection, as you can see, and what takes form, in this direction, are the relations which poetry has had--if it is true, then, that poetry has this "passion" for images--to the diverse forms of religious speculation.

Yet you did not write this book, after having planned it?

I thought I was writing it. I thought I was at least placing some markers as an introduction to this study which was, of course, too vast, too ambitious for this occasion, and perhaps also too difficult for me. I thought I had made a little progress along this conceptual route, I wrote a certain number of pages, and when Skira, last July, insisted on having the text I had promised long before, I thought I could assure Lauro Venturi, who was passing through the village where I was working, in Provence,<sup>3</sup> that the book was finished and that in three or four days it would be typed and mailed. But that is when the illusions were dispelled. There was something in the second sentence which was not exactly what was needed--or what I needed, let us say--and I tried to correct it, to efface this fold, which I succeeded in doing, moreover, but then it reappeared in the next sentence, as the new word I had just introduced shed its faint light all around; and so I had to make more corrections. In short, step by step, everything was disrupted, and soon shifted in its perspectives, its

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<sup>3</sup>Bonnieux, July 1971. (Author's note.)



goals; and instead of sending the manuscript as I had promised, I involved myself, or rather I enclosed myself for three whole months in a labor which for the most part had been unforeseeable even the day before: and it is from this work that the book emerged, with the first problem having more or less disappeared.

Could you tell us at least what you kept of the first project? Of what nature was the change?

I can certainly try to answer these questions, for they have meaning for me as well, so much so that I have been forced to think about them and will have to think more about them if I write a sequel to this book, as I have wanted to do ever since I interrupted it. In the main, it is not that one project has replaced another, based on a sudden decision; instead, there has been a brusque, soon a rapid drift through a writing already in progress, a drift, I would say, of the writing towards itself, towards more autonomy, more secret interiority; propelled by forces to which I had not wanted, for a long time, to give free rein, preferring --trying to prefer, until I reached this moment of truth--conceptual neutrality. From the start the book's beginning, the very beginning, had been more or less what it has remained. In order to gain a better understanding of this obsession

with images, designating as they do a world beyond, I had long wanted to depart from an obsession which I myself have experienced, and which I still endure at times: that of a back country, of an earth beyond the horizon, place of life which we could have rejoined--I underline this conditional--if we had taken the other road, at the crossroads. The back country, understood in this sense, and the image, in the sense I've given this word (and which is well illustrated, for example, by Poussin's great landscapes, with these beautiful monuments over there, against the sky), have this in common, that they each retain the most immediate, the most concrete aspects of the earth, and yet carry them to a second degree of ontological intensity. And once this similarity has been perceived, the image could be placed in relation to a profound hesitation which is in us, in experience as we live it, and concerning the way in which we live it: either here in the incarnation, in the choices that are linked one to the other in daily commitment, or over there, elsewhere, in the same world no doubt, but redrawn by dream, which undoes the constraints of finitude, of time. The image, as you can see, is the temptation of whoever disposes of words, of whoever therefore has the power to make words say what he desires; but it is his disquiet, too, faced with a liberty which he feels is too great--for who does not know in his heart that we can only understand the earth

truly if we feel it as life demands, in time, in the constraints which time imposes on us: in the place of here, accepted? In sum, I refused for myself the cult of images, in which I almost saw the hand of the fallen angel, luring the consciousness with melancholy; but I still acknowledged a virtue in images, for isn't this place where we must live, all of us together, and which we create, isn't this place a dream as well, though founded on bare matter? The values we elaborate in order to realize what seems to us the design of life itself, in its spiritual virtuality, are in no way necessary, biologically; they are an illusion which becomes real only if it is accepted by all, and when that is the case, the dream is realized--and at the end of the long detour of utopian images, there may perhaps be the meeting of an image which all can live, and a hypothesis which in its internal economy would be acceptable to all living beings in their most radical condition of beings who are born and must die. The image would have been the seed of the "authentic sojourn on earth" which Mallarmé evokes, but precisely because, like the seed itself, it would have had the wisdom to die to its first being, which is an unbridled invention, and the infinite. So you see that in the depths of the image, there is what can rescue the image from the demon, what can make it incarnate, divine. As for poetry, I tended, as I still do today, to propose

a dialectical conception, where in a first dreaming moment it would give itself to the image, but in order then to criticize it, in the name of incarnation, to simplify it, to universalize it, finally to identify it with the simple givens of existence, that are revealed as an infinity, once more, but from inside this time, from the resonance, which no nostalgia can trouble any longer--of their sufficiency. . . . Still, the drift began, as I later understood, each time I tried to clarify these notions. For in evoking the back country, I appealed to memories, to elusive impressions, I retraced some very personal experiences, and this other level of consciousness could only seek to dominate, and to impose its own logic. At a certain moment, I understood that I knew less than my unconscious did, concerning the very questions which I was raising, and that it was therefore necessary, at least for a time, to let my unconscious work.

Does that mean an automatism?

Not at all, and this point should, I believe, be underlined, and clarified. Because we allow these forces, which are incompletely known if not entirely unknown, to direct us, we need not therefore remain passive under

their thrusts, which are at times contradictory, nor must we remain silent before the signs they hold out, like Perceval at the castle of the Fisher King, who saw the procession of the Grail go past, and did not speak-- for if we ever resigned ourselves in this way, it is then that the castle would be empty the next morning and the country all around infertile. In fact, it is when we try to think conceptually, with logic rather than with symbol, that we are prey to automatisms, for then we are only conscious of one level in our words, and we allow ourselves to be manipulated by what takes place in the depths; everyone knows today that there is a second determination in philosophies which were themselves unaware of it, though they believed themselves to be most rigorous. But if we open ourselves, as poetry requires, to the polysemias, to the images, to the plurality of figures in the texts, then the more the phrase of the unconscious is autonomous and obscure, the more joy consciousness takes in remaining active, in having to choose, to create order in this apparent chaos, and, strangely, we will now have the power to do so; we will know quickly and with increasing accuracy what must be rejected, and what must be kept, what coherence is drawn, what meanings are discovered, what answers must be made, what decisions taken. Many, even countless significations will escape the author, of course, for the

meaning is like a section cut in the matter of the text: sections can be drawn along so many planes, based on so many axioms or hypotheses--those of psychologies, for example, or sociologies, or philosophies. But from a certain point of view that lies in us, that knows it must reject the words which are only screens, the sentences which say nothing, the subconscious digressions, for the truth that is at work is still further down--from this point of view, we remain in charge, to the edge of the unknown.

## II.

Yves Bonnefoy, last week you told us how you had passed, while writing The Back Country, from a project of conceptual analysis to another, freer project, determined in part by the memories, the desires, the obscure forces which one can only know by renouncing a certain continuity of notions. And as I listened to you, I wondered to what extent that work could be distinguished from poetry, strictly defined.

Well, it is certainly true that the work of writing that book was very similar to the invention, the composition of a poem. And in order to distinguish more clearly

between them, if we must, between the poem and the book of prose, perhaps we should first try to understand this relationship, don't you agree? So I will tell you how I conceive of poetic creation, and in order to do that, and as a beginning, I will tell you how I practice it myself. Which will lead me to give this first clarification, that in fact I do not write poems, if by this word we must understand a very well defined work, autonomous, and separable from others of the same genre which I would have completed beforehand, or conceived afterwards. This remark could surprise those who have read or perceived poems, precisely, in my books: that is to say, brief texts, isolated and even reinforced, often, in their particularity, and one could well say in their difference, by the presence of a title. And yet, I can assure them that the books I write form a whole in which each text is only a fragment: each exists for me, from the beginning, only in its relation to all the others, so that it can only be justified and even meaningful through what these others tend to be and to mean in themselves. What is produced then--and this may help you understand that the essential oppositions, in the poet's work, are not between one book or another, each begun or even completed at a distance from the others, but among diverse aspects of the most general process of

writing, aspects which each bear on the totality of what he has written or will write, in his entire oeuvre, except that at some moments, one aspect can nonetheless take precedence over others for a reason in our existence or in answer to some need of the time. At the beginning, for there is a beginning, is silence. I may have spoken before: either the language of everyday, which moreover has great poetic virtualities in its depths, or a more personal language which I had formed little by little, in the past of my oeuvre. Let me say in passing, and as the converse of what I just said about the shared language of everyday, that this second language, this language which is on the whole private, will never be more, in my eyes, than the revelation of the powers of the first, and even that only in part. If it is authentically poetic, it adds nothing to the first language; instead it simplifies the language of everyday, stripping it of those words or stereotypes which are too caught up in the inessential, too external to the experience which is most valuable--that of existence in its relation to finitude. With each instant, the common tongue is degraded, estranged from this experience, which nonetheless conditions its entire structure; it runs down, and begins to ring false, and it is the function of poetry to realign it, if I may say so, to restore a little of its resonance that has been muffled, a little



of its precision. --Let us suppose, then, that I had such a language at my command, a language which had even a little of the old vibrancy, which had reawakened even slightly to its powers. . . .

I will interrupt you, if you permit, for I am afraid that I do not understand what you mean by these powers of language.

Yes, it is somewhat of a vicious circle, as I must evoke these powers before I define them, and build on them, on the knowledge one has of them, when it is a question, in the end, of understanding them. I will try to be more precise, without waiting any longer. If I say: the bread, the wine, only these two words, you will immediately think, or so I believe, of a certain type of essential relations between beings, you will think of their solidarity, under the sign of life's fundamental needs and of its fundamental constraints; these are words for communion, words which remind us that language is not meant only to describe appearances, but also to turn us towards the other person, so that we may join him in founding a place, in deciding its meaning. So the important thing with these words--the bread, the wine--is not only that they signify something other than

flour or glass or a bottle, let us say, but that they signify in another way. And therefore to speak them, to use them under this sign, is to make a structural bond appear at the heart of language, a structure which is not the simple differentiation of signifiers, of notions, but the creation of being: I will call it symbolic for it gathers the beings at the heart of a unity, emanating from the place which has been formed and shining through all things. If we say the bread, the wine, then our language is re-opened to our fundamental needs as living beings, and will also vibrate with the fundamental forms of the world--since the world has been fashioned, after all, by the living being and not by the abstract consciousness--here our language is once more, at least potentially, the word. The powers of language are that language can rebuild an economy of the being-in-the-world, in opposition to the disembodied scrutiny of science; the powers of language are that in its fundamental words, there is a reminder that being is possible: that is, meaning, place, presence and not absence, where scientific speech will only see the object. And that is a great deal, isn't it, especially if we remember that these objects which science proposes have even invaded our psychic life, for example these Oedipal impulses which are isolated, and manipulated, and so made unintelligible if not fatal. But these powers

must still be reawakened, as I was telling you; and that means, in practice, that if I want the bread and the wine to come back in my voice with all their meaning, I must wait for them with other words which have been born of my life, and verified in it, and which will welcome and uphold them. If the symbols are to re-form, I must meditate on the events of my existence in which their teaching was revealed of its own will, midway between my singularity and the constraints of all life. And that--these words--are the vocables, the specific structuralizations, of this language which seems private, and which, as I said earlier, revives the common tongue.

. . .

And so you command this language, which you say is already a form of poetry. And yet you spoke of silence, you said that this language came before the beginning of your work as a poet.

It may well seem that there is a contradiction there. But even if we imagine that one had, at a given moment, words at one's command which were a little conscious of presence, habit still brings a dangerous facility, or again one's life may change, and so it follows that one loses contact, at one time or another, with the

experience that this language brought, which therefore is degraded, as so often happens with the ordinary word. To put it in another way, it is not enough for the good of the new creation that the language which took form in earlier poems was alive and conscious; this language must still connect with the writer's existence, in its present stage, with its problems, always new, and his constant weakness. Then, the reader can surely recreate this necessary relation of authentic intimacy with a given language, can recreate it indefinitely, if only these poems which he loves allude to universal situations: it will be enough that he can inscribe his own memories in these words of another, as is certainly always possible. When Rimbaud, for example, writes, "But how healthful is the wind!"<sup>4</sup> we each have our own experience of the wind, our dreams which it urged us, on the plateaux, in the storm, to rediscover, to recommence in this word which is so profoundly capable of being shared. And the poem that has "held" once, in the severe demand of a poetry that is formed, will have value, enduring value, for anyone who appreciates it and always returns to it; except that one will never read it in entirely the same way from one year to the next: the reader changes, too, and so what he reads changes, even what he may know by

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<sup>4</sup>"La Rivière de Cassis," Derniers vers, l. 12.

heart. The reader has the power or the freedom to inhabit a book forever. . . . But the author only rarely has this privilege. For he lived too concretely, the first time, in this place of affirmations and of images, and now he is painfully aware of what these phrases from another time have not seized or foreseen of what he was then or has since become; and so it follows that as soon as his understanding of the world changes, even a little, he feels the need to re-examine an entire network of symbolic relations, even if this network still touches him, in order to more completely inscribe his truth which now is perceived more clearly, or his deeper knowledge of being. This re-examination, this tabula rasa, even if momentary, is the "silence" of which I spoke just now with an apparent illogic. The book one wrote yesterday, from which one expected everything, while writing it, since it was the very field of the advent of presence, of the hope of being--is barely completed or, in any case, soon after, when one can no longer take anything from it for one's own need, its only value is as an incitement to begin again, and it is as if a silence had fallen, suddenly. . . . A silence, but in no way a complete penury. The memory of the poetry which had been experienced, once, in its specific vibration, allows one to fend off the useless clamor of the external word, by which I do not mean, as I have already said, the

daily concerns, social or political tasks, but rather ideologies, propagandas, stereotyped knowledge, intellectual worlds. As for the great symbols, precisely the ones which must be rethought, and relived, they are still present, though they are silent because one has silenced their first interpretation, but in return they are more dense, more charged with exalting virtualities. This is the truest moment of the poet's work; and in my eyes there is no true creation unless this silence of the beginning can be maintained, in a certain way, in the new writing, of which I will speak next.

For we have now come back, in sum, to the description you announced a little while ago, of the different moments of poetic writing-- these moments which you said were more distinct, in the poet, than his works are from each other. Yet you have just evoked the inevitable disparity of these works. . . .

You will see however that they tend towards unity, while on the other hand these moments we speak of are irreducible, the characters of a drama. . . . At the beginning, then, the silence, the newly felt need of a true word and in consequence of a language restructured at least

in part, beyond a first instant of "tabula rasa"; and nothing precise to say, of course, for there is no thorough knowledge or experience before the word which in the end will express them. The mathematician does not transcribe his theorem, as if it were already there, in his mind, prepared by other methods; he produces it with the help of the very signs which formulate it, which does not prevent this formulation from being true and even real: true and real because it is coherent.

Well, a destiny is coherent too, and the place of life, or they should be; and the speech which determines them must be invented as well, must be produced in a similar way; nothing is or can be meditated before this speech exists, nothing can even be thought outside the first sentences it sketches. But if nothing foreshadows--like an idea of what will be--this crystallization of a language, of a new consciousness, everything we are is still present, and breathing in our verbal virtuality which is largely unconscious and which a conceptualization, even if it is discerning (psychological, let us say) would cut off from itself, and quickly silence in this decisive moment of our relation to ourselves.

Well, it is then that words emerge. Words, fragments of sentences, metaphors--metonymies also, and by that I mean associations without visible cause, irrational, enigmatic, the one, for example, which recently imposed itself on me,

and which has persisted--the idea of a whistling, of a changing pitch in a monotonous sound, and of an image of foliage, of almost unfathomable masses of greenery-- and I let this other of my word, as obscure as it then seems to me, rise in me during days, months; even years, if that is necessary, may pass in this way, for I know that these propositions which come from my being know more than I do about my own will, or my relations with others, or our shared earth, and that I must not, I must certainly not intervene. That, all that, is the first work, and it builds what I may call a verbal space, a semantic field. Except that, must I say it, I am already--already, for the two epochs merge, the protagonists do not only follow each other across the stage, they are there together from the beginning, they have their relation, their play there, itself a part of my enigma--I am already wondering what these givens mean. Not rationally, with the means, let us say, of the psychoanalyst. . . .

Would you be inclined to say that these means, psychoanalytic notions, would lead you into error? Would be external, in sum, to this word of unity which you seem to want, as you say, to awaken?



These notions may be partly in error, and it is another of poetry's functions not to dismiss this eventuality, and to remind the psychologist or psychoanalyst of the forces and powers, and the finalities too, the desires, which they have failed to recognize, perhaps, in the models they offer of the subject's relation to the world. But more generally, and even when it is a question of serious instruments, of which psychoanalysis has so many, you will agree that in these moments there can be no question of interpreting, of taking a detached attitude, of reducing to schemas, of returning to generalities: no, we must let whatever it is exist, and grow, simply, whatever these words and these relations of words tend to signify or seek to establish with an organity, a plurality in their mutual accord of which our most useful notions will draw, at most, mere representations, each one blind to a heart and to a soul which are nonetheless there. To "understand," to wonder what these signals "mean": in other words, to discover significant relations between certain presences which must be preserved as such--attachments, let us say, to beings which were or still are or will be, memories or aspirations, realities which I have charged with meaning--and then to search, in their company which I can now understand more clearly (though it is not so much that the censorship has been lifted, as that they are more

confiding), what time, and life, are bringing to us in this very instant, as always, and what they are taking. A non-conceptual understanding, and that is why any hypotheses I may make concerning this meaning which is still dark, are not thoughts which would make me a philosopher, removing me from poetry, but fragments of a complete word, which will still be polysemous; living words into which the first logophanies, already of this sort, are incorporated without becoming any weaker: changed perhaps, their strong beats stressed, for example, but still (or so, at least, I would like) with their weight of immediacy, their demand. Then, well, these words which came first remain enigmatic often, but it is also as if they illuminated, despite everything, and with a strange and rather oblique light, a small space around them, between them, where other relations unsuspected before now, can now be faintly seen. In short, it is a world that is defined, step by step, since a language, and in consequence an order, are formed again. This world is the one in which I live at this moment in my life, it is my present experience of the universe. And then, the third epoch begins.

The epoch in which you describe this world?

No, that of its acceptance. For what is poetry made of, if not of unity--true unity which one has been able to rejoin--that is, of assent? This time I must certainly give a further explanation, and I have less right than ever to be obscure, for we are discussing what is most important. What exactly is this world that we receive--when we write in the way I have just indicated--from what there is in us that questions the being outside? The meeting of elemental presences which we hold as real--the fruit, the trees, a few beings, a few ways to exist--and of mirages like those formed in any psyche by our instinctive aspirations, our prejudices, our refusals: a dream, in sum, where these fruit, these trees, but these mountains too, and a certain kind of stone, and the hoopoe who flies over the rocks like a fairy in disguise, and those near us and all our values, our beliefs, are rearranged in a figure which might reflect above all my refusal of finitude, my fear before destiny, if there were not a truly poetic elaboration--which I will now describe. I would only have reached, in other words, what we may call an image, a world image in which true concerns, authentic commitments which however are always partial, merely dissimulate a will to escape which bends the forms and the perspectives to its own ends. And it is precisely for this reason that I said a moment ago that the words which we command at first tend to

constitute a language, for a language is not only the reservoir of great powers; it is also, unfortunately, the preserve of many notions which content themselves one with another, which do not require that there be any reality in their net, and if no reality then no finitude, joy or sorrow, or to be precise, no authentic joy or sorrow, experienced in time that is truly lived; for a verbal structure is perfectly well able to integrate certain reflections, if not even certain forms of joy and suffering, into its fictional universe and bend them to its illusory ends. And so the world which appears in the crucible of the "first" writing--allow me to say "first" in the hope that I may do better--can be suspected of being a dream. . . .

But why not? If it is coherent, as you said, and beautiful?

It is a question of knowing whether there are not degrees, or better hypostases, in coherence and beauty. Or to explain my thought in another way, whether the dream is not an impoverished reading of being, with useless complications, and mannerisms which a more interior understanding of "what is"--what is, that is finitude--would allow us to efface from the image, thus revealing

the true beauty in this more intense simplicity, or if you prefer the most interior economy, still unrevealed, of the earth, of existence. . . . You may ask me the reason for this opposition, and with what right I oppose this idea of a beauty of appearance to another, closer to the world's being, more objective? Am I not contradicting what I said earlier, of a world which is only our creation, in any case, produced through the intermediary of a language? But, though we determine the figure of things, we are also determined by life, this structure, almost this sentence: the life of which animal existence is no more than a frozen form, and human existence only an aspect, or moment. And that means that a greater coherence is drawn and develops, around us and in us, in relation to which we must therefore place ourselves, either inside or in the margins, depending on whether we remain faithful to its truth or leave it behind. Then the dream, exactly, the obstinate dream of a whole which we create with all our desires at work, if it is life itself in that we make it in this way, is also separated from life, because it forgets that there is finitude, and that is our fault, as speaking beings; because it does not want to know that we must choose, and accept our limits from the first, welcome the idea of destiny, which implies the idea of death, and not oppose it, or at least not always, with the intoxicating

fumes of writing. And that is to lose the meaning of the deepest coherence, which is therefore the most capable of being shared. Shouldn't we, tell me, try to cut as if across the fields, across these suggestions brought by dream? Shouldn't we make this presence of time appear, in order to accept it as such, presence which is hidden there as, in Poussin's great paintings,<sup>5</sup> the serpent lies hidden in the grass, near the source? As you can see, we find that danger again, and in a very concrete way, which I discussed the other day in relation to painted images; and I would have said nothing about it then, no doubt I would never even have thought of studying the ambiguities of plastic art, if I had not had to be preoccupied with it for a long time, and on my own account, in the writing of poetry.

And so we also find a concern which we may call moral, at least as much as it is aesthetic?

Yes and no; or rather let us say that it is above all a question of words, words which have not been defined

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<sup>5</sup>There are two--Landscape with a Man Pursued by a Snake (n.d.) and Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake (1648). It is this last, in the National Gallery, London, which Bonnefoy will describe in more detail in the third interview.

precisely enough or whose meaning we have lost--for the Middle Ages used them, all the same, in a more dialectical, a more conscious way than we do. We will return to this point, if you like.

### III.

Yves Bonnefoy, the other day we were speaking of the way in which a poem may be written. And you had left off with the idea, the description, of a sort of critique of the givens of the first dream, a critique founded on the awareness of finitude, of destiny, and which one may therefore interpret, at least the question arose, as one of the forms of moral experience.

We had spoken that word, and I had immediately told you that we might have to critique, to redefine its use as well, or at any rate its use in modern times. For if it is true that we may call an attitude "moral" which tends to reject the dream, even though the liberty of words lends itself so naturally to dream, and for such great celebrations, it is also true that we may call it aesthetic, since one strives for a harmony, that is a beauty, through this moral preoccupation. Remember, it

is when Rimbaud wrote, "I who had called myself wise man or angel, excused from all morality, I am returned to the earth with a duty to seek, and the rugged reality to embrace";<sup>6</sup> it is when he said that having created all the celebrations, all the triumphs, all the dramas as well, he must bury his imagination, abdicate his glory as an artist; it is when he seems in this way to renounce all pursuit of beauty that he adds, a few lines further and in the last lines of the work: "Meanwhile it is the last night. Let us receive all the influxes of vigor and real tenderness. And at dawn, armed with an ardent patience, we will enter the splendid cities." He has discovered a beauty in existing which will be more valuable in his eyes, from now on, than the beauty of the imaginary; and if to write is to dedicate oneself to the imaginary, well, he says, may one renounce the writing, and the splendor will only be the more accessible. These are sentences which have been enormously important for my reflection, for my life. I believe they do justice to an opposition which some think, very naively, to find today between commitment in the time-- which is supposed to be narrow--of existence as it is lived, and the search for, the advent of a beauty, a form. But precisely because we understand what Rimbaud

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. "The Back Country," note 51.



is saying, in these sentences charged with all his experience, must we also conclude, as one would indeed say he does, that the practice of words is condemned in its entirety to the merely external beauty; shouldn't we rather give new currency to this beautiful word, "poetry," already rich with so many exaltations and hopes, by beginning a quest, among contradictions, certainly, and with no illusions of easy success--quest of a word which in its "ardent patience" would little by little internalize the "rugged reality," that is time, and finitude? It is under such a sign as this, in any case, that the "third epoch"--illusion or commencement, I will not decide--begins for me, as I was saying the other day.

An epoch, therefore, in which you critique your own dream. But how can one thwart this need to dream, which is so natural to writing?

That is certainly the entire problem! Let us say that we must keep our eyes fixed, as much as possible--and it is difficult, this sun is blinding--on what Hegel proposed that the spirit meditate: death, or to put it in a better way, life, birth, which makes us both the absolute of an instant and a chance which no divine plan will

explain or transfigure. If we seize this elusive evidence, even awkwardly or superficially, then the elements of that world-image which, in their form as a whole, have censored it, will begin to be differentiated, dissociated, some elements revealed as compatible with the truth that we glimpse, while others are shown to be mirages, now dispelled. The dream of a golden age has collided with the fatalities of the iron age, our eternal condition. And a sacrifice takes place--the "return to the earth" of which Rimbaud speaks--except that by sacrifice I do not at all mean privation, heightened suffering, even a momentary abasement: for it is above all the dream from before that was negative, and a lack, since it did not bring anything, or construct anything except on the foundation of a fear, and it even increased that fear by its incomprehension of what life can have of simplicity and glory. There is a portion of nightmare even in the most beautiful dream, precisely because it is beautiful, because it forgets: as in the Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake, by Poussin, which I mentioned the other day, where we can certainly cherish these vast horizons that bring peace, and these magnificent constructions, over there, beneath the peaceful clouds of the summer which has no end, but where we cannot ignore the drama that is played, at the very center: this

attack on man by the monster who embodies all the anxiety which has accumulated in so much beauty. Yes, we must acknowledge the omnipresence of the void, the obsession with death that is lived as if it were the void, as if it were nothing, without compensation, without plenitude, in the apparent plenitude of these images which are too beautiful. But if we make this sacrifice they don't dare make, giving up the dubious goods which the imaginary proposes; then the anxiety which I signal will tend to dissipate while the simple things will reveal, and augment, their savor. What is the great instrument of poetry? Not even stoicism, which is only the suppression, and not the dispersal, of the mirages, but, simply, confidence, a maximum of confidence. And to begin with, confidence in the other person, for we cannot rejoin finitude, we cannot be imbued with the relativity of our own being, the illusory nature of our "self," unless we are open to the difficult reality of the other's difference, his point of view which denies our own: which means, moreover, that we must speak to him--I insist on this word--even in our own writing, speak to him if only in silence, before ourselves, in this instant when our writing is at the crossroads. The true beginning of poetry is when a language, fixed and dogmatic, allowing its own structures to act, no longer determines the writing; but when a force in us is affirmed through these structures,

which are relativized, and literally demystified: a force which is older than any language, which is our origin, and which I like to call the word.

Language, the word and this idea of the other person who is necessary to poetic creation, these notions are indeed always present in your writing on poetry. And yet, at some moments you have seemed to set the literary work in opposition to the meeting of another person, and to say that literature makes this meeting impossible because it remains, despite one's efforts, a language, a personal universe which is thus closed on itself. Wouldn't this be the moment to raise this point?

Yes, and I can certainly offer a few clarifications. I emphasized the other day that what took form, when I first listened, as if passively, to desire's propositions, was an order, a world, a language restructuring the givens of my existence, as if in a dream. And there is indeed something of the other's existence, in this order, these words, as he is a part of my horizon and the object of my interest, so that I can claim to have caught,

in a sense, and retained the other's reality: I can even tell myself that I am able to reveal, in my own language, aspects of his reality which he could not express in his own. But if I catch certain moments or forms of another's existence, it is only by rewriting this existence, with notions, and in an economy, which will remain foreign to him, and in order, profoundly, to nourish an idea of the world which comes from what I am: I will merely have used the appearance of this existence, I will have made it into a word of my language, a symbol in my theater, I will not at all have preserved it in what assures its being and constitutes its presence, and which is its liberty to remain other than what my desire wants. The other is abolished, Mallarmé would have said, at the very moment when a work seemed to reveal, and to love him. That being the case, I have often feared that this dialectic of the sign, which Mallarmé accepted, and even wanted as radical as possible, as it completed, in his eyes, the transmutation in Idea of our relation to ourselves--I have feared, in effect, that this dialectic might inevitably triumph in the work of poetry, and even if this work is committed in the way I have described: these were the pessimistic moments of my uncertain reflection, which I can rediscover for example in my second book, Hier régnant désert. But I have also judged, in my first book and now more

and more, that it may not be impossible to find a way out. In a few studies which I have made recently and which I am continuing now--this is moreover the subject of my talks during these few months' visit to the University of Geneva--I have tried to isolate, in the work of Shakespeare or of other poets, the "remorse" they have felt concerning this abolition which seems inevitable; and then, and this is clearly the essential as soon as they reach it, a certain act of spirit which makes this remorse the leaven which will "rise" and break all closure. How does this happen? Well, when the writer has understood, not abstractly but in depth, by means of a few unforgettable experiences, that the coherence of his writing is denounced, overflowed, by a reality and a truth which he barely knew but can no longer deny, it is as if the other, whom he had excluded from his book, suddenly began to speak: since it is the knowledge which he now has of his act, in what is lived, that has relativized his first speech. He will certainly not describe, directly, this reality which belongs to the other, as he describes objects which his thought continues to offer itself in more characteristic fashion, and which he "abolishes" as before; but the other's reality will act on his words, even if obliquely, invisibly--one can judge that it is present. But if this is the case, must we not see that there are two forces

at work here, each one authentic, and can we not hope that, as a result, there will be a little more of the universal in our books? To write poetically is, in my opinion, to speak the other's language, however little. And not to stop there, not to prefer the other's language in its equally contestable singularity--as does, wrongly, the literature called "social" but to combat it if necessary, to have an honest discussion with it, in order to surpass the conflict of these two private languages, and to emerge at last into a little collective meaning.-- And this meaning is that much less inaccessible, moreover, because the other dreams as we do, so that even if the goal is to awaken, is the almost unknown beyond of existence in image, we will still remain a very long time, he and I, with these figures of dream, which can recognize each other, born as they are of the same alienations, and superimpose themselves on each other, revealing a simpler schema. The fundamental goal of poetry, its practical goal let us say, its more modest goal which would be on a scale with the times, may not be the direct blow against the life in image, or the overwhelming emergence into waking, under the sign of absolute presence, but rather the reconciliation, in the course of this search, of beings who are each on the road, though each in their own fashion: and that

is because this greater comprehension of each by the other, and this simplification which makes them less despairingly dissimilar, is the preparation for a shared dream, a dream which would no longer be solitude, a dream in which this atmosphere of radical isolation would be dissipated, from the inside, by the increased density of these mutual relations, this atmosphere of absolute exteriority which makes death, especially in modern times, so difficult to conceive in its creative value. Isn't the weight of finitude immediately easier to bear, when there are words that reunite, as is still the case in a few great poems which we have: or, more precisely, isn't this weight lighter in its own mass? A few folk songs, old, of course, give this same impression of reciprocal transparence which absorbs the void as well: this impression that they are Grace itself. No, in a few ultimate forms, writing is not opposed to incarnation. The only problem, and it is a problem of existence, not of work in words, remains to "disconnect" from one's self, to abandon the goods one has accumulated in the imaginary to the ambition of the poet's obscure double--and how close, it's true--whom I might call the artist.



But how do you yourself practice, concretely, this reduction of the imaginary? So far you have only evoked principles.

That is because I do not practice it, I only try. And all I can claim to have perceived is this necessity for a simplification, by which the imaginary, "reduced," would in the end become music. In other words, when I "critique" my dream, and try to reduce it, to rediscover the beautiful simple desires whose grace would allow men and women to live more fully, taught by these desires to be more conscious of the infinite of finitude, in fact I am still dreaming, rebelling against the need to understand my illusions, to confront my idleness. And if I am changing a little, all the same, at this stage in my work, if I am moving from despair to what I think is assent, a day comes, unavoidably, and which leads moreover to new poems, a day comes when I must acknowledge that where I thought to rejoin this open world, or at least an outcrop of the place of presence, in reality I only touched it with dangerous words, in which many distortions and chimeras have remained active, in hidden connotations. I have only made a rough beginning. And in that the book is nothing but a failure. Except that it is valuable, in my eyes, valuable as a failure, because I have at least understood, at a moment

defined by its view of the world, that this was all I was able to reach: and this understanding arms me to search further, and can even have value for others. . . . There are protagonists, I said to you when we were discussing the different epochs of writing. Well, the original silence, when we have refused the enchantments of a language, when we want to save the word from the entrapments of its own language--that is the poet who speaks in us: he goes ahead, we will not be able to catch up with him, but he demands, he leads. And then, writing, we are in danger of becoming the artist. And in the end we are only the one who has chosen that deliverance, and was not capable of it, but who has lived the distance between self and self: the witness.

Witness as Beckett is, for example, to the falsehood, the inadequacy of words? Not exactly, if I understand you.

I must really answer: no, not at all. Although I think I understand, but perhaps I am mistaken, the experience which is at the origin of many of these black works of our literature, which seem to have chosen aphasia. These are writers who begin by perceiving this gap between writing and presence which I have evoked then

denied; who feel that by abandoning our words to their own will we have only attained a language, which is sealed once again. And they generalize this observation, discovering that each individual in the world, even if he does not write, still uses his words to give himself preference, to mask himself--and from this discovery, which is true, I do not doubt it either, and is truer today than ever before, since there is no longer any sacred to guarantee our vows, to unify the images--they have concluded that the word, the true word, is impossible, or is becoming impossible: and they then thought that they had to bear witness to this and to do so, precisely, through this literature which is closed, which--this literature, too--monologues, mirror image of all the rest. Behind the simulated word of so many beings, or the word of a few others, which gives the illusion of sincerity, they have seen the words, or to put it in another way, the words which in this silence only express the needs which are still dark, the unattainable dreams, the impulses which are finally brutal, the words which in this way come near, terribly near, matter, like matter abounding for nothing, in an autonomy which seems inevitable, an intricacy without hope: and fascinated, afraid, these writers have decided to let them be, in the very text where we once thought we directed them, and they do this in order to give an

idea of the catastrophe. And these texts which have no conceivable future are like the corpse of the word, from which the odor and the leaden color will rise of hope's decomposition. A few great works have resulted, which unlike so many others that are only a diversion or a facile humanism, have a dignity and rigor which can pass for proofs of the validity of their intuition. But let us be wary of what seems to be their error, their dangerous deviation. These writers tell us that communication is impossible from now on, as is the establishment of meaning; but they offer their testimony without any longer attempting, as I have just said, the dialectic of the word, which they feel is illusory from the start: and to give up in this way, without trying the path once more, may be to lose sight of the very nature of what is called impossible and, who knows? to miss the way out which may have opened in some unforeseen place. . . . A hopelessness which does not hope, if I dare say it, is nothing but a generalized atony, where, if illusions are indeed dispelled, it is also true that lucidity is darkened. If despair threatens, but remains violent, desiring, shaking the words like a closed door, then in a child's mouth, or in the gravity of a vow of love, a few of our fundamental words, which are simple, will point to the meaning they can give to the world. It seems to me that to experience the impossible, we

must always return, like Sisyphus to his rock, to this movement of hope which I name poetry. And then if the night deepens despite everything, that will be the true testimony, which at these frontiers will take the form, however, the more natural form of silence, the abandonment of all writing. The writing of the void is still art, and its ends are still those of the dream: it displays the nothingness in order to escape it more completely, escape it into form. Rimbaud is more eloquent, when he renounced poetry so totally that he no longer knows that he practiced it, perhaps: when he is about to leave for Harar.

Precisely: doesn't Rimbaud's final decision impress you? Doesn't it deny any renewal of hope? Can one reconcile the fear of the impossible, the impossible word, with the search for meaning, without lying to oneself?

That is the great question, which will decide the future of poetry, proving me right or wrong. There is another literature I must mention, at this point, which is even more disturbing for this future than the literature I evoked a moment ago; and it is all the more important that I speak of it, for it is established in the very

place where my idea of poetry has its origin as well, except that in my case it is in order to leave this place and to contradict it. A literature, I am reluctant to use this word for these works, and only do so with the greatest respect. Yet they arise, in a sense, from diversion, and even in the most immediate, the most humble fashion: which gives them meaning within this same space of literature which our time has substituted for the sacred. So what is involved? Well, some minds have attempted, precisely, to give meaning to the world, to life, and have worked hard at it, as we can easily see, in their own existence, they have loved, in other words, they could have celebrated: but then they hit, very concretely, against evidence that could not be denied, let us say an unjust death, physical poverty, and thus they have encountered this evil more directly or more rapidly than others, which seems to well up from the most secret place of the very life I have been praising. For these minds, now, the assent, the music-- "knowing" or not<sup>7</sup>--are impracticable. And yet they do not try to stage this impossibility, and doubtless they would only see in this speech a comfort like others, and one can even find undisguised traces, in their writings, of places they have lived, affections which were profound,

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. "The Back Country," note 69.

definitive, movements which began in joy and which remain temptations, enigmas. But as these moments of hope, of confidence, have not "taken," in the end, have not formed the cement of meaning among the world's stones, it is sorrow, and sometimes bitterness, which give these pages, despite everything, their true aspect, always discontinuous, always broken: their words always covered by relapses of silence, and even their brief laughter, their games which are only to forget.--And when we hear this voice, can we seriously claim that our moments of joy, of assent to life, can oppose it; don't we feel that these moments forget the deepest fracture: and so much the more because it is not only from outside that this denunciation, which does not even offer proofs, comes to trouble us in our calm, no, it is from within us, where we hear it echo dully, or start again, at each instant. And then what conviction can we have, at last? Or even, what good does it to seek a conviction, in these endless knots of contradictions, of obsession? But we are not always our own master. Whether we know it or not, whether we will it or not, we are always involved in what is by nature contradictory, and must indeed be called, with a word that is suspect today, our religious dimension.

Would you be willing to speak more precisely on this point?

Certainly, and as clearly as I can. That will be for next time.

#### IV.

Yves Bonnefoy, you concluded, the other day, that divergences in poetry could be reduced in the end to the opposition of religious attitudes: and you suggested that we return to this point.

It was not a conclusion, simply a new way to say that I have been trying to express since the start of our discussions, which departed, as you remember, from the problem of images. I had proposed at that time that our need for the images which were for so long, and which still remain the most profound content of artistic creation, did not signify the desire to represent our world, but rather a desire to build another, delivered from the flaws of this one: and thus our endless search for a transcendence is revealed, but it is a transcendence of a peculiar sort, whose god is Form, and whose epiphany is writing. And when I criticized



the artist who submits to the image--to the dream, in other words, which accepts itself as dream--when I reminded him of the last Rimbaud and of his "rugged reality," saying that this was truth, and beauty, I only adopted, in defiance of one sort of religion, the values and views of another; and so exposed myself as well to an objection which is itself specifically religious, born as it is of the evidence of evil, which is everywhere at work in the substance of the world. . . . We cannot doubt that the rejection of reality as it is--this denial, this dream of an escape, which I call gnosticism--is the determining cause of many works, even among those which seem most intensely concerned with the most seductive aspects of life. For this feeling of horror, of disgust, destroys all confidence and discourages any enterprise before it is even begun, reducing us, in order to pass the time, to constructing substitute languages which we will oppose to this world: but in turning to the benefit of these languages what most pleased us in this world's forms. For my part, if I were to yield one day to the temptation I also feel to see life as a scandal, I would not fall silent, and only maintain a few words, reduced almost to ash, in my hearth in order to illuminate the vanity of being; I would be one of those artists who

elaborates a variant of the Universe, and like Mozart or Borromini,<sup>8</sup> I would want it to be that much more patterned, three-dimensional and complex in potential, because the work it would require could then be infinite: as it would be the only occupation one would still feel possible. The imaginary has its justification--or seeks it--in the existence of evil, and art, as imaginary, is therefore a religious proposition. This being the case, when I returned the other day to these reflections concerning writers I respect, those who believe that meaning is illusory but who would have wished, passionately, that it were otherwise, I was going to add another remark, or rather raise another question, which bears on the very being of this evil which so often prevents us all from having any happiness in the earth. This much is sure: all that we can reproach life with is its finitude. Even Job's lamentation, even Ivan's indignation, in The Brothers Karamazov, and of course Michelangelo's aspirations to a higher beauty, Baudelaire's anxiety, all of that would be resolved, repossessed, if we had an infinite power to begin over, in order to rectify the injustice, break the stubborn form, postpone death till these searches were completed. And if we feel in this way that finitude is a limitation

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. "The Back Country," note 68.

and a lack, when the flower makes finitude its beauty, the lark its cry of joy in space--isn't it precisely because we draw from the infinite which words allow, while writing? Language allow us to isolate the purely tangible quality in the object, to detach it from its background of existence, writing allows us to refine its charm; our sentences fend off, for awhile, the claw of time and space which grips us through things; and that is certainly a wealth, a power, the very field, open from the first, of artistic creation: but from the perspective of our deepest consciousness, which determines meaning, it is still the foremost cause of vertigo, when the abyss suddenly gapes at our feet. And so I wonder, this is the question I mentioned to you, if language is not itself the only cause of this evil, of this impression of nothingness which it rejects. And if it is not enough, then, if we want to persist in our instinctive confidence despite the most terrible evidence, for us to remain in spirit as close as we can to its double postulation--language and word, dream and alliance--as if that were the knot which a future hero will one day have the power to cut. A hero? Simply the one who will designate, at the level of the simplest things, and by means of finitude confronted, traversed, and understood--who will designate the relations among words which would dissipate this evil infinite, re-establish

the true absolute. It belongs to poets, reinstating the sacred, to show the true form, which dispels the fear by which the imaginary exists, and aggravates the fear.

Do you expect that to happen?

Here is what I feel, in any case, and you may call it a profession of faith, if that word seems best to you, I will accept it willingly. . . . You remember the famous sentence of Pascal's: "We have an inability to prove, invincible to all dogmatism. We have an idea of the truth, invincible to all Pyrrhonism."<sup>9</sup> Well, in a rather similar way, there is someone in me, artist as I am and therefore a friend to form, a builder of back countries always rebegun, someone who sees what is as a scandal, and feels his own beliefs--yes, what I have been saying to you since our first meeting, and what I will add in a minute--are simply and naively a humanist illusion, without future. But at the same moment, and with the same voice, concerning the same objects, in view of the

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<sup>9</sup>Pensée #406 in Louis Lafuma's edition of 1952, Pensées sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets, published in three volumes by Editions du Luxembourg, Paris.

same earth, I feel as strongly and soon even more so, that to see no more than a vast lure in our affection for life, our intuition of its value, its meaning, is to lure myself even more; and I have confidence, all at once, I feel that there is a way, through the snares of words, which will show in the end that evil is not, or will only have existed a moment, for us--we who have spoken in the wrong way--before the reunions in which the trials will end, and the enigmas will dissipate. There is an answer for the gnostic in me--I understand this word as it was used during the first centuries of Christianity in Alexandria, in the time of Basilides or Marcion,<sup>10</sup> who saw a usurper in the god of the Incarnation, and felt imprisoned in his universe, appealing to a distant god, source of light, but impotent to deliver us--there is a triumphant answer in the intuition of a meaning, of a presence to come. And yet I am not Christian, even if I find many Christian notions valuable, as you must have understood, and to begin with I do not

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<sup>10</sup> Basilides was a second-century Gnostic in Alexandria, whose twenty-four books of commentary on the Gospel are entitled the Exegetica. Marcion, who was active around 144, founded the first great Christian sect to rival Catholicism. He believed there were two Gods, the Old Testament God of our imperfect creation and the "Stranger God," Jesus, drawn from a reduced and re-written New Testament.

have faith. But, how can I explain it, it seems to me that the Nietzschean "God is dead" is a naive phrase, which only concerns the slough which the spirit of doubt leaves behind, in a moment of vacancy between the sacred of the past and an experience of the more interior presence still to come; and that the truth is that "God," quite simply, and collectively, is still to be born, and will be born, little by little or brusquely, which is why the myth of the Nativity, for example, the myth of the divine child, of the child who is both ordinary and mysterious, has been able to shake so many eras, and even take precedence, often, over the theology of the Cross. God is to be born, and I have, at moments, not a faith of course, but a faith in a possible faith. . . . Another thing which separates me from Christianity is evidently the dolorist conception it has of charity. If it is true that evil is only the provisional consequence of the timidity of language, then charity must be, as Rimbaud says,<sup>11</sup> the key to the ancient feast, a celebration, to which all the sensory virtualities would be invited--without giving us any cause for fear. Annunciation of Grace, but still in the grip of the Law which has nonetheless been rejected--the Law which is language,

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<sup>11</sup>In "Jadis, si je me souviens bien. . . ," A Season in Hell, par. 8-9.

not the word--Christian charity, which too often can only soothe the misery, is merely the negative of that reciprocal adhesion, that great exchange which will come: which will still be tragic, but in the light, as is a flood, as is the fire.

Do you seriously think that the world is moving in this direction?

It's true, the book of life, the admirable earth, is more stained each day, and shaken, in danger of destruction. It may be that this economy, life, which had grown with the invention of the word and as a consequence of this new potential, which had in effect been delivered from its fixity, will be devastated in its material foundations, by the corrosive action of the stereotypes, the dogmatizations, the senseless choices of the language which predominates today--and how powerfully, even in its dream!--the language of technologies which nothing and no one controls. In this case there would be no advent of presence. But doesn't the simple fact that there could be such an advent make it necessary for poetry, which is born of this hope, to continue on its way, even if we can expect nothing very beneficial from the near future? And besides, what powers do we have,

what powers of the spirit, which would allow us to foretell the future, for good or ill, of human history? Did anything announce the beginnings of language, that suddenness, that fire which kindled between beings who were promoted to liberty--and the energy, too, which maintained for so long the wisdom of primitive societies? Similarly, in our epoch which is no longer primitive, in which language takes itself as its own end, in our second epoch which is that of the law, we may perhaps be on the eve, though we cannot feel it, of the absolute revolution. . . . The "third" stage of writing, if it is ravaged by doubt, as I said the other day, has its drive, despite everything, its heart in the work, thanks to a few thoughts of this sort. Let us not stop searching, in the grisaille of the dream, for a way towards the dawn, which is the earth. Negative theology already detaches this fact from our encumbrances, this absolute, mysterious, founding fact that there is light; now let us join to it the positive theology which would sketch a place to live. Poetry is also the theology of the earth, the thought which makes the tree an intercessor, and the source a symbolic revelation.

You have in any case defined what you mean by poetry, based on a description of these three epochs of writing. But in order to



lay the foundations and elaborate the notions of poetry, you began with a work of prose, The Back Country, and you implied that there were differences between the two genres despite the analogy which you had perceived. Shouldn't we return to this point?

Yes, I would like to, especially as I can then continue the definition of poetry, of which one dimension has been neglected, in my view. What I have tried to say, in sum, is that we have only these alternatives when we write, art and poetry, dream and the critique of dream--duality at whose heart I have thus chosen, or tried to choose. And therefore nothing I have said so far leads even to a partial definition of what we call prose, and some poems, as you know, have all the features of even the most ordinary prose, despite the efforts of linguists who would define poetic creation by a divergence in the use of the word. This being the case, there have nonetheless been two levels in the poetic enterprise throughout its diverse epochs, at least in the west, and it is important for us to distinguish between them, precisely because they may be so closely associated. And I will say that their relationship is in their intention, the intention--allow me to be more concise, now--of eliciting the Presence; while their

difference lies in the object which this intention considers, an object which can be, directly, what matters to us, or more or less merged with accidental circumstances, and aspects which remain external and which we must therefore, as a first step, examine and reduce. For example, my word can certainly remain at the point closest to my most immediate affections, perceived in what is most interior in them, most apt to the universal, under the sign of a few moments so charged with meaning that they are already like symbols, in the larger search which is in question. Such constellations of figures or impressions speak in words which are very general, which in themselves represent the essential aspects of its universe; and this allows for the poem's brevity. But this very synthetic approach, though it sheds light on the peaks, leaves the valleys in shadow. Many elements of my being-in-the-world, even if they take part in this writing, remain for the most part unthought, although they too should be examined, if I really want to recognize what arises from the image and what from the presence, in the idea I form of my life. In fact, if I fail to visit these regions, I may not see the true threshold of finitude. For finitude is clearly bound up with my acts of yesterday or of childhood, the experience, for example, of a certain visit to a certain place, or a certain meeting, or an enduring relationship with a

certain Italian painting. So I should also travel, shouldn't I, through these very precise places, these well defined circumstances, irreplaceable marks of my limits. And in this will begin another work, which I will call prose, though still in poetry, the more patient search which is able to gain perspective. This effort will bear on the thousand small sandy ways through the labyrinth, it will touch small knots which it may perhaps be able to untie. In the critique of the dream, which I evoked in our second interview, this prose will reconsider the relations, still too a priori, which had been established between words in the poems; will add memories, reflections concerning facts or beings which had been left in the margins; and so will analyze this first writing, not as the critic would do, since the critic is content to make its structures more explicit in order to deliver it more completely to what it is already and will remain: no, this time the analysis will suspect the writing, oppose it with new givens, reopen it to question on its own level, allow it to rethink its own work which is to restore the words, though they want nothing of this task, to a practice of the world that is guided by finitude. Two roads, but they overlap, they cut through the same terrain. And, ahead of them, two demands which will join in the end, perhaps, without either one having had to renounce itself.

What means are available to prose? Can you give us an idea?

At the moment I know very little beyond this return I have just explained, reconsideration of the facts which the poem had left outside: an approach which I attempted in The Back Country, but which I had already felt necessary, five or six years earlier, in the pages of a book entitled A Dream in Mantua. Still, here are a few clarifications of one of the forms this return can take. In the books of poetry which I have published, which I have therefore offered to readings which must necessarily be interpretations, there are often allusions to facts and things which I do not try to locate more precisely, or to explain. For example, I called a poem in Hier régnant désert, "At San Francesco, Evening," without saying that it concerned one of the churches in Ferrara, even though the special character of this disturbing city was by no means foreign to the sentiment which this fragment evoked: in fact, this character was so much a part of the poem that to keep silent about it doomed the poem to obscurity.<sup>12</sup> Why did I exclude,

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<sup>11</sup>The church of San Francesco is a brick edifice in the style of the early Renaissance, first raised in 1227, rebuilt in 1341, and renovated after 1494 by Biagio Rossetti. The poem is as follows:

deliberately as it happened, a significant element?

But then how could I violate the right which belongs to our desire, at the instant it arises, its right to reach for its object without explicitly representing to itself what it is doing nor what cause determines it?

While at San Francisco, I knew I was in Ferrara but I did not say so much to myself, in that moment. And on the other hand and above all, if I had named Ferrara in the poem, this name would immediately have assumed the role of a signifier in a text, determined by the text--at the expense of my true relation to Ferrara--as well as indicative of this experience: whereas if I do not evoke it by name, all the reality of Ferrara, with its abundant meaning for me that I have not yet penetrated or completed, remains associated, by metonymy, with the written word--and is maintained there, like a demand. To keep the allusion obscure, or as if suspended, is to avoid integrating it into the idea I create for myself, at the present moment, of my relation to myself,

. . . And so the floor was of marble in the dark  
Hall, where you were led by incurable hope.  
One would have said of calm water, where paired  
lights  
In the distance carried the voices of candles, of  
evening.

And yet no ship sought the land there,  
No step came any more to trouble the water's calm.  
And so, I tell you, and so with our other mirages,  
O pomp in our hearts, o enduring flames! (Poèmes, p. 104)

to the world: and so it is already to relativize this bond, in favor of my changing existence, and it is to keep myself open to more profound indications which I might receive from Ferrara, from my memory of Ferrara, who knows, when I will have changed. One must know when to stop analyzing oneself, then one will be prepared for this return I have described, which seeks to comprehend, but in the other sense, as well, to include, seeking a deeper unity thanks to the more numerous and diverse moments of our life. . . . In other words, must we call this one of its means, "prose" needs time to pass, needs the screens to shift, for the changing views help to dissipate the mirages. For prose, these margins of the poem are the metonymical dimension which has remained open, and from which it can draw what it requires to break the closed constructions of the metaphor, which is no more, in sum, than the decision I took yesterday, the understanding which is always too hasty and which is in danger of remaining a part of the past, separating me from the world, making my relation to its potential presence a shadow, a desert. The "metaphor," the analogical interpretation, that is what builds us a language, and dooms us to the illusions of the image--we must find its cracks, sound its false walls, and all without thinking, pessimistically, that it is in vain. For, after all, this someone in me who wandered once in Ferrara,

if he dreamed, sometimes, without admitting it, it was also without completely accepting it, and he was already the one, more conscious of the needs and dialectics, who seeks himself today, in our discussions for example; and as he was there at one of the crossroads of his life, he must have perceived, at the edges of his attention, many furtive things which he abandoned for a time, and which could now serve me as keys, to what lies beyond metaphor.

But, if you examine it in this way, you incorporate it into writing, you make it a bearer of metaphors, you destroy its value as nonabolished presence. . . .

That is true, and this return which is still in the written word may well seem another defeat of the will of presence; the circle of writing, which can penetrate everywhere and whose center is nowhere, would only have passed through a new point. But the metaphorization which is thus accomplished has not destroyed the metonymic reserve, simply because it has won a position, even if this position is important; the mass of what we have not thought, of what we have lived, is too rich--no, I should say instead that to startle it in this way,

by waking it, will make it more abundant, even "overflowing" to use another word from theology; memory is only formulated by recalling other memories, or by revealing other contacts. I am very sure (and here is still another reason to study Baroque architecture, which teaches this future even in its stone) that the circle of a life's recovery, or to be more precise of a liberty, is not a circle if it is traced with faith; rather it is a spiral which increases its radius with each turn, and from the horizons which rise to others more distant, will not essentialize the here and now of a being, but reveal its transcendence over the very words which want to define it, reduce it, "coagulate" it into image. Provided that the questioning spirit remains, it is the "self" which, its attention drawn to its own double game--search for and refusal of presence--will be forced to become, will mature, will metamorphosize, who knows? A being who would have been frozen into image reveals this depth to others, this tide of existence which defies the reign of words. And if he himself has not succeeded in his search, has not delivered himself from his mirages, his vertigos, at least he will have spoken of this need, which is the only real need, to those who might happen to read his words.

Remarks prepared for Radio  
Suisse Romande



PART IV

## CROSS STREET

### Egypt

#### I.

There were many of us on this steamer which had been drifting for days, all motors stilled, all fires quenched, though still propelled, as one could feel, by a hidden force, so that we were not alarmed, on board, even if we were not entirely at ease. "One," "us," the others, myself, we were a group of friends, and there had been many events in our shared past and then during the first period of this voyage, or this dream, a thousand peripeties which I can still feel in their abundance, their quality of duration truly lived. But their memory was beginning to fade, and it disappeared altogether with the final episode and even with its first moments, as if it were in the nature of this episode to untie, without violence but forever, what had ripened the joys, the preoccupations, the teachings of an existence.

A few certainties, all the same. It was summer, we were crossing the eastern Mediterranean, and though we had no goal, we were following a movement which proceeded from Egypt, turned at first towards the west, and then urged the boat towards northern shores which I felt from the first would be mountainous.

And one evening, as dark fell, we arrived at a port where the houses rose in tiers up the flank, precisely, of a rather high mountain, and at times even seemed to disappear in the folds of its mass. It was evidently the end of a great festival in this country, the streets were lined with fires which mingled under the trees; the houses, thrown open, sparkled, and so one could easily see that the neighborhoods farther up the mountain were separated by wooded or rocky bands which brought the back country almost to the heart of the city. Here and there, one could also glimpse other dark spots among the roofs, but these troubled by a little phosphorescence: probably they marked the sites of churches. And another church, perhaps a cathedral, firmly anchored on a spur near the center, its entire façade and the base of its great domes lit with a beautiful yellow light, dominated all the port, the bay-- so that from a distance it was what one saw first among all the places and monuments of this unknown land. But

one would have said--was it only an illusion?--that it was empty, and silent.

I was standing at the front of the boat, among the other passengers who had gathered there, already obscure, whispering--and I wondered: "Is it Salonica? Is it Smyrna?" without excluding the possibility that it might be still another city, unknown to me. My only conviction, which led to a preference, though slight, for Salonica, was that this port, which had grown little by little, was turned towards the south, with its back to a vast region that was more or less empty, vanishing into the depths of Asia. But the boat was arriving at the quay, moving at the same slow and gentle pace which it had maintained during all these last days, and already we were ashore, among the men and women who lingered on the embankment, although here or there the sea breeze had begun to scatter--a brighter flame, among those which were quenched--the faded flowers and the debris of garlands.

And I ask, at first gaily, a few of those closest to me: "What city is this?"

But, it's strange, no one understands my question. Their heads turn towards me, they smile, I can see that they have grasped the sense of my words, their

incomprehension is not due to the language--and yet, farther down, nothing gets through. So I try to rephrase my question, which is suddenly anxious. For example, "What do you call this place, where you live?" Or again, "If you were away from home, and were returning (I can vaguely see them walking under the cliffs by the sea, with a donkey, and the city like a distant screen before the setting sun), you would tell me: I am going to. . . .?" But none of these strategems allows me to obtain the least response. It seems that the very idea of name, or place, is foreign to the people here, at least for what concerns their city. They barely listen to me, besides, they turn aside, although politely, and meanwhile my friends have dispersed in the crowd.

## II.

I wake up, and all through the day I find myself thinking of this lighted city, this quay, this absolute incomprehension, with great sadness and a feeling of solitude.

Then, in the evening, the phone rang, and I learned of what had taken place during the past night. My mother, who lived alone in my native city, had had a stroke as she was going to bed, and had lain on the floor all night and the next morning as well, almost unconscious--

no doubt dreaming. I also learned that she had greeted her rescuers with words which demonstrated a weakened intelligence, the uncertain and fantastic perception of a child on the threshold of language, but with all the courtesy that was habitual to her. She wanted, I believe, to offer refreshments. And I thought, again with sadness, that hidden beneath his courtesy there had always been a feeling of distance, dissimulated even from herself; the people around her, in this country where she had come as a young girl, where she had passed her life, had remained foreign to her--cold, she said, distrustful, lacking that capacity for welcome and exchange which she associated on the other hand with her birth place, as the great virtue of her father's land.

Come morning, again, I arrived, early, at the station. It was a beautiful, cool day, a buoyant sun ran along the surface of the shadows which seemed to be water, shimmering. And I saw that a little girl in blue jeans was wandering along the platform, humming, and the two or three curved lines of her shadow on the cement, shrill and agitated like birds, seemed to me sentences, rich perhaps with meaning. At times, holding her right foot out gracefully before her, in this play of light and dark, she tested the solidity of the ground as if it were ice that would crack, before leaning her

weight on it all at once, laughing and shaking her head. Then she stopped, looked into the distance--at what I did not know--probably nothing. And I understood--like her, all at once--that her name was "Egypt." And my sadness vanished, for I was no longer in life, where one feels sad, but again in dream; and also because I understood that if the dream began again now, through the places and situations of day, in the country of here, where there are names for beings, and for cities, it was that the dream led directly to an end which could only be of here as well, and thus beneficent. I boarded the train, I looked at the platform once more in my life, it began to move, slowly, in the summer light, as if I were on a shore.

### III.

Once more in my life, and there had been so many times! When I was a child, about the same age as this little girl, it was in the other country, in the mountains, and the sun rising low on the left, the train which emerged from between the stones on the right rushed towards us with its bright front, then passed, splashing us with its shadow, that was hardly broken between the cars by the commas, the periods--or the words?--of light. The entire village went to the station early in the morning "to see the train pass," and came back in the late

afternoon to greet its return; my mother, my grandmother, my aunt often followed, in the idleness of summer, and sometimes it was we who descended the still vibrating steps, with the endless baggage of summer vacations. Ah, crumpled by the long night in the crowded compartments and the cafeterias of two or three stations, overflowing with unfinished dreams, beating my wings like a dazzled owl, how well I saw that there were the living and the dead together! In the foreground these hands that were held out, these mustaches, these buns pierced with iron needles, this sunlight bursting on the Holy Ghost of a bodice; but in the distance, over there, smiling and anxious as in the photographs in their oval frames, those old faces of whom I would be told, later: "No, you couldn't have known him. No, that was already past his time. . . ." And still wandered from group to group on the platform, in her wide black skirt that was torn and dusty, with a huge basket, one would have said, of fruit and flowers, very much faded, on her head, the "Promé té ché," whom they said was crazy.<sup>1</sup> She approached everyone, even leaning towards me, laughing, shaking her finger as if to threaten, teasingly, or to recall a

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<sup>1</sup>"Promé té ché" is a dialect rendering of the phrase, "Je te promets que (I promise you that)," which the old woman repeated again and again.



former vow. "Ah, je te promets, I promise you . . . ," she said, forever, and people told the story, or I came to think, that a fiancé had left her once in this station, and had never returned. Of course, everyone was talking, very loudly, exclaiming, laughing, no one paid any attention to her, any more than to the shadow which passed briefly over her face when the last door closed. And then she returned to the village with the last travellers, humming a little to one side, and you could see her again at night, crouched over her dark door, stirring the embers under the black iron pots. I loved her, it seemed to me she was the earth itself, the earth which I knew was growing old, aphasic, in the extinction of the villages, the last processions for sun or rain, the last songs in patois sung by the goose-girls in the fields. And I dreamt that one day I would make right, but how? the fault of the one who had fled in the morning of the world.

### The Fruit

The sun would doubtless have been intolerable.

But it seemed that its light was held back by a wall, one could only guess at its presence through the foliage: immobile, the leaves, and at peace, in the shoreless afternoon.

And there had been a long silence. And then there appeared at the summit, not without difficulty--as could be seen at the end, one would have said she placed her toes in holes that were not there, on knots that crumbled, though she laughed all the same--and sat on the edge, swinging her skinny legs inelegantly onto this side, a little girl whose face, in this golden light, seemed a disk of silver, and even very smooth, slightly dimmed.

She was still laughing, perhaps because she held so much fruit in her skirt which was folded into a pocket on her knees, fruit from the trees nearby which she took and ate. They were fat cherries, which kept the sun on their fleeting shore. And there were still more and even too many, they slipped out of the bright cloth, as she moved, and fell with a dull sound in the grass at the world's end.

### The Fires

The boat glides over canals which open, infinitely one would say, into other canals, all and on all sides bordered by high walls, about six feet of well-fitted stones beneath the leaves which stir in the breeze. The day has passed, and now the water begins to reflect the

rays of a great setting sun, hidden at times, but still rarely, by these walls on the right or the left.

The boatman has lit a fire, at the bow.

And here, at water level, is a door held closed by a grill, where children are leaning, laughing, inside, their foreheads obscured by brown curls. A large garden can be seen between their narrow shoulders, poorly covered by painted cloths; and other fires, but these of grass, are burning there, and birds are singing, passing like tufts of bright colors through the bit of sky cut out by the threshold. The boat is chained to a pier, now. Its fire thrusts dense masses of hot air, vibrant, into the sky.

We wait. Nothing will change any more, in the unmoving light. Only the sound of the water will cease and begin again, against the hull. The children's laughter the last color to rekindle here or there, in the twilight of the flowers, the fruit, like a vestige of time, with evaporates.

### A Cupola

We had decided--stupidly? no, not altogether--to paint a sort of cupola. It was there, already, above us in the afternoon heat, a hollow of whiteness embossed in places, past a small narthex, itself entirely white

and bare--all we could see, in fact, was a statue of the Virgin, halfway up, with its branch from last year, and the pots of paint and our brushes, which we had brought a little before dawn.

And we began to paint, laughing, jostling each other on our ladders, as there was not enough space between the four walls, and yet each of us had his part in the image, some great agitated figure, obscure, to draw from the red and the ochre, and the blue, to thrust among the agitation of the other bodies and faces towards the calm eye above the stones: so that everything was tangled, the brushes crossing each other, the halos dappling each other, and there were eyes which appeared in the trees--palm trees, many of them, against a setting sun--laughing in the trees, rising like moons. And we erased as we went on, we began again, while the cricket sang outside, indifferent, "ingenuous,"<sup>1</sup> in the Virgin's branch.

O the beauty of that afternoon in the unmoving heat!

And yet we had to work quickly, too quickly, for the paint which was running down all these brushes

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<sup>1</sup>Mallarmé, letter to Eugène Lefebure, 17 May 1867. "I only knew the English cricket, sweet caricaturist: only yesterday did I hear, among the young shoots of wheat, this sacred voice of the ingenuous earth. . . ."

that collided, shaken, spilled on our bodies, staining us, making one of us red and the other blue, or brown, and all of us signs which shimmered in so much sun under the vault, in the silence. And because at the same time, it's strange, night was falling. And because the young girl of the statue, who painted with us or was painted, we no longer knew which, the eternal Virgin with a star on her brow, wanted to go home and slipped off the ladder, her dress over her knees, and recrossed the antechamber, blue which turned to mauve like the hills in the evening. And now she was running, and shouting. There was someone among us, at one time or another, to run after her, catch up with her; and then all at once she threw himself into the thick grass, her knees bent under her chin, her eyes closed, suddenly calm.

### Rome, the Arrows

I.

I have entered and am now walking through rooms whose walls are covered with large paintings or detached sections of frescos. It is obvious that all these works are superb, their color rises dense and bright like the warm air over the grass fires on beautiful September mornings, and the forms vibrate though their flickering does not signify anything unreal; on the contrary, a

robust joy and a faith emanate from them as if the earth, washed of its shadows which one would say turn on something fixed--a hinge, a hidden door?--breathed more freely. But what most impresses me in these Visitations with their mountainsides, these Nativities with their countless Magi in the trees (and one does not know whether it is night or day, despite the star), these Baptisms, these pages from the lives of saints in which a little of the red flame appears, there, in this vibration--and how many other subjects are obscure to me, though not unknown for all that, I feel that I would understand them if I did not have to pass so quickly--is the singular use they make of perspective. It is centered, rigorously centered, as the great Tuscan inventors, lovers of geometry, wanted it to be, and yet it is not. When one's eye, drawn over there, to the vanishing point, is about to find peace in the convergence of lines which has ripened the coherence of meaning, an irresistible force draws it elsewhere, towards another center, while, how can I explain it, this movement of departure is annulled in the very moment it is accomplished, so that one feels that this new vanishing point is both very distant from the first and very near, that this infinite only abounds at the peaceful heart of unity. Have you tried to see, historians and critics of painting, have you tried to follow

in its duration, its appearance of hesitation, the course of the arrows loosed by the eternal archer, distant, unknown to us, invisible, master of the techniques of Zen? The arrows lodge around the center, then one comes to rest a little to one side--not, we feel, because of the archer's unskillfulness nor because of his supreme skill, in irony, but as an indication, though we do not yet know of what, in the indifference and the peace; and meanwhile the last arrow rests in its expected place near the first. . . . I looked at all that, and soon two thoughts came to me. To begin with, the memory of Plotinus,<sup>1</sup> who teaches that the One is higher than being; and thus suggests that perspective, which belongs to the level of being, only gives a metaphorical image of the idea of center, which of course has important consequences for the work, unconscious or not, of artists. Certain artists, for example, obscurely conscious of this character of exile, may have concluded that any work of perspective must acknowledge itself to be an image, contented or not; and others. . . . Can't we imagine that there were, at least in the field of possibility, painters who engaged in perspective as in an experiment, an arrow whose feathers are the colors and

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 7.

the lights of this world and which is hurled outside what is, towards--what? let us say what is not, what carries; and the meeting brought about, in knowledge, by unknowing; and then sometimes catches fire, up there?

But this somewhat confused glimpse was already covered by the other memory, the ordinary memory, which did not illuminate but increased the enigma, now almost an anxiety. I must explain that I had found these paintings less astonishing, from the start, for their strangeness, though this was considerable, than for something, on the contrary, very familiar which was caught there, tightly, like a thread among others in the web. And when I had Plotinus in mind, this uncertain reminiscence suddenly became precise: "But of course," I cried (to myself), "the painter whose echo I sense here, if not even his direct influence, is Piero della Francesca!<sup>2</sup> He also practiced, although without this ease which is a culmination, only given, one feels, to beings more angelic (or more terrestrial) than we, the clear color. And he also knows--although on a single plane, let us

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 2. Most of the paintings evoked in this dream--the Flagellation, the Baptism of Christ, the Madonna del Parto at Monterchi--were discussed either in that essay or in "Humor and the Cast Shadows"; also refer to "The Back Country," note 25. In addition, the "merciful Virgin" is the Virgin of Mercy at Borgo, tentatively dated 1460.



say proportion, number, while here there are so many others!--the dialectic of the center and the aside, of symmetries troubled by asymmetries." Piero helped me to decipher the unknown paintings, and in a sense explained them to me. But, it's strange, far from making them seem more natural to me, bringing them back in consequence to some region or epoch of Italian history, it is what lent itself, in Piero's work, to comparison, what helped me to decipher a meaning, which became incomprehensible. To be honest, his Flagellation, for example, or the Baptism of Christ, had already impressed me, had also impressed me by what one feels is inexplicable in the context of Italian tradition and even absent, moreover, from everything, absent, if I may say so, from the world, in their presence which is nonetheless so dense, so rustic, so immediately welcoming to a reflection of the sky in the pools, or to a leaping bird. And it is this basic syncope, this absolute heterogeneity of what should have been, as a basis, warmest, most natural, which grew now in my memory, illuminating the works of the master of Borgo San Sepolcro and quenching them at the same time, as lightning can discolor a summer or an autumn morning, over the fires in the grass. Piero did not reduce the distance, did not bring near me the east towards which the unknown

"school" rolled its vast waters; instead, it was Piero who was borne off.

## II.

And I was still walking, walking through these rooms of which there were so many, as if this museum--for I was without question in a museum--were one of the great museums of this Italy I could not locate, one of those which do not only house, as do many do, the works of the local "cultura," but have also gathered, through centuries sometimes, the necessarily diverse propositions of a true civilization. In the unity which had impressed me on a first glance, and which still asserted itself, not only through stylistic aspects but also as the interior and profound place in which these signs became act, this art a religion, I thus began to perceive diffractions, nuances, almost oppositions at certain levels, where the great variables of the psyche or of carnal existence are reflected: one of these pictures was not, despite its supreme ease, without a shadow, at instants, of rigidity, as in the style of the primitives, and another was even touched with mannerism. . . . Clearly an entire people had lived all this, suffering the shocks of irreducible matter, and also of a history, in their search for the good. And I ask: "But then what is it? Here is a society, which must have had its architecture, too, its poets,

how is it that so much testimony has gone unrecognized until today? And how is it, too, that these paintings, sufficient to add an entire Italy to our own, have such interior relations, in their difference, to ours, but especially to the late Trecento and early Quattrocento, that I must feel them to be both inside this moment and this place which are our past, and outside, in a future, although timeless?"

And I continued: "How is it, above all, that I am so certain, despite the discouraging nature of this conviction, that I do not understand, and never could understand, the exact nature of this relationship which nonetheless ties--before my eyes, I who love painting so much--these works which I see so clearly to this art of Tuscany or The Marches which I have known for so long? In fact, it is as if I could not locate, even in thought, what still concerns me the most. As if, to conclude, these vast retables which rise around me, invitation, objurgation, solicitude, presence, were only, ultimate thought, the ultimate screen which prevents me from seeing the face of what concerns me the most. I see the red, yes, the bright yellow, the cold blue, and the flowering bouquet, still touched with a little snow, of the green and the rose, and the violet, I feel this wind which makes them bow, and straighten, but I know there is also an image in this fire, oh

certainly not a formal image, not colored--the smoke lets us see images such as this, in the morning, or the smell of the incense we light--which would be the revelation and which escapes me. Alas, the more clearly we see, the more distinctly we perceive the effects of our blind spot. The more we advance--and I have advanced, as I can see--the more we know that a door will remain closed. Ah, what is this art of peace and cruelty? Ah, where am I?"

And someone answers, who was walking beside me: "But look! These are simply the paintings which could have been painted in Rome if, at the moment when Giotto, Duccio, Pietro Cavallini and a few young people already, who followed them, were laying the foundations of a new art (as one says in your language), the Curia had not left the city for Avignon."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The so-called "Babylonian Captivity" lasted from 1309 to 1377, having begun with a dispute between Boniface VIII and Philippe IV of France, concerning the French king's illegal levies on clergy. For Giotto di Bondone (ca. 1266-1337), who incidentally painted a portrait of Boniface (now in the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome), cf. "The Back Country," note 23. This Florentine painter and architect broke with Byzantine tradition to create a new art of grace and movement. His contemporary, Duccio di Buoninsegna (ca. 1255-c. 1319), was a Sienese painter much influenced by Byzantine style. His most celebrated work is the double altar (the Maestà) commissioned for the Siena Cathedral, and now in the Cathedral Museum. Pietro Cavallini (ca. 1240-1330) is best known for his frescos in S. Cecilia, Trastevere, Rome. He was deeply interested in classical art as well as in the new developments of his time.

Don't you understand? All its past which was still so eloquent in its ruined monuments, all its resources of theology, of rites, of wealth and poverty, predisposed Rome to dominate the art of a reawakened Italy, to become the imperious center already dreamt by the nascent perspective in its uncertain technique-- and then an accident of history deprives it of the few patrons and crowds which are necessary if this kind of fire is going to kindle. Isn't the idea of what could have been enough to make you burn with fever? Isn't this enough, if you are an adolescent, and unhappy, to fill you with visions while you fret your heart out in the empty rooms, on the hills strewn with marbles? and enough to make you regretful, again, when the opportunity is regained in the fifteenth, the sixteenth centuries, and art starts over, but slowly, influenced by other schools--too late? There, sir, is what one could have had, yes, of beauty and good in our city; or if you prefer, what has been and remains forever: the great frustration which troubled Raphael, exasperated Michelangelo, marked our feeble fa presto with its discouraged impatience, its lassitude, haunts all of modern art perhaps--yes, Tiepolo, yes, Delacroix, yes, Turner--and has only been calmed a little, for an hour which I would call autumnal, the ripe fruit but not the flower, not the

dazzling foliage, alas, in the great Baroque fantasies.<sup>4</sup>  
 Ah, signore, the absolute art was once possible! At  
 the unique point where all the lessons of the ancient  
 East and the ancient West were gathered, where the  
 lesson of duration--of chance--was ripened in the de-  
 molished palaces, where the lesson of charity which had  
 been offered by the Church of the catacombs was maintained  
 in the reflection of tapers on the mosaics of the apses--  
 the quality, though it was negative, soon disembodied,  
 of absolute which belonged to the Christians' agape,  
 and the virtualities of glory, of storms in the senses,  
 through the senses, which is given in Rome's other name,  
 wouldn't these give rise, all at once, in the positive  
 that is always dreamt and never attained, to standing

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<sup>4</sup>This catalogue includes many artists whom Bonne-  
 foy discussed in earlier essays. For Raphael, cf. "Humor  
 and the Cast Shadows," note 11. For Michelangelo, cf.  
 "Second Earth," note 11 and "The Back Country," note 38.  
 Tiepolo was the most important Venetian painter and  
 decorator of the eighteenth century (1696-1770). His  
 frescos and ceilings are characterized by a feverish  
 ascension and liquid color. For Delacroix, cf. "Paint-  
 ing, Poetry: Vertigo, Peace," note 1 and "Second Earth,"  
 note 11. Turner was an English landscape painter (1775-  
 1851) much influenced by the seventeenth-century painter  
 Claude Lorrain. Like Claude who painted in Rome, Turner  
 spent considerable time in Italy, although in Venice  
 rather than in Rome. His late works are increasingly  
 abstract, and structured by whirling vortices.

images, works one would traverse, laughing, as if they were festivals--wouldn't they give rise, yes, to an end multiplied in seeds and sparks of history? Only one among all your painters had some experience of this positivity received in the beginning, which was at last our good, here: and that is Piero della Francesca. Is it because he was born at the frontiers of our land, in the countryside upstream from Rome,<sup>5</sup> where a little of the two heritages must have survived a long time, like grasses mingled with other grasses, at the edge of the tilled fields? For whatever reason, you know well how transparent is his color, how musical are his forms, how tranquil his assurance; you have even spoken of his humor,<sup>6</sup> where the lacerations, the regrets which usually form your "great art" seem to dissipate. And it is true that the positive is attenuated, in his work, I would even say it is dormant; it is his peasant ways, he takes a siesta, walks a little in his sleep--all the same, your Piero is one of us, and that consoles us a little, gives us the shadow of a hope. For one can well imagine, don't you agree? that there is a limit, in the carriage of the merciful Virgin's head at

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<sup>5</sup>Piero was born at Borgo San Sepolcro, on the Tiber.

<sup>6</sup>In "Humor and the Cast Shadows," pp. 67-81.

Borgo, or especially in the Madonna del Parto (and the angels' hose, their four colors delivered! their birds' call on the ground! ah, these apparitions, these flights!), a border between you and us and, why not, a door? You are walking in the deserted countryside, one August afternoon, you are worried, aren't you? And then you understand that for the last moment you have been following a wall, and suddenly this low door.  
 . . . "7

"But where am I?" I asked again, insistently. "For you cannot deny that you at least exist. Or if not you yourself, at any rate these works. In one sense at least, I see them. . . ."

"You are in Rome, of course. Did you think there was only one? Haven't you understood the lesson of the arrows, the heavy arrows coming from God knows where to strike here or there on the target? Rome is the center, so it is everywhere. It is one, so it is multiple. And as Rome has a history. . . . Ah, you must see, that is everything! In fact, the popes never left Rome. There was never an Avignon. Art, the great art which the West was expecting, the art of the place

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<sup>7</sup>It was in The Traveller that Bonnefoy had this experience, or described it. Cf. "The Back Country," p. 198.



and the formula,<sup>8</sup> took place, yes, and found its formula, here--I do not say now--and what you call your artistic past, since 1309, is only a myth, it has never been, except for Piero, and you even see him differently than we do, and Domenico Veneziano.<sup>9</sup> Art took place, we are saved, my friend. And it is for that reason that you who are not saved do not even perceive our existence."

### III.

"It's true," I said sadly. "And yet I have searched for so long! At Rome and far from Rome. In the illuminated sanctuaries and the humble mountain chapels. When the museums opened and through the half open doors of the churches which have been turned into garages. When the sun rose over Umbria, and when the night fell. . . ."

"But you only looked at the color and the forms! Haven't you noticed that these are the only words in your critical language? Sometimes, I admit, you were slightly interested in the image, but for what it tries to say. You must look at the spaces between, my dear

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<sup>8</sup>Rimbaud, "Vagabonds," from the Illuminations: ". . . we wandered, nourished by wine from the caverns and biscuits for the road, I was eager to find the place and the formula."

<sup>9</sup>Cf. "The Back Country," note 23.

traveling companion! You must feel, instinctively, that what you had there, in front of you, is never--a thing accomplished and therefore sealed by finitude--anything more than the grid which can at most yield a text--while if you lift the grid, forget the idea of a message, and think of simultaneity since you cannot grasp the absolute, you will find the whole page. Wait! Let me place a grid over this page! Think of sweetness, for example, but without cruelty; or of one with the other, yes, that's alright, but without serenity, without innocence. And look, this picture. You see, your familiar Italy. . . ."

"In effect," I said. "Botticelli's Pietà, in the Fogg Museum!"<sup>10</sup>

". . . is only a particular instance of our art, quite simply! Except that, I was afraid of this, and it is to your credit, you placed the veil badly, a little of the infinite still filters through. But it doesn't matter. Now you know everything. You and your painters, strange mortal beings who despise your own finitude, but so imperfectly, and who only tend in fact towards the finite, you are each the sentences; and we, the abundant words. You who speak are matter; and we who are silent are the spirit. And that is why, even

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 7.

when you wander in what is called Rome, you only carry your absence with you. Looking at Rome, except on a few peaks that break through, and there are a few, you do not know how to see us, on the shores where we are reaching out to you, however, in our cloths of marble, that is of lightning, against the true sky. Oh, my friend! we are there, all the while, we watch over you.<sup>11</sup> We enter your street, your house, even your gestures. We speak about you among ourselves, in front of you, inside you. If you set your hand on this table, this leaf: and this city which opens, these bronzed façades near the sea, these streams of gold on the flagstones, after the rain, these obscure arrivals, and these joys, these rending horizons at your windows, these are all us. And our pictures, our statues--for we made such things, as you see, it is as if we raised some hangings in order to pass into another room, and our friends are there, in the tufts of images, infinite--abound therefore in your paintings and statues, since at a certain point in your works--what pessimism this was, your Euclidian geometry, what an abdication, your perspective!--each line has countless perpendiculars, a true sun, where you only see one, which is death."

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<sup>11</sup>It is at this point that the guide shifts from the formal pronoun vous to the intimate tu.

"You are the sum," I said, "and we. . . .What did our master say? the abolition!"<sup>12</sup>

"We are much more than the sum! And you cannot even imagine what your oppositions exclude. Our least branches bow under the weight of countless worlds. The contradictions you invent are dispelled in skies, in roving lights, your aporias and your poverties are dissipated."<sup>13</sup> What naiveté, this idea of a throw of the dice! Your poet thought of everything, but we, we think of the One beyond, another density of the infinite: where the simple begins. . . . Let yourself flow, yes, but feel the thrust, my son, which already lifts you from beneath. Oh, accept! Recognize the first hills of the true country! And see, already in these tufts of grass on the rock which emerges, flower the rose and the green of this perfume, this nothing: the simple gesture, the bright laughter."

"Yes, I know that our rites are not, how shall I put it, at the necessary intensity."

"Then enter, as you have done so many times before, this chapel in the fields, hear the silence

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<sup>12</sup>Mallarmé. For the throw of the dice in the next paragraph, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 10.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. "Humor and the Cast Shadows," note 5.

vibrate in a thousand cries of the cicadas, the grasshoppers, look at this Madonna. . . ."

I raised my eyes to the ancient fresco, so ruined, so fragmented by the cracks of the colors' erosion, and that of the forms, that ruin seemed, in this instant before the absolute effacement, changed in its sign, radiant, a writing in the writing. And between the bent face of this young woman and the face of the child who laughingly held out his arms to her, and his glance as well, his mouth, it seemed to me also that the laughter of the one and the smile of the other were multiplied like a sun caught in a mirror, like a thousand suns thrown back by a thousand mirrors--a thousand suns, a thousand boats which each would have passed the horizon which was still a deep red, would have risen to the zenith, and now fell, over the great tilled fields, and were already reborn in each fold of the color, each crease of the form, dazzling, cruel--when the mirror turned, darting its rays into our eyes--but yet of such sweetness, almost as if we could die of it! Infinite which moves, blinding, in the surf on the shore, yes it was you! Egypt who shimmers endlessly in the rapid waters of the world, yes, it was you! Other words, so many, which emerge in the name of Rome, yes, you too! And without forming sentences, in the immensity of the instant, I saw in a single glance, and effaced, a thousand

labyrinths from before--understanding, first of all, that while we wandered in Avignon or elsewhere in human history which is indeed always painful, the genius of the place and the time had ripened for us--from one word to another, touched by the conflagration--and had kept ready for our use, and now offered us . . . what? What our gods of heaven had promised us in vain, the word, the ripe grapes.

Still, I also had to acknowledge, at the same time, another thought, more complex, which came to me: and which was that I felt time was passing--streaming, let us say, instead of moving in peace, breaking white on the rocks of the beach--and that this had its effect on the work I was allowed to glimpse, without touching it in the infinite of its profound exchanges, which turned stormy, where I saw some black, where I now sensed an imminent lightning, the nearness of great opaque rains over the faded mountains. Some art (I do not see another word) mingled again with what had been divine; and a growing Baroquism came to tear, with its feverish movements, what had been, for an instant, on its four wreathed columns, the uncreated, the positive, the simple fire--while something primitive, still a little rigid, courageously marked in strained contours on the ochre and blue beaches, precipitated in this troubled solution, like a will which would tend to

remove itself from the passions, the vain ambitions, the dreams, in order to recommence, in privation, the assuredly reasonable act of a wisdom. And I, "clenched like a madman,"<sup>14</sup> fascinated, I watched for these movements of dissociation, I threw myself after them in the eddies of the image, when perhaps it would have been enough (and I thought so!) to ignore them--yes, I already recognized (will I say: I even tried, with a bitter joy, to distinguish?) these "styles," as we also say, these moments of the spirit which we have decided are incompatible and which are indeed incompatible, once they have fallen from unity--where they still glowed, there in front of me. . . . Alas, why must we always come back to the belief that we are dreaming when perhaps we are, simply? The belief that it is our arm thrust into the water which makes its lights move? And why, in the advent, this shadow, so soon of a memory? For I have already seen, not only this face--o Isis, mother, that would be only too natural--but this image. . . .<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Baudelaire, "A une passante" (1860). The poet is speaking to the unknown woman whom he could have loved, who passes without pausing. He himself is unable to make the least movement towards her.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. "Seven Fires," note 6.

God! It seemed to me now that I was in the chapel of Monterchi one summer morning, looking at the great fresco, the one which says that a life will be born; the one which tempers with irony, with wisdom and peace, what we know remains of the finite, of the non-divine, in the infinite, the divinity of what will be born.

And I began to walk again, in the surrounding night. Bent, the roll of hemp clad in wax on my forearm, the small flame held in my fingertips. And around me and to infinity this rock, alive at times with a few remnants of painting.

Convenerunt in Unum

To write, to publish this story,<sup>1</sup> this memory of travelling, while still uncertain of the fate of the Flagellation, of the Madonna of Senegallia!<sup>2</sup> It is not only that we have lost, perhaps forever, two great works, but that the presence is ruined--continuous, like one plot of land, one meaning--which had been the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, the paintings of Piero. Why, I will

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<sup>1</sup>The preceding one. (Author's note.)

<sup>2</sup>Along with Raphael's The Mute One, these two paintings were taken from the Palazzo Ducale on February 6, 1975.



not try to say: but this architecture and this painting breathed with the same distant life, and advanced in the same ecstasy. Once more in these strange years that we must live through, these iconoclastic years that yet burn with images, we must resign ourselves to understanding that the evidence of the One, when by chance it still watches, here or there, cannot halt, with its majesty, the darkening hand which urges history on.

Convenerunt in unum, as it was once inscribed below the Flagellation. What thought determined these words, taken from a passage in the Psalms,<sup>3</sup> where it refers to princes and kings, Christ's adversaries? "They conspired against him," said the lost inscription. And I who was tempted to understand: "They assembled in the unity!"

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An empty room in a palace whose music we can no longer hear, except in snatches whose very peace becomes a deepening of the wound, is now the altar, in its afternoon of shadow, towards which all hope of a meaning is turned, all thought of the place, the only value we can oppose to the drift of the signs. If heaven

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<sup>3</sup>Psalm 48.

cannot, may the line of the crests around Urbino keep the museum curators from replacing the lost paintings with others, bringing art history to palliate the loss of one who had wanted, in peace, to breach the labyrinth of writing; and who gave such a profound and lasting impression of having succeeded.

An empty room. Absence, as if it were still life, all the same, still an appeal--trace of a presence which was, and which could rekindle on the horizon of what, signifier without signified, sign without referent, language without speech flows from all sides, and streams in vain.

Will it be necessary, more and more often, that we dream what was? The visitors to the Palazzo Ducale not finding what they had desired--some for so many years, like the star. Others travelling in shame through the famished nations, the dismembered civilizations. And soon all of us constrained to dream the earth itself, its plants and its animals, and this great art now lost, for example, the roads, because we could not save from destruction the few true countries that remain. Nothing is lost, I know, there will always be a photograph of the valleys which once were sacred, of the rooms where men once lived with the divine, even of this tuft of grass, absolute, at the threshold of a house in the mountains,

and a child is there who smiles, at whom we do not know, nor where this was, nor when, but how dense is this air, this real place! And for a long time to come there will be chamois and ibex in the preserves, and retables everywhere, taken from Quattrocento altars--I used to take pleasure in these exiles, but that was . . . fifteen years ago, when the greater part was still in place.<sup>4</sup> Still, from each piece of flotsam there falls, invisible, what was a justification in its place of origin, and a hope.

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And I tell myself, I admit, so great is the need to hope: who knows, perhaps we needed this generalization of the state of dream, this extension of its atmosphere, whose riches are as great as its virtualities are still unplumbed, in order for the good--which we have never approached, throughout our long nocturnal history, except in dream--to catch, suddenly, like a second fire, astonishing, in this world that is nearing its end? The unity, the breath of a Presence in our communities, our works, these are destroyed at each instant by the ill will that is in each of us, and

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<sup>4</sup>In 1961, when Bonnefoy wrote "Of Painting and the Place."

perhaps we will need this wind from everywhere to rise, and become pure blackness, in order for the idea of the place to take root in the void which this wind will carry before it, the place that is both unreal, from now on, and a thought rejoined, and delivered, an intuition one can finally pass through all at once, like the lightning? To found, to establish, to give meaning as one gives a glass of water, to the strangers who arrive, never seemed so natural, was never so simple, as in the desert. And so I "think" that it is when a hope, a labor, admit to having failed, untie themselves, that the true form is revealed. I dream of another earth, which will appear by degrees--larger trees bearing fruit, rapid clouds which are once more bright, fields "studded with flowers," as we used to say, and the chapels in the fields, in the morning, and their paintings, the ones which are as simple as roads beneath the grass--in the dissipation of the fire which will have burned this earth. . . .

Which yet was so beautiful! But there was this black stain in the movement of the animals, this thorn in the bouquets: she was the mother we did not know how to love as we would have had to love her, with abandon; and thus the languages, history, the works too, thought, all this abstraction, this fever in the enigma,

this tearing emotion! And the other will be the daughter who goes ahead of us in the day to which she gives birth as she goes--laughing as she gathers the berries, singing as she bites into the fruit.

### The Hoopoe

The notion of a red that would be blue, an outside that would be inside, an "all that" that would be a body which hands of an unknown nature would fix, sweating, to cushions of shadow, passed gracefully, hoopoe in the cool air, and came to rest on a stone.

### The Gods

We were on the highest terrace, with the seasons, at the end of an autumn afternoon. And suddenly "that" rose from the ravine and passed as if called to the east--clusters of vibrant wings and the shadows of bodies, translucent, which whirled by the thousands at the heart of other clusters. . . . What silence there was, until nightfall! The masons had stopped work, no bird sang, no insect rasped any longer, we watched the great whirlwinds swell, of which some were so thick that they seemed to obscure the sun.

And at times one of these travellers swept down onto the parapet or our sleeves which were still bright; and we told each other that its heart was beating, we loved that its old wrought face shone in its littleness, under a tiara.

### The Discoveries at Prague

May 2, 1975

As faithfully as possible, the moments of one of those fantasies that sometimes form in us in the same way that the other dream, the night dream, catches and unravels.

Some brief prose texts which I have come to write, recently, are also like dreams, and they surely have something of a dream's intimate relation to our unconscious will, for I try to keep my reflection from monitoring what is revealed there, from the start, as surprising and incomprehensible. It seems to me that I can perceive what is organic and specific in the particle of secret life flowing from my pen, and that I can thus help it grow, and breathe more freely, through the prudent work of deletions that only obey its need. Which leads me to think that André Breton was wrong to consider absolute automatism as the necessary condition

of the true word.<sup>1</sup> Anything submerged by the most recent memory, anything the eyes catch or the ear sustains, can enter this writing without hindrance, and at the expense of the parallels and proportions, and the cautious weighing of which is forged the least formulation, even if it is executed without conscious approbation. To delete, on the other hand, to choose while letting the other choose, is to permit an economy, encourage a depository--who knows? to urge the thought which rises from below to profit from this first arrangement, for this heightened composition through which meaning, in certain works of poetry or the arts, becomes peace, and music. This deeper work has already taken place in what we spontaneously call "beautiful dreams," this work which frees a form, heard in the thrusts of desire, to rise, in the light, but in order then to wait for desire, to receive it, refresh it with its water, appease it with its serious joy.

Beautiful dreams. . . . As much as surrealism was wrong to rush the already impatient flow of words,

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<sup>1</sup>In his first manifesto (1924), Andre Breton (1896-1966) defined Surrealism as "Pure psychic automatism by which one proposes to express, orally or in writing, or in an entirely other way, the real functioning of thought." (Emphasis added.)

refusing to pause at what might yet be the crossroads, the short cut, the threshold of the lost place where we could live--who knows? and why stifle the only important question?--so much would psychoanalysis impoverish its understanding of desire if it did not try, adding an "aesthetic" dimension to its examination of symbols, to appreciate these elements of composition, of rhythm, of silence, of rustling in the margins, of beauty, which sometimes give the scenes we traverse in sleep their unforgettable aspect.

But the fantasy formed of itself in what I will recount today, and beyond the blank page, outside the margins of any plan to experiment or write; formed rapidly, I would even say irresistibly, until it reached an interruption--whether an end or an obstacle, I could not tell. For the moment I only listened, and now, years later, I only want to remember these situations and questions which were etched then on my memory. Writing will probably modify some details, either to the advantage or the disadvantage of what sought itself in this suddenly favorable opportunity: though I think I am faithful, I will not give the attention of which I have just spoken. For the most part, all the same, I think I am a serious witness, and therefore no more than a witness.

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At the beginning, a paragraph in a newspaper.

I learned that at the castle of Prague a room had remained sealed for several hundreds of years without anyone remembering it, and then that it had been located, opened and discovered to hold paintings, including a large Rubens, which a prince has collected in the seventeenth century, and perhaps had hidden there himself.<sup>2</sup>

And an "idea for a story" came to me, as soon as I read this, but it was so imperious, as I said, and so prompt to reveal itself that it was immediately what mattered, of course. They have just understood, from several indications--I will not try to know which--that some paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are there, very close, in a room underground which they have always known was half full of stones. Many of these huge blocks are removed. Then there is a door, which they open, and a staircase with steps missing. An historian is charged with the first reconnaissance. In fact, if he is given the lamp and the rope, it is above all because of his impatience, which is unreasonably great and which surprises

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<sup>2</sup>In 1962, Dr. Jaromír Neumann did clean and identify certain neglected canvases which had been hanging in Hradčany Castle, including Rubens' Council of the Gods (ca. 1602).

the others; he is like a beast stamping, conscious of some unknown presence.

He descends, and remains for a half hour perhaps in what they imagine is a room, or a passageway. Then he shakes the rope, they lift him up again, he arrives, pale, and meanwhile there echoes below him, and for a long time, God! the sound of an avalanche, the fall--it's clear--of an infinite number of other stones. What has happened, what did he see? At first, and for a long moment, he does not answer, and then he declares, his eyes turned aside, or lowered, that nothing has happened, no, and he saw nothing. The paintings? No, there are no paintings. And in any event, there cannot be any question of going down, no, nor of looking further for these canvases, as what just fell has carried everything with it, has destroyed everything. . . . He is sure of it. And how does he know that? One would think he had wanted it, provoked it! So someone is already insinuating. But again he does not answer, his eyes turned elsewhere. Evidently the question was absurd.

The day finally passed, however, and the historian returned with a young woman, his lover, to his house which is far off in the mountains, opening onto fields studded with flowers. She, with her eyes always

a little surprised, and her long moments of silence--it is her way of advancing through the water of days, sparkling, rapid--yes, she was there, that morning, in front of the sealed door, and she has been worried ever since. What took place is beyond any conceivable explanation, she is sure of that--and yet she feels she has to know. All day she has asked for his confidence with her eyes, but in vain. No denial on his part, no impatience, no, but his face is closed, his eyes troubled. Now it is night, and despite the window that is open to the stars, and his nearness on the bed where they are both lying, she can no longer see his face, he can only feel that her hand reaches for his in the shadow--is that the reason?--in any case, he speaks. Let us say that he returns first, with an allusion given in a low voice, which allusion I do not know, to the edge of that space which his silence has held at a distance, and resealed, since the end of the morning; and she says, quickly:

- Tell me? I am sure you saw something.

And he answers as promptly, in a very low voice (and the window is on his right, one can hear the breeze, the sky is calm):

- Yes, the paintings.

- The paintings! But why, why didn't you say anything?

- I was afraid.

.....

- Afraid, love? But of what?

- I don't know. Of the paintings. . . . No,  
not of the paintings. . . .

It is a strange voice he has now, as if broken, as if resigned, but feverish too, at times, and at instants exalted, as he explains, very confusedly, that he was afraid, and is still afraid, God knows! no, not of the paintings: with them, rather. Or with others, "which we both know, love." But afraid of the paintings too, yes, all the same. Afraid of them, especially.

- But why?

- Because they were . . . different.

And with this word the confession begins, which doubtless she alone could provoke, because of her way of looking ahead, her silences, and her voice which is broken like his, and hesitating. He will speak, he will even want to tell her everything, he will suffer from his inability to tell everything, to say all there is to say.

.....

- Different? What do you mean? Unexpected?

- Oh yes!

- How were they unexpected? In what way?

- I can't explain.

- And that's what frightened you? That they

were unexpected?

- Yes.

- Nothing else?

No.

. . . . .

- But tell me, in what way were they different, these paintings? The subjects?

- Oh no, no.

- They were the subjects we know? Tell me which ones.

- I don't know. The usual ones. Some Visitations, some Magi. Some mythological scenes, some portraits. As there are everywhere. . . .

- So it was the style? It's an unknown school?

- Oh no, no.

- Then what school was it? You know, if it's not unknown.

- Yes. Florentines, above all. A lot of Florentine painting.

- From what period?

- The seventeenth century. . . . Above all, yes. A little before. A lot from the seventeenth century.

- But you know what painting well, don't you?

- Oh God, yes!

- So what could surprise you in that? It was other painters? Painters you didn't know?

- No.

- You recognized them all?

- Yes, no, I'm not sure. I didn't have time to see everything. But that isn't the question.

- Tell me some names.

- Cigoli, Giovanni da San Giovanni. . . .<sup>3</sup>

But there were others, too. Even some Venetians, I think. And the Rubens. But especially Florence. And when I tell you it doesn't matter. It isn't. . . .

- But what, what?

(She is almost begging now. She feels that the contact can be lost.)

.....

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<sup>3</sup>Lodovico Cardi, called Cigoli (1559-1613) was a member of the Academy of Florence. Among his works executed in Florence are a Trinity at Santa Croce, Saint Albert at Santa Maria Maggiore, Martyrdom of St. Stephen at Monte Domini, Saint Antoine at the Church of the Conventuali. Giovanni Mannozi, known as Giovanni da San Giovanni (1592-1636), was an historical and genre painter in Florence. Influenced by Caravaggio and Ribera, he found patrons in Cosimo II and Ferdinand II of Tuscany.

- I told you, they were--what did I say?--dif-  
ferent. . . . Other.

- But how, I beg you, how? In the details?

The expressions?

- No, nothing in particular.

- But still? In the color?

- What an idea! The color . . . no.

- Describe one of these canvases, would you?

- It would be. . . . That wouldn't accomplish anything. The difference, you can't describe it. It's not a matter of words.

- Why not?

- Because the words are our words, don't you understand?

. . . . .

- But you're certainly thinking of something right now, aren't you? You can see something?

- Yes.

- What? Tell me quickly, quickly!

- Oh nothing. An Annunciation, perhaps. . . .

- Good. And then? It's in the Virgin? The angel?

- It's the vase, too, the flower.

- What kind of flower? Unknown. . . . (She feels herself shiver, she's cold.)

- Oh no, no. The usual flower. . . . Other, yes, but not in the way you think. Try to understand. They were the predictable paintings. Not a Cigoli or a Rubens we couldn't imagine, a stage in their painting we didn't know of, for example. Everything that was there, believe me, I could have dated it within two years. And not another nature, no, they were the same flowers and the same trees, and not another theology, no. And not even other faces, other glances. But it was. . . . other.

. . . . .

- Other, you mean: monstrous?

- Oh no. You're making a mistake. No, not that.

- Then more. . . . A heightened beauty? A greater purity? Something terrible because it is too beautiful, too pure?

- No.

- Oh, I am so afraid!

- Listen!

And he raises himself on one elbow, she sees the sky above him, around him, through the great window on the right.

"Listen. . . . It is as if. . . . As if I had to understand, suddenly, that everything we have here,



as regards painting, all these paintings from the past, and even the recent past--yes, even Delacroix, even Cézanne<sup>4</sup>--didn't exist, had never existed . . . had only been our illusion.

- But those paintings exist! There are even some in this house, near us.

- That's true. But they have always been there, in front of our eyes. And they are thus . . . our dream. They are . . . what we are. While these others, they are different because they have been lost, all together, because they kept to themselves, stayed in the past. The past is other.

And again this feeling that he has not known how to make himself clear, how to formulate his thought.

"Listen. It is as if you suddenly understood that our languages. . . . Yes, the words we use, the syntax, well, they weren't even a language, they were . . . nothing, the nothingness, the surf. The surf that moves under the star.

- And . . . the others?

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<sup>4</sup>For Delacroix, cf. "Painting, Poetry: Vertigo, Peace," note 1 and "Second Earth," note 2. Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) was a French postimpressionist painter who used geometrical forms and color to create depth in a steady, diffused light. He returned again and again to certain themes--fruit spilling out of a basket onto the tilted table, landscapes in Provence.

- They? We? The star. No, not the star. The stones.

.....

She is crying. And he, leaning over her, looking at her, sees her at moments long ago, and yesterday; he recognizes her.

- Let me tell you: it didn't surprise me.

- God, who are you?

- Let me tell you: there were even days when I almost knew. . . . As a child, yes, an adolescent. . . . Looking at landscapes, at mythological scenes, examining the clouds, the bare glowing flesh in the chiaroscuro. Ah, all evidence is enigma! All plenitude is crossed with a pale line, tightened on itself, which we do not see, but which zigzags, at moments, though the wheat of the image--yes, in the mountains, the bodies--and discolours everything, love, like the lightning. We bring these scraps together, these colors and signs, we resew. . . . But below, in the abyss. . . .

- The sky? The stones?

- I called it the night.

She is crying. There is the task, in front of her. All these days of an entire life to lay out like a road in the flowers, the songs of the birds, the shadow. This sound of dazzled water, troubled water,

which the step makes in the stones. And through the window which is open, why? all these stars already, these vapors of the Milky Way which envelop them--and something like a form in this mist, which breathes. The dawn will appear, however, like the dispersion of images.

May 4

To this "transcription" I must add two remarks--for the moment.

The first is that I did not really accomplish what I set out to do. In the dialogue especially, I added more to my memory than the few details I had foreseen. Nothing which hampers its movement, it seems to me--the meaning, if there is one, should not be affected. All the same, so many of these words, in the figure of the whole, are rustlings in which other figures are foreshadowed. . . . Who has said that the account of a dream is worthless, even inadmissible, because it substitutes the definite for the multiple? Each sentence is a labyrinth, there are grottos everywhere in which water is gleaming on the stones. And it is a fact that, if I had noted the same memory two or four years ago--it is very old, as I said--I could already have used many of the words I use today, for example, these "fields studded with flowers" which belong to the original dictation:

but I could not have ended up with the text I wrote the day before yesterday.

The other remark: as this entire text was determined very rapidly despite the divergence, almost without any deletions, I must really hold these few pages, relative as they are, as an accomplished fact, in which the fantasy I had in mind is caught forever. And what I must now indicate most clearly is that I am not without regret for the virtualities that were abolished in this way, whether variations or new themes: to the point that I wonder what would have happened if I had used this "idea for a story," precisely, to write one, with all the augmentation of description, of fiction which the first given may have required--and would then have provided. After all, this indication certainly accompanied it, very distinctly, that it was an "idea," a point of departure--from which more substance could have been born. And who knows whether I did not seek, under the pretext of preserving the truth, feigning to believe that the initial fantasy was valuable in itself, to reseal a door, like the "historian" at the Prague castle? What depth could there have been in the presence of the "young woman," for example, what depth should there have been? And this house in the mountains? Writing is only a seal, very often, that we place on a

threshold: and even when this seal has the radiant aspect of an open portal.

It remains true that I can take this act which closed the door as a threshold in itself; it will be enough if I break with its structure, place myself from the start at the level of these rustlings, these shimmerings I've evoked, adding the associations it awakens in me, as so many unexplored facts. Thus the fortune teller, our friend, places other figures over the first she turned over.

And it is in this spirit that I will now evoke--in haste, I will come back to it--another "idea for a story" which suggested itself while I was writing, the day before yesterday, and even became more insistent as I continued to transcribe my phantasm and left the point behind where the new idea could have been inserted. What led to it, I think, was this situation in which a group of men and women leaned over an underground room. The thought intruded then, in effect, that this room below, buried very deep in the earth, could yet receive light through a bay--one among many, among so many, on the flank of the castle. More precisely, I saw a high wall lit by the sun, and scores of windows at different levels, which opened, of course, into ordinary rooms and corridors: but one, which no one could remember or locate, would be that of the room in the depths--yes,

despite its position at an ordinary level, in the light. . . . What a contradiction! And what fearful premonitions of thought, and matter, when one is forced to accept this evidence! One of the members of the group might have had to suggest this hypothesis, while they all leaned over the rope, or even explain the reasoning which led to it.

A lighted wall! These closed windows--for many of the rooms, known or not, have been deserted for so long--in the castle wall which is turned towards God only knows what horizon, what night, in the vast and silent countryside. And myself perhaps, as a child, visiting some castle in the Loire valley, and looking, through the recessed window of a wing, at this alternation of stone and panes, flaming softly in the evening sky. In the great salons, the bedrooms, the paneled dressing rooms--and the guard, who goes ahead, opens the endless windows with so much noise! and the shutters that are in front of the glass, on the side of the room's shadow, the light rising like a glance--Leda, the Virgin move briefly in the dream of the figures, of which time has drowned the blue of an August sky, a sky riddled with a thousand swallow calls, under the shimmering water of brown varnish. To dive, yes, dive into the eddies and echos of this sheet of images, to descend from level to level in the fluid and cool water, traversed at times

by the sun, until the thrust at the bottom lifts you--  
and then to reascend, o earth, transfigured, towards  
the pure sky, the foliage.

A New Series of Discoveries

August, now

I wrote this story, it must have been three months ago, then I sent it to Bruno Roy for the album in which it was to appear; I corrected the proofs, and later still I returned to Paris, where all at once I am curious to know what exactly, in their time, over there, were these "discoveries at Prague." It is not that I doubt my memory, but it rests on so little information! I am surprised, now, that I do not know more about this event which is, after all, extraordinary, and what astonishes me above all is that I have not tried, through all these years, to go back to my sources--that is not at all like me. I used to have at least one article, which I had found one day in an issue of Burlington Magazine--it was, as near as I can remember, two or three years after the first mention of the discovery in the press, and from time to time I even remembered that moment, in which I opened the magazine, became aware of the title, skimmed the first lines. What is more,

I eventually went to Prague, and visited the castle and its gallery of paintings, at one end of which I recognized, on a wall to its scale, and lit from the left, I would say--but why that memory?--an old friend: the Rubens, a vast canvas as bizarre moreover as it was magnificent, a "feast of the gods" but with something of the air of a picnic, though frantic, and so modern--hats like those in Manet, and laughter like Offenbach's.<sup>1</sup> Having come that far, I must have requested a catalogue.

And that is what I look for first, all up and down my books, but in the end I must admit that I do not have it.

Then I go in search of the article which I had kept in mind, and I do find one, in the right journal, more or less at the epoch I would have said--"Rediscoveries of Old Masters at Prague Castle," by T. Gottheiner, in 1965, evidently translated from German--<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For Manet, cf. "Of Painting and the Place," note 9. Offenbach (1819-1880) was born in Germany, later becoming a French citizen. He is associated with French light opera. His most famous work is the Tales of Hoffmann, first performed after the composer's death.

<sup>2</sup>The article may be found in Burlington Magazine, 107:753 (December 1965), pp. 600-606. Bonnefoy's summary is essentially correct, except that the Rubens is not illustrated, and the list of paintings discovered is not exactly what one might expect from Bonnefoy's account. Cigoli and Giovanni da San Giovanni, named in the earlier story, are not mentioned. And the painters are not "Florentines, above all"--there is not a Florentine among them--but primarily Venetians. The



but this time I must recognize that there is no question of the lost room described in the original newspaper paragraph. In fact this report, which seems very well informed and cautious, God knows, implicitly denies the room's existence, since it reports the principal moments of the discovery in detail, without ever mentioning such a room. Hadn't I read Gottheiner's study when I first ran across it? In the years that followed, I would have sworn that I had, and even if I ended by thinking--contradictorily, it's true--that I still had to seek more precise information on the retracing of the forgotten place, the crossing of its threshold, the paintings' sudden reappearance. And my belief was that much stronger because I had an idea of the Rubens, after reading these pages of Burlington Magazine, and the names of a few painters, primarily Italians, Mannerists or artists from the seventeenth century, whose works had been recovered.

So I call one of my friends who I am sure has the Prague catalogue. He reads me a few paragraphs: no, nothing. Everything happened as T. Gottheiner

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artists included are: Rubens, Veronese, Pordenone, Titian, Tintoretto, Bassano, Saraceni, Guido Reni, Hans von Aachen and Deomenico Fetti. Also the castle in question is the Hradčany, not the Hradschin.

indicates it did, and there is certainly never very much held back--what could they fear?--in these accounts written by peaceful historians. . . . In short: the paintings of the Imperial collections, once gathered at the castle, then stolen when the castle was pillaged, or sold, or carried elsewhere, no one knew for sure, had not all reappeared, far from it, in the world's museums or on the art market; and when a complete examination of the situation at Hradschin was undertaken after the last war, these gaps at first seemed astonishing; then it was discovered that a number of canvases, with scaling paint or drowning in successive coats of varnish, still remained in the vast structure which had lain so long in ruins, canvases no one looked at as they passed, infrequently, through the semi-darkness of the rooms; and they were restored and appraised. And that is when it appeared that these works which had been judged to be mediocre, the indifferent work of followers--judged when, in fact, and where? nowhere, never, time had simply passed without anyone taking notice--were in many cases the beautiful paintings which had been sought in vain at the four corners of the earth. A "return of what was hidden," but not in fact very remarkable. There is the slightest complication in Gottheiner's account--

but no, it is I who cannot force myself, even today, to read all that is there--when he alludes to a "Keeper of the Treasure" who would have occupied, at certain periods, a Kunsthhammer, a room filled with art works, where several of the lost paintings had remained until the recent inspections. Is that, this first museum, the source of the information, unquestionably mistaken, of which I was the victim, though certainly complaisant? A place of which they may still have spoken in the castle, by hearsay, but which they could not find in the labyrinth of rooms? Nothing in any case that would have allowed me to accept the myth of the door sealed for so long if, when I visited the Hradschin, I had glanced at the lists in the catalogue as I almost always feel compelled to do.

What should I conclude? I have just reflected on this new series of discoveries, which trouble me a great deal, of course, and I believe that I am justified in making two hypotheses.

The first, which is simple, is that up to the moment when for some reason I was able to write the first pages of my story, I had unconsciously protected the original information, which permitted the dream,

against all evidence. Let us say that I wanted to safeguard this flash of my thought from below for as long as favorable "circumstances" of my own, it little matters which ones, had not yet given me the power to make it flame suddenly at a turn in my writing.

But I also wonder--what am I saying? it is a much stronger temptation, already a sort of certainty--whether my emotion, or fascination, or fear--this feeling is difficult to express in one word, the English of Burlington Magazine, which hardly uses the word, would have awe, which is magnificent, a dread without any identifiable cause--has not found a confirmation in Gottheiner's article, rather than the denial which had to be fended off if the dream were to continue; and a confirmation so disturbing, in its excess of unexpected information, that I immediately had to suppress, once I had read the text--yes, and read it well--its dangerous revelation.

What does Gottheiner say in effect--whose name I persist in writing Gottenheir, my pen has slipped more than once, I must be thinking of the heir (as in English) of the gods (Götter, in German), but why in heaven's name? What does he say, if not that in a half light, and a silence, paintings which had been judged to be lost, believed to be elsewhere, were in fact here. That

absent, they were present. Or again, that what offered itself to our attention, these vague works on the walls, as a particular word, a meaning but also a reason to speak this meaning, a beginning at least of interpretation, a shadow at least of law in the signs' disorder, was other, and would one day be recognized as such, with eyes that would suddenly be other? An evidence? But no, a trap! An image, no, the sheet of water which gleams in peace, one would say, but where an entire life is hidden, as the swampy mass of brown varnish should however have allowed us to foresee. And that is certainly disturbing news, for there is more than one castle in Prague. The lost gallery, the unknown we do not want, now I learn that they are in each of our words, our desires, they trouble our consciousness, which believes itself free, with their shimmering light or their mirages.

And so I hypothesize that if the first paragraph, concerning the sealed rooms and the works hidden within, denied to our knowledge, had struck me because of its symbolic virtuality, in which the unconscious is signified--this place of our images, our obsessions, but forbidden, perhaps impenetrable--the second, much more suggestive and urgent--more true, simply--reminded me that the dark background is not for all that a distant place which we could avoid for long, and which we will

still be able to exorcise, despite some fear in the evenings. The first news was reassuring, in sum, it said that our consciousness is a "castle" without secret regions even if some are sealed or at least resealable, and very little had to be added in order to preserve its unexpected promise, nothing but a sort of myth--the collapse, the reclosure--which one would carefully preserve in one's memory, as one travelled the dangerous paths of writing. The other is, on the contrary, what one tries not to know, since one must still live.

Can we accept, in effect, committed as we are to an existence, with the beliefs we require, the affections that come to us, the meaning that emerges as soon as a destiny takes shape--can we think that all these values, these colors, even these presences that we have gathered are less our true knowledge, our responsibility in its free act, than a simple aggregate of words spoken endlessly in the place of other words, and riddled with drifting forces, impulses which in their void know nothing of what we ourselves believe that we want? If one becomes aware of this eternal doubling of all acts and things, then what solitude there is all at once, for it is not that the self, repudiated, ceases to be; no, it still thinks, in us,

it feels, it still desires, but now it has nothing any longer, this earth is its exile, though it is "studded with flowers" as in the most beautiful painting. Ah, let us rather suppress, from the first minutes, the most dangerous part of the revelation that comes to us! And how can we suppress it more effectively than by retelling it, but changed, confronting it but in a deflection of the signs that are too threatening? And so one writes books. . . .

#### February

Yes--I go back to these last few pages, I reread them, rediscover them, rather--yes, one can say what they say, this thought has a meaning. How can one live if one is not the origin? If one does not at least reflect the distant being, the indifferent being, in the illusionless depth of a bright mirror?

But if that is the case, why did I accept, last summer, what I would have fled before, this true place of the paintings in the old Hradschin, of which the text written in May does not yet seem aware? Why this need, barely three months later, to know more, and isn't this new desire the real enigma?

So I return once more to these "Discoveries at Prague" which I cannot bring myself to decide are complete.

. . . And first, it is all the same surprising, from the earliest epoch, that I have thus undertaken, brusquely, and moreover without encountering any obstacles, to write this story, or this story of an idea for a story, which I had carried in me for over twenty years--that's a long time--without ever thinking very seriously of giving it form. Didn't an event take place, at this moment or a little before, which had a decisive effect?

I reread--always difficult--the printed pages, the published pages. I try very hard to look at these words from the outside, though I had chosen each one.

And first I discover that they lend themselves, it's true, to the myth which affirms the sealed door, but that in these very words where the unknown is resealed, where the phantasmal stones roll endlessly into the depths, a concern remains and does not weaken, a memory endures, and an anxiety; and that another being watches, and questions, near the "historian" who cannot rest, one who with all her heart refuses the distance which is re-established, and the silence which is resealed. In other words, my story cannot be reduced to two dimensions and to the unity of the trace of the mythic discourse. If it is not, indeed, the novel I regretted on the second day, one still finds an evocation of persons, places, even sentiments, which in the



depth of existence, irrational, ambiguous, seem to surpass the exorcism I have attempted. . . . In the first instant, my disquiet may have exerted its power of censorship, which is itself like a dream. But I must recognize that there is another desire at work there; on the whole it is like a dream at the heart of the dream, a dream whose scattered elements are not without cohesion for all that they're scattered, nor perhaps without a specific truth. . . .

So that in order to begin again to understand, I only have to reassemble these elements which abounded where being was suddenly lost--and perhaps as an answer. Why this young woman "who advances," why this house in the mountains--where there are, once again, paintings--why this bed, soon, "where they are both lying, she can no longer see his face," why did I add this carnal dimension to the historian's "metaphysical" confession? And why this open window--a question I asked myself in the text itself--why this vast and calm outdoors which takes the place, at the end, of the man, the woman, the drama of the one and the other, bringing to the foreground of our attention "these stars already, these vapors of the Milky Way which envelop them--and something like a form in this mist, which breathes?"

"Something. . . ." I assert that I wrote these last lines quoted above as I had imagined the story of which they are a part: that is, driven, without knowing anything of what I was saying in them, and also without the intention of suggesting anything through allusion or symbol. It was "like that," and even if I perceived that my fantasy, as I said, formed an indivisible whole, I could not have explained what was meant or represented by this form in the mist. Inasmuch as it is incompleteness, that is lack: "God," would I have decided perhaps, but not without recalling that this interpretation would contravene the impression of a future that whitened in the image. It is very deep in me, in fact, that I feel that what is called a faith is impossible.

God! And yet there is one, in the preceding pages, at this ambiguous level--"it's scientific, isn't it, a question of describing, not accepting"--where the historians' vocabulary echoes, especially when they discuss Italian painting. I note: Visitation and Magi. And I cannot disguise from myself that there remains very little of this "scientific" ambiguity, as soon as it is a question of the Annunciation, this time it is the subject of the work, as such, which troubled my hero--as he bears witness. The Angel,

the Virgin. And "it's the vase, too, the flower." The Mother who is sometimes represented on a field "studded with flowers"--rarely enough in Florence or Rome, it's true, but in Germany, in Bohemia. . . . From one theme to the other, in any case, still a divine birth.

And now I only have to complete my understanding, today, of what I had known for a long time, of course, since "it was written" so precisely: to wit, that this "something like a form," but which breathes, this presence which is still uncertain but so clearly desired, is a birth which is to come, a birth on a scale with the starry sky, and the earth, a birth which would be divine--except that any birth is divine, any life that takes form is an earth and a sky which begin again, and so it follows that the desire expressed there may not require, on this bed, with the nearness of these two beings, the silence of the fragrant mountain all around them, very much theology. God, no, the child himself as the only true manifestation, the only one that is evident, of what is always sought and lost, in the idea--naive, in sum--of God.

I knew it, and even my conscious thought, my "philosophy," was not without some knowledge of it, this intuition I've always felt, and which flows so freely now, to confirm my reading! For I am not unaware, what

am I saying: I have repeated, reiterated, I have inscribed as the epigraph of at least two books,<sup>3</sup> that the experience of the void I was speaking of a moment ago, this sense of an exile in the very place where one has one's being, and of the self as a sort of image, is only what one feels when one remains enclosed in oneself, precisely, so that one can only write, or act, based on one's own life, like a cloud: while if another life appears at the heart of one's own, a still fragile presence which must be helped to its unknown maturation, it very quickly effects a decentering, in which doubt and its mirages are effaced. Who can think for long that he is not, if he is permitted to make another be? Whether or not one believes oneself to be a void, there is no longer any time to think of it, and this is true not only in the ordinary duration but also at the level of reflection, where this detour, doubt, no longer suggests itself. One is the child of one's child, that is the entire mystery. And what is dissipated, in these moments, as the story already indicated through its obsessive use of these few words, "other," "different," "unknown," is not only an anxiety as to the self's ultimate being, but one of the self's modes of being.

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<sup>3</sup>The first two. Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 11, and "The Back Country," note 54.

"Before," let us say at the stage of the historian, one barely knows anything of one's self beyond one's own particularity, that enigma, one feels oneself to be a chance which, deprived of being and yet active, exigent, denying everything in this absurd writing, haunts us at times like a double, so much more alien, and harmful, because he shares our features, almost our glance. I can no longer doubt it, now. All these "discoveries at Prague" were only in order to dream that this "evil" unknown, mirage born of vertigo, could be replaced by this other unknown, which saves: one's ignorance of the future, of the simple day-to-day future, in a life in which there are tasks to fulfil.

And if I was able to write this text after having kept it so long on this side of words, like a dream which does not dare admit its existence, it is because the "something like a form" breathed in a real mist, and stirred, at the end of this waiting period--and then a birth took place. This time I could allow the old desire to be expressed, I could even signify its accomplishment, for what does my new "idea" try to say, after all, the idea which comes to recolor the first, this thought that the room in the depths, ancient retreat of the double, also receives the light through an opening that it has, though one cannot say how?

The window, still nocturnal, of the bedroom in the mountains is now a bay, penetrated by the light of day. And this association of two visions in the enigma, two relations to the eternal light, does not only indicate that an event has taken place, in a life; it is a sort of graft, through which a new word, which wants to be the daughter of time, is attached in the writing to the dreams' dark trunk.

### Cross Street

When I was a child, I was fascinated by a certain Cross Street. For at one end, not too far from our house and the school, it was the ordinary world, and at the other, over there. . . . While this name riddled with fires assured me that it was indeed the passage.

And so I looked with all my eyes, first to the right and then to the left, when we took this street as we sometimes did, even walking all the way to the end, as if it had been any ordinary street; but when we arrived I was tired, almost asleep, and suddenly we were in the bizarre space of the large botanical garden. --Is it here, I said to myself from moment to moment, that over there begins? Here, in this house with its closed shutters? Here, under this lilac? And in this

group of children who are playing with hoops and marbles on the sidewalk disjointed by grass, isn't one already on the other side, is it with fingers of shadow that he touches the hands of the little girls from here? Notions which were certainly contradictory, elusive. And the more so because these detached houses, these vaults of backyards, were undistinguishable from many others in our city; all one could feel there, all one breathed to the last door of painted sheet metal was the increased torpor of the suburbs with their kitchen gardens. Ah, what matters has so few features! Once we had arrived at the botanical garden, where there are names inscribed beneath each tree, in the other smell, I set out running, suddenly awake, I wanted to go far, to enter another place, but the paths edged with small hoops must have turned, in the box tree's shadow, must have rejoined their point of origin, for I soon found myself where I had begun, this time as always before.

How much good this name did me: Cross Street; and this garden of essences; and this vegetable Latin in the warm, moist evenings!

Five years ago, when my mother was in the hospital near the botanical garden, I once again passed two or three early afternoons along Cross Street. And all at once I

rediscovered the city of my childhood, which I had nearly forgotten after so many years away, and this street which seemed to open into another world.

And it was still the same prudence--or the same peace; still this moist odor of lettuce in front of the doors; these old women who sew the infinite into their faded linens, and these Byzantine peacocks at the windows, standing face to face in the embroidery of the dining room curtains, and sometimes a curtain stirs, for a second. And the chalk which still flakes at the corners of the walls. And these silent children. No, Cross Street had not changed. And yet. . . .

How can I explain? It seemed to me that here, where I was, and there, where I was going, were all together what before I had only placed at the confines, in the invisible.

### Coming Home in the Evening

A path in the botanical garden, with alot of red sky above the moist trees. And a father, a mother from the steel works, who have brought their young child with them.

Then, looking towards the evening, the roofs are a hand which reaches a stone to another hand.



And suddenly it is a neighborhood of low, dark shops, and the night which has followed us step by step is short of breath, even stops breathing at times; and the mother is immense near her son who is growing.

Another Cross Street

"Cross Street," someone is saying to me in an art gallery--it is one afternoon near the windowpane, I can see the grey walls outside, the passersby along Jacob Street--"Cross Street, ah, how well I recognized it in the page you devoted to it, for I used to live there too, did you know, in your city. And how much I loved this silence, and how these prosperous houses.

. . .

- Prosperous, no. It's one of the poorest streets.

- Not in the least! I remember it so well.

And the enclosed gardens, and the trees. . . . The old park of the archbishop's palace, just two steps away.

- The archbishop's palace, no, it's the botanical garden."

And so we continue to talk, evoking another neighborhood which I know as well, for I lived there as an adolescent--I was going to high school then, and I sometimes crossed the archbishop's park which was almost

always entirely deserted when I emerged from the empty streets. Shimmering dangerous moments, in which I was tempted to cry out, with all my strength, in order to prove that I existed in my way, in order to verify that these long rows of private houses and small gardens--and no movement ever broke through the walls, there was never any sound except the eternal piano on which a scale fumbled in the distance--were not merely a decor, no, worse, were not the crystallization of some unknown substance, meaningless stains on the windows, stone of the muffled doors. To cry out, to make these curtains move, this piano cease, and then to run, my satchel with all my books beating on my back, down towards the small house we had then, near the canal, where my father had just died. I know this neighborhood well, it is not Cross Street.

Unless. . . . I know, with such an absolute certainty, and I have known for so long, that Cross Street goes off towards the west, through the suburbs, then among the first fields, in the humidity of the lilac and the sound of the pumps! And it was so few years ago that I went back, when the city of my childhood reappeared, and vanished again! Yet the idea that I am mistaken, concerning this street, has found its way into my mind, and lodges there.

I go home, to the house I have now, and I look for the map I had kept of the "somber city," a map which was once used often, as I can see, worn out but repaired, on the back, with thick strips of tape, the color of packing paper. It opens again, the words and the lines fall back into place, and this dead language is spoken once more, at the crossroads. It's true, Cross Street is to the east, in the wealthy neighborhoods. And there, what is the name of this street which six or seven years ago I followed towards the formless suburbs, while I meditated on the importance it had had in my life?

I look with all my eyes, misted now, and find nothing. For here indeed are several streets which go towards the west, zigzagging a little like ancient paths which the city has only partially straightened, but it seems to me that I know each one perfectly, and none is the street I can see so distinctly as soon as I close my eyes. As for others, elsewhere, one or two whose strange names could have retained this quality of "passage," and have dissolved into it, later: well, this Flight Street, which suddenly comes back to me, is too far, all the same, from the garden of animals and essences--after all, this botanical garden was a little like the Garden of Eden--it vanishes among the railroad tracks to the south. . . . Where then is this street,

which I know with all my being, which is, and what is its name? What is its real place in this network of places which are themselves just as real, but which seem to exclude it?

And as I ask myself these questions, here, on the famous blank page, reciting my astonishment but not without choosing my words, I know that this is still writing, I know that these new notations only continue "Cross Street," the other story, and save a memory from being no more than an error by complicating, intensifying a poem. And yet, and I ask you to believe me, the enigma I formulate is in my life as well, the astonishment will last longer than the words which express it. For all my writing, I am also the one who looks at the map of the city where he grew up, and does not understand.

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What was the other Cross Street? How could I live for so long with two distinct stores of knowledge, two memories which have never interfered with each other? Which is in me the one who begins when the other, or an other, and which other, enters the small house near the canal, where there is a tuft of bamboo in the four foot garden--where we came to live two years ago, where my father dies, where we will soon leave again?

I shuffle these figures on my table, these figures with their worn and indistinct contours, these faces, these embers of lost glances, these memories of the corners of corridors, and of faded flowers on the wall paper, of the door to the laundry behind the house, with its slippery step, of odors, the smell of the chestnuts on the boulevard at each mystery of bright spring--when the stormy sky topples, already carrying the past away, and sketching--isn't that the future, over there, a moving silhouette, laughter in the mist, a ruddy head that turns, a body like the surf in Polynesia. What map must I place on what other, what map without features, printed in a single color, a greyish purple, blind, have I already placed over what map that was too significant--unless it rises from the shuffle, irrisistible, last, not the annulment of meaning but meaning itself? I have many uncertain memories, many open memories still to decipher, as I can see. All of a Cross Street to carry far off among my first chances, the first places I did not understand, the affections I did not live, until I reach the origin which will be both absolute and indifferent, the origin which, though poor, was nonetheless--animals and plants, and the smell of the box tree, and the obscure man and woman, an entire world, which I owe to another child.

chance, of which we are born, chance that is precariously, delicately folded on itself, to infinity, like the wing that the chrysalis will unfold: you can only keep everything within your unknown color for as long as we are alone, and as if asleep, turned towards the shadow. To the other--and even if it is writing, the wing's unfolding, at times--we are indebted for the meaning.

### Uncontrollable Laughter

It was a question, obscurely, of an old man who had made his specialty, with good reason, of wash drawings that depicted uncontrollable laughter.

He's a wise man, I was told. For a long time he has only attempted to trace, with a single brush stroke--yes, uncontrollable laughter.

And, on tiptoe, in this gallery at the back of a bamboo garden, we approached the door of his cell. Listen, we whispered (and we laughed, we laughed!), listen to the sound of the brush.

### The Signifier

The first word was "the cloud," the second was again "the cloud," the third, fourth, etc, were "the

cloud," or "the sky," of "the air," we were not sure.

But already the seventh tore, faded, could no longer be distinguished from the tearing, the fading of others below, an infinite number of others, the others ash, the others almost a white powder, which we stirred, vainly, in this large sack of rough cloth, what remained of the language.

PART V



INTERVIEW WITH JOHN E. JACKSON CONCERNING  
SURREALISM (1976)

Yves Bonnefoy, what interests me is to understand how you passed from Surrealist writing, which held you for a moment, to another use of the image in the poems of Douve.<sup>1</sup>

The image is what had touched me most closely, and most immediately, in Surrealist works--poetry as much as painting. And the more so, probably, because I had not yet really seen anything of what greater poets or painters had been able to do or were still doing with appearance, how they discovered--as I learned later--an entirely other intensity in appearance, that of the evidence, the simple. In fact, this was taking place while I was still a high school student in my provincial city, where what does not draw attention, what is perpetuated without becoming, and without unsettling any established habit, was the law--and where the bookstores were empty. One day, my philosophy teacher, a very young

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<sup>1</sup>On the motion and immobility of Douve, Bonnefoy's first book of verse (1953).

man who had frequented a few avant-garde groups in Paris, just before the war dispersed them, lent me the Short Anthology of Surrealism, by Georges Hugnet, and there I discovered, all at once, the poems of Breton, of Péret, of Eluard, the superb verbal masses of Tzara in his Dadaist period, and Chirico's Mystery and Melancholy of a Street--a true thunderbolt--Giacometti's Suspended Ball, the collages of Max Ernst and Tanguy, the first Miròs: an entire world.<sup>2</sup> I was immediately fascinated, summoned, and precisely by the strange situations in these works, the unimagined objects, the altered aspect of things, in short, what is called the image, in Surrealism, even if it is in fact a denial of coherent representation. "If only there were sun tonight,"<sup>3</sup> I read, and it seemed to me that a road whose

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<sup>2</sup> The Petite anthologie poétique du surréalisme edited by Georges Hugnet was published in Paris, by Editions Jeanne Bucher, in 1934. The following poets are included: André Breton, René Char, René Crevel, Salvador Dali, Paul Eluard, Georges Hugnet, E.L.T. Mésens, Paul Nougé, Benjamin Péret, Gui Rosey, Tristan Tzara and Philippe Soupault (only in collaboration with Breton). Also these artists: Hans Arp, Victor Brauner, Giorgio di Chirico, Salvador Dali, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti (though not the work mentioned here by Bonnefoy), Valentine Hugo, Rene Magritte, Joan Mirò, Pablo Picasso, Man Ray and Yves Tanguy.

<sup>3</sup> André Breton, "L'Aigrette," Clair de Terre, 1923. Other poems from this volume are included in Hugnet's anthology, but not, as Bonnefoy implies, this one.

presence I had not even suspected opened in front of me, in this night which I recognized as my own, and as deep as ever but suddenly murmuring, initiatory, the first step towards the first true light. . . . And yet, I must emphasize that for a long moment my adherence to these intuitions and glimpses, exalted as it was at the time, was not exclusive for all that; I was reading other poets, for example Valéry, and what is more I loved the sky's and the sea's identity with themselves, in "The Graveyard by the Sea,"<sup>4</sup> the heat without hidden depths, the sparkling light in which dreams are dispelled. A question of incoherence, again, or were these needs, each one true, which I would have to synthesize? In any case it was only later that I became a militant, with all the exclusions and self-styled ferocity which that implies.

Was there a new and specific occasion which led to this more radical commitment?

No, unless it was the state of mind which prevailed after the Liberation, that mixture of vague hope and

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Valéry's (1871-1945) most famous poem. In the classicism of its form and thought, this meditation on "the three or four undeniable gods" is far removed from Surrealism.

ideological naiveté, and all the firm positions, all the regroupings it caused, all those bad poems too, burdened with fine sentiments which had become clichés, which had become--precisely--poor and intolerable images. There was much in all that to refuse, for one who instinctively associated the idea of poetry with an intensification of consciousness and of the word, whatever its values and principles in other respects; and there was also the temptation to take sides oneself, to bring--for the second time, since there had been those writings of the Résistance, but this time on the true plane--the writing of poetry into contact with collective preoccupations: and it was my tendency towards Surrealism which profited from this ambition when I arrived in Paris, for Surrealism had spoken so often of the spirit's revolution; and I founded what was, of course, a tiny review,<sup>5</sup> which forced

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<sup>5</sup>La Révolution la Nuit, named after a 1923 composition by Max Ernst which was included in Hugnet's anthology. The publication history of this review is very confused, as different bibliographers give conflicting information. There is a copy of an issue identified as number 2 (no date) at the Art Institute of Chicago, which includes Bonnefoy's "Anti-Platon," an early work which he himself dates from 1946. Also included is work by Yves Battistini, Victor Brauner, Jean Brun, Jacques Charpier, Christian Dotremont, Jacques Hérold, Edouard Jaguer, Mary Reynolds and Iaroslav Serpan.

me in its turn to make judgments without nuances. In addition, I met some former members of the group, for example Victor Brauner who was one of the greatest,<sup>6</sup> then in 1946 I met Breton, when he returned from the United States: and here were examples of a refusal to compromise, of a vigilance whose intensity hardly incited me to question what they affirmed, the one so simply, the other still so haughtily, despite his obvious sadness, and surrounded as he was by the legend created by the distance of those five years of interruption and exile. But my faithfulness was not without contradictions, even in this second period. In fact, as much as I saw myself, and declared myself to be violently Surrealist in my publications and my writing, I still remained at a distance from the group which had reformed around Breton. I did not associate with his young friends, I did not invite them to publish in my

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<sup>6</sup>This Roumanian artist, who created the cover for the Art Institute issue of La Révolution la Nuit, first came to Paris in 1927, when he met the Surrealists. He joined the group on his second trip in 1932. He suffered a major accident in 1938, which seems to have become, in retrospect, a focus for his life. Like other Surrealists, he became increasingly interested in the occult after 1940, but he broke with the group in 1948, having participated (as Bonnefoy did himself) in the 1947 exhibition. "Force de concentration de Monsieur K," which was included in Hugnet's anthology and must therefore have been Bonnefoy's introduction to Brauner, dates from 1934 and is now in a private collection in Paris.

review (nor Breton for that matter, but in his case it was out of admiration, I thought him too great for my review, at least in the beginning), and on the other hand I had friendships, for example with Christian Dotremont,<sup>7</sup> among the infinitely more independent, more ironic members of the Belgian group, which was always very distinct from the one in Paris, and which Breton appreciated less and less. I also saw a great deal of Gilbert Lely,<sup>8</sup> himself a friend of the Surrealists but not devoted to them, and he encouraged me to make judgments. As for my relations with Breton, well, for some reason they ended abruptly. I admired him, as I said, hadn't he written Les vases communicants, L'Amour fou--rather than Nadja, which had disappointed me, and the poems of Revolver which I tried so hard to like,

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<sup>7</sup> Belgian Surrealist who collaborated with Bonnefoy on the Art Institute issue of La Révolution la Nuit. In 1948, he joined a group of avant-garde artists who walked out of a conference sponsored by members of the Franco-Belgian Revolutionary Surrealist Group. Denouncing formalism, intellectualism and estheticism, artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam formed COBRA to promote spontaneous, expressionistic art. There were eight issues of the review called Cobra, during the years 1948-1951.

<sup>8</sup> Editor and biographer of the Marquis de Sade, Lely's collected poems were published in Paris by Jean-Jacques Pauvert (1969). Bonnefoy comments on the inside cover of the collection that "His poetry is the redemption, through memory and the cry, of what is lost.  
 . . ."

but there was also Pleine marge, his masterpiece<sup>9</sup>--- all the same, he left me cold, with all his distant courtesy, "attentive" to me as he said, but vaguely surprised and clearly on his guard: probably I had a sullen air which he must have interpreted as a sign of antipathy. On the whole, I must have passed for a rather marginal member of the group, and when the day came, just before the exhibition of 1947,<sup>10</sup> when I refused to sign the manifesto of that time, which was moreover called "Rupture inaugurale,"<sup>11</sup> everything was

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<sup>9</sup>Breton published Les vases communicants in 1932, L'Amour fou in 1937, Nadja, his novel, in 1928, Le Revolver à cheveux blancs in 1932, and Pleine marge in 1940. The first three contain his "great walks through Paris, which Bonnefoy admires later in this interview (p. 393).

<sup>10</sup>When Breton returned to France, he organized an international exhibition of Surrealism. The catalogue, entitled Le Surréalisme en 1947 and published by Maeght, was prepared by Breton and Duchamp and included a bewildering array of writers and artists, including Bonnefoy and several of the contributors to his review (Brauner, Brun, Hérold, Serpan). There are two editions: the limited edition has an "object" by Marcel Duchamp as its cover and twenty-four original plates.

<sup>11</sup>Subtitled a "Declaration adopted on June 21, 1947, by the Group in France in order to define its prejudicial attitude towards all partisan politics," this manifesto was published in Paris by Editions Surréalistes. It is really directed against the Communist Party, which is accused of betraying the workers' movement. It is interesting that some of the manifesto's language lingers in Bonnefoy's reminiscences. The Surrealists' stated goal is to transform the world and change life (Rimbaud); to resolve the conflicts between desire and necessity, between dream and act (Baudelaire), between the marvellous and the contingent, etc.; to

over without any of the dramas of disappointed hope. Breton contented himself with refusing to shake my hand as he left the cafe; there was neither exclusion nor insult.

Why did you refuse to sign "Rupture inaugurale?"

For a reason which will surprise you, and which no longer means anything to me. Despite many pages which Andre Breton had written, but on the strength all the same of a few solemn declarations which were left to us from the group's past, I imagined that Surrealism was entirely opposed to any occultism, in other words that it only tended to reveal the riches of the world which falls to our senses, and of the life that is possible in the world's heart, without any belief in hidden powers. It's true that the Surrealists had appealed to the Dalai-Lama, during the twenties, but

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un-chain (rather than to redeem) man. The occultism which bothered Bonnefoy, and which was much more evident in the 1947 exhibition in which he did participate, lies in a call near the end of the manifesto for the promulgation of a new myth. Among those who signed "Rupture inaugurale," Brauner, Brun and Hérold all contributed to La Révolution la Nuit.



then they had declared themselves to be Hegelians and even Marxists, which mattered to me because I came to poetry, for my part, from a region of thought dominated by the ancient study, which is still pursued after a fashion, of mathematics and the history of science-- and of this formal logic whose difficult relation to the dialectical method we had to reverse already caused me concern. In these circumstances, to see Breton and his friends become enthusiastic about magic, and make Léonie Auboïs d'Ashby into a sort of demon, preparing to raise an altar to her at the upcoming exhibition,<sup>12</sup> was disconcerting, and the more so because I was not myself without an elective fondness for certain concrete forms, which I'll discuss with you, of ancient thought and religious speculation. I loved the Alexandrian sects, which had been revealed to me by Georges Bataille's study, among others--the one about Gnostic intaglios, in Documents, the most beautiful review from the period between the two wars; I was ready to accept

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<sup>12</sup>There were eight altars altogether at the 1947 exhibition, each one devoted to a being "susceptible to being endowed with mythical life." The goal was to express a new myth--this was, indeed, the theme of the entire exhibit (cf. Breton's "Projet initial" in Le Surrealisme en 1947, pp. 135-38). For Léonie Auboïs d'Ashby, cf. Rimbaud's "Dévotion" in the Illuminations.

the Osirus, "black god," of Arcane 17, out of affection for the Pharonic period.<sup>13</sup> Caught between a sort of spontaneous materialism, which has remained natural to me, and an innate concern with transcendence, a profound taste for the categories and even the myths which express transcendence, I had to find an acceptable compromise; and incapable as I still was of understanding what could form this compromise, I had at least decided that it must exclude belief and repatriate all the experience of ancient correspondences, all the fantasies of occult powers, into an ontology, simply, and the pure act of poetry.

Isn't it this relationship of Surrealism to science--this contradiction, all the same--

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<sup>13</sup>A consistent concern of Bonnefoy's: cf. "The Back Country," among other texts. Georges Bataille's article was in Documents, 1 (1930), pp. 1-8. (There were only fifteen issues altogether: seven in 1929 and eight in 1930.) This article is in fact a rejection of gnosticism defined as "the despotic and bestial obsession with evil, lawless forces . . . in metaphysical speculation as well as in the nightmare of mythology." Bataille associates this obsession with black magic and also with modern materialism.--Bataille and his review were a center of opposition to Breton's group (cf. for example, the end of Breton's Second Manifesto) although he also participated in the 1947 exhibition.

which you were already trying to clarify in the page from 1945, entitled "The New Objectivity," which appeared in the first issue of La Révolution la Nuit?

Yes, the notion which seemed most important to me, from this point of view, was certainly that of the object, since it had become as problematical in the new physics, after Heisenberg's discoveries,<sup>14</sup> as it was central to Breton, who had invented the Surrealist object and had overcast his entire group with it. I was struck by this fact that modern knowledge, founded on the physics of the atom or on biology, traverses the level of our objects of existence without seeing it--the objects our eye perceives, the objects we can love or which help us live--while ancient science was able to keep hold of everything, charging everything with meaning in the network of correspondences. And what I valued, on the contrary, in Surrealist poetics, which loves windfalls, coincidences, encounters, is that this poetics was supremely attentive--remember Breton crossing Paris in his great prose works--to those thousand things, at

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<sup>14</sup>Born in 1901, Heisenberg developed the "philosophy of complementarity" in 1927, holding that the observed object is altered by being measured, or observed.

once furtive and insistent, which his predecessors' poetry had been unable to query, even during the Symbolist epoch, had not even glimpsed. To my mind, this was a compensatory practice which was historically necessary and already effective, and which we had to think through, to deepen, but without falling once more into fantasies of magic which could only reseal the forces at work in the infra-consciousness. With that said, "The New Objectivity," as far as I can remember, was only a very confused intuition, in very few lines, lacking some categories which only asserted themselves in me a little later. The idea of presence, for example, would enable me, I believe, to more precisely define the relationship of Surrealism to scientific thought or, simply, object-directed thought, if I were still concerned with that; in other words, to the thought which does not unduly existentialize our material environment, our earthly place. Now I would say that there is no real or surreal, the one structured and revered by science, the other overflowing science with its irrational characteristics, which can only be perceived by the primitive eye--that would only lead me to despise the table I write on, the unformed stone in the ravines, in favor of the lyrebird--but **rather presence**, at times, in the face of the transitory

signifieds of conceptual thought. And to begin with, I would be more able to differentiate and detach myself from Surrealism, recognizing that I loved the Surrealist object, and the image in which it appears, for a certain intuition which posed it, an intuition of its presence which sets the object there in front of us, where it refuses all analysis, where one would say it is conscious--but that this possession by presence is also as if deformed, and so deprived of its virtue.

I see that we have reached the heart of your thought concerning Surrealism, in which one can see both an acceptance and a refusal. . . .

At any rate, I will be better able to tell you, now, what Surrealism brought me, and if you will let me, I will give you an example which could be taken from Chirico, since you want to know why I was so fond of this work, but instead I will turn to Max Ernst, because I have a very precise memory of the encounter I will describe. In Hugnet's anthology, there is a collage by

Ernst, taken from La Semaine de Bonté,<sup>15</sup> a collage which shows a young girl bound and gagged in the compartment of a train, at night, in the yellow light of an electric bulb. Around her are the other passengers, who have the heads of lions. And one shares her terror, which goes beyond the danger to her life, if she is in danger, and which even bears on the most fundamental relationship one can have with the real, that which reveals the alien character of reality, transcending our representations, and so throwing us back into nothingness. With that said, if this particular image arouses us to such an immediate sense of metaphysical horror, it is because Max Ernst, who was a great poet in this respect, has taken as elements of his collage those woodcuts from the Magasin pittoresque in which very practiced, very rapid engravers--they had to finish their work by dawn, like the modern journalist--were already able to evoke recent events or aspects of the world just as photographs would soon do in their place. In the line or the light there is already the glance

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<sup>15</sup>This collage is taken from a novel composed of collages, published in Paris in 1934. Ernst used illustrations from popular literature of the late nineteenth century to create entirely improbable but eminently believable situations. This one is the eighth image in the first volume (the pages are unnumbered).

of the darkroom, which simply registers the symbols which coordinate things for us, without knowing anything of their significance--symbols which even the most pessimistic painting from earlier periods had noted instinctively, for our peace, in its representation of the world. All that Max Ernst did with his collages was to make explicit and dramatic a perception which he found, diffuse but deeply rooted, in the prints he loved, an intuition which was still latent but which will be easier and easier to initiate, with horror or anxiety, in the theological age which is ending, and which we may call the experience of nothingness, very precisely that and nothing else, since in the failure of meaning it is our faith in ourselves which dissipates if objects and beings no longer speak, no longer collaborate with us, unless we consider ourselves as exiles groping in a universe of shadows. And for my part, there had certainly been enough empty houses in my childhood--enough petrified alcoves in the immobility of closed country houses, and enough old magazines too, from the end of the last century (it was in the attic that I looked at these scenes convulsed in the gaslight), for this view to come easily to me, as soon as it was proposed by the Surrealist poets, and for me to be moved by these icons of blackness, for them to show me to

myself, brusquely and with a real disquiet. We should note that there was no example of such a thought of being, especially one signified so directly, in the art and poetry most currently accepted, the only art and poetry I had perceived in 1942 or 1943. Surrealism, on the other hand, was nothing but that, paintings and poems both, and it is in this way that I was led to designate experience with the notions of Surrealism, and that I called these sorts of apparitions surreal "objects" or qualities, with all the unformed hope that, in spite of everything, one puts into these words. But, I repeat, with richer categories, and my example will lead to them, I could have understood more rapidly that the gagged look of the nocturnal train, this greater intensity perceived in the object which a moment before we were still seeing distractedly, is a negative intensity, if I may call it that--the Surrealists were fond of the word black which certainly expressed this light at cross purposes--not the unveiling of the background of tangible experience, with riches unperceived by our ordinary reason, but the wrong presence, the one which removes what is, at the very moment it appears to us, and closes it to our reading: so that we must seek, beyond its night, a shore where the meaning--meaning, that is the new idea, the essential idea--can reform in simple things, assuring each one a place, a



justification, in the unity which is more than being, which is in itself the light.

Where did you find these categories you speak of? Distinct, in sum, from the contribution of Surrealism but allowing you to decipher it?

It is difficult, I must say in passing, to go back as we are doing to earlier periods, even and especially if it is a question of what mattered the most in the formation of our thought. I do not keep a journal, I do not note anything of what was, I forget a great deal, and so I run the risk of revising, based on the values I hold today, what I once lived in a confused and contradictory fashion, and with, perhaps, other tendencies, which I misunderstand now or even suppress. It is the dream's trick to disguise itself as memory, isn't it? From another perspective, the influences which acted on me were too complex for me to be able to untangle them so rapidly. I read extensively in Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, Hegel, Plotinus, and each of these played a role. And beyond thought there is daily life, which little by little turns the theoretician of twenty

odd years, abstract or rather distracted, into the more conscious and responsible being who understands better what life is, what a destiny is, what one must value in order to be worthy of a destiny. The Surrealists were children, they played games, which are, moreover, irreplaceable, but for me existence, after 1947, was for a long time difficult--work, suburb, solitude--and what is more, the education I had received urged me to accept those humble tasks, those anonymous finalities which are so far from the egocentrism which can often open the mirages of the infinite to poetic creation. Yes, it is through the years passing and their trial that I learned what time is, and chance, what I call finitude, in their irreducibility which is being itself. Still, I will not be far wrong if I offer you this instance which was decisive for me, during this period of formation, the encounter which was probably unexpected for a young Surrealist, but which chance brought to me very early, an encounter with a theologian, if the word can be used for him, with the Russian Leon Chestov. Already in 1944, I had found a second-hand copy of his Power of the Keys along the Seine, in Boris de Schloezer's admirable translation, and a labor had begun in me.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. "Second Earth," note 12. The Library of Congress lists Boris de Schloezer's translation of Le pouvoir des clés (Potestas clavium) under the alternate spelling, Lev Shestov (Paris, J. Schiffrin, 1928).

Chestov teaches that what we love is by rights what has being, in the strongest and most "objective" sense of that word. It follows that Job is right to demand that his children and his goods, which God had taken from him, be returned to him by this same free power which is beyond all causes, just as we would be right if we demanded, if we dared to think and to will that Socrates whom we loved, and who died unjustly, not be dead, that he begin again untouched by judgment or hemlock: and that because this representation which philosophers call essence, and which science would call causality, or necessity, is only, as Chestov repeats endlessly, the retrospective consolation, as dishonest as it is disastrous, which our eternal stoicism invents in apparent sorrow. This entire philosophy, or this thought I should probably say, for there is no system to it, and for good reason, is oriented, as we can see, by the idea of resurrection, or rather by the idea of a continuing effacement of the past-abolition of history's irreversibility, rewriting of history by authentic desire; and we could call it senseless, but only, in fact, because it insists on thinking the absolute with which it is, legitimately, haunted, in the naive form of temporal eternity. Chestov himself is afraid of time, he remains outside the instant whose value he does not feel. If we only retain his valorizations--presence

over absence, what is loved over what is, or passes for being--we will arrive at a negation of absence, a resurrection of what is lost, which in my opinion is better founded once we understand that the absolute we desire lies in the plenitude of a second in which intensity is worth eternity. In sum, it is only a question of so preparing ourselves to meet reality that our complete adherence allows the universal to burn the differences in us, and the vain desires which are born of fears, and the regrets, in vast moments whose aftermath matters little. And doubtless it is difficult, but there is the light, and the goal. Chestov, by claiming eternity, opened my eyes to what is missing in Surrealism, so that reality, which is more than the surreal, could flourish; and I would call that, in the end, the hope.

Have we reached the origins of your preoccupation with the sacred; with what you have not been afraid to call the religious, although you have indicated that the idea of God, that unduly fixed signified, already provokes the absence?

Yes, probably, but with a few nuances. To begin with, this "religious" quality--why refuse the word?--wasn't

religious in its origins, since it was a question of what I had lived, and had vaguely foreseen. From childhood a certain idea I had of the place, for example, the "here" barren and discolored, while elsewhere--or rather "over there"--was rich with substance, had all the marks, it now seems to me, of an intuition of transcendence, even if in this case transcendence inhabited aspects of our world; and it seems significant that the first text I ever published, a response to a survey from Savoir-vivre, one of those extremely elusive reviews of Belgian Surrealism, was an evocation of this "back country" which I described much later and which is at the very least a demonic phantasm.<sup>17</sup> On the other

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<sup>17</sup>As Bonnefoy indicates, a tiny review of which I have only been able to locate one issue, the one which is devoted to the survey Bonnefoy answered (1946?). Sixty-six others also answered these four questions: What things do you detest the most? What do you love the most? What do you wish the most? What do you fear the most?

Among those who answered, Battistini, Brun and Dotremont were also contributors to La Revolution la Nuit. Nine others were involved in the 1947 international exhibition or signed "Rupture inaugurale." And there are a few celebrated names: Char, Magritte, Picabia, Schwitters.

Bonnefoy's answer reveals his preoccupation with Surrealist icons--a painting by Tanguy, Chirico's Mystery and Melancholy of a Street--and the beginning of his return voyage, as his answer revolves around a print he saw as a child.

hand, nothing could be farther from my vision of Surrealism than to interpret it as a secularism to which I would have had to oppose my more extensive knowledge of transcendence in order to be myself. If it had occurred to me, in 1947, to use this suspect and insulted word, the religious, I would have used it, in fact, against Breton and his followers, in my criticism of "Rupture inaugurale," for example, inasmuch as I did not like their occultist inclinations. These archives of the "wrong" presence which I received in abundance from Surrealism, and which awoke me, as I said--all that is certainly religious, and even in the only living form that modern poetry has known, with the exception of Georges Bataille--I had read Le Coupable, then L'Experience intérieure, as early as 1944, and I had felt that he was speaking of what is essential. But both the occultism of André Breton--what Jean Starobinski has characterized so well, and has demonstrated, by recalling the influence on Breton of Myers' "subliminal self"<sup>18</sup>--and the ethics of paroxysm in Bataille's work, were a perverted sense of the religious, and it is for

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<sup>18</sup>The article in question is "Freud, Breton, Myers" in André Breton, a volume of essays edited by Marc Eigeldinger (Neuchâtel, Editions de la Baconnière, 1970), pp. 153-71.

this reason that separation from Breton was certainly a beginning, an origin.

What do you mean by a "perverted sense of the religious?"

Alas, something that was in me as well, and still is to some extent, which moreover explains my first adherence to Surrealism, or in any case overdetermines it: so that, when I mobilized myself against the demons and the "black gods" of the 1947 exhibit, it was less an alien thought than an interior heresy, to which I had ceded a great deal, at certain times, and which I was trying to combat in its most extreme forms, those I could most easily criticize. The "perverted" sense of the religious is what I have called "gnosticism" in several places, and above all in The Back Country: a thought of transcendence, yes, but which has attached itself unduly to a certain object or aspect of our universe, an object chosen at first to account indirectly for transcendence, by analogy for example, but quickly seen as carrying the traces, at least, of a superior reality in its being; and the other things of our world are devalued in consequence, the earth itself is felt to be a prison, since these low things predominate in it; divinity is an

absence, which only appears at certain instants, and only appears veiled; our lucidity is a flash which only gains a few instants of torn liberty. It is certainly true, for example, that the experience of being is sometimes an ardor which one can feel as a sort of adolescence carried, in its very difference, to an unknown intensity, and so it is legitimate, based on this prescience, to make adolescence a figure of the good, and even to dream of angels or spirits released from time and age, for such notions allow us to speak symbolically of mental attitudes which are difficult to express in other ways. But "gnosis" begins when Breton writes, mythologically, that Rimbaud was for one or two seasons a true god of puberty, and that he should always have remained this god, refusing the servitudes of finite existence, of destiny, even if it meant suicide, I suppose, as soon as the weight of the world became too great. The gnostic attitude, in other words, substitutes an image, which is held to be the only reality, for all things, and above all for the other person: so that there is gnosis, to my mind, or in any case risk of gnosis, as soon as there is writing, since the writer is attached to facts, to objects, to the beings he loves, and whom he invests therefore with his desire, and abolishes in their own being, deifies, in sum, according to the laws of his own heaven, although these beings belong to our



world. If he is not careful, the author will think that his text has selected what is true and pure from the world, and that these few words are a reflection or an expression of the absent god--Mallarmé would say a trace in which an Intelligible is revealed. I believe that one can affirm--and this would assist the task of criticism--that all literature, especially all poetry, is in part gnosis, since it is in part writing. But the Surrealists, ah, how much more so than other poets, except for their predecessors, the later Symbolists! Breton is completely immersed in this illusory sovereignty which denies Nadja the right to her own truth, though he thinks that he recognizes her as a free presence; her truth is too simple, too ordinary; she has to be a fairy or she will be rejected, along with millions of other despicable beings. I said that Nadja had disappointed me. It is precisely for this reason, it is because the book sacrifices too manifestly to a generalized writing, I would say, to a reception of the world which only retains what one desires from the perspective of a self who is, moreover, content to be no more than the sum of his images.

You were saying that this "gnosis" was also present in you?

In that I write; perhaps also as the tendency which led me to write. But what separated me from the Surrealists, in the end, is that I believe, through an entirely other experience in me, that the "gnostic" dream is a distorted intuition, as fallacious as it is intense, and that there can only be true presence if sympathy, which is knowledge in its act, has been able to pass something like a thread, not only through a few aspects which lend themselves to our fantasies, but through every dimension of the object, of the world, assuming them, reintegrating them into a unity which I for my part feel that the earth guarantees us, in its evidence, the earth which is life. In my eyes this unity--and it was in this way that I read Plotinus--is the foundation of being, the reason that anything at all can participate in a place which has being, instead of falling again, through fragmentation and interior opacity, into its nothingness and our own. It is this unity which asks us to trust ourselves to finitude, because there is no totality except in the reciprocal recognition of the parts which make up the whole: and that is limitation, in its presence, but a limitation which earns us the right, in the very assumption of our nothingness, to

accede to the universal. And that is the act I would call religious, that is the potential sacred, and that is what allowed me to leave Surrealism, incapable as it was of having faith in the simple forms of life, preferring the unfolding of the imaginary to the tightening of the evidence, the peacock's fan to the stones of the threshold. Finitude, which can make us accept a place, and therefore live in that place, and therefore see it in its depth, in its resonances, is not the land of exile feared by the gnostic vertigo, clinging to its rock of infinity; nor is it the sorrow Chestov speaks of, which one could reverse if one had faith and courage, and which is accepted, but in suffering, by the stoicism of the philosophers; no, it is once again, and from the interior, the infinite which we thought was lost, the plenitude which saves--the instant replacing the eternal. And that is why, shortly after my Surrealist exercises, I could place as the epigraph to my first book, Douve, or rather on the threshold of the reflection which led to it--and not without irony, because of its original context--this sentence of Hegel's on death, and finitude, which he tells us that thought must remember.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 11.

You evoke your writings from the time you had left Surrealism, as I did myself, at the beginning of our discussion. Speaking practically, how was the passage accomplished? Not so much in reflection, now, as in writing, where this danger exists.

I believe that this passage was accomplished because of a contradiction which exists in Surrealist writing, a contradiction which Breton preferred not to acknowledge, or which he perverted--I do not have time to explain-- a contradiction which for my part I discerned little by little, quickly feeling, as I imagine, its positive quality in a search for meaning. Let us go back to the image, which we evoked at the start. The Surrealist image is the most effective instrument of the gnosis I was discussing, because it subverts the principles that allow us to decipher the world, because it is indifferent to time, to space, to causality, to the laws of nature and being, and so it blurs the figure of our place, deprives us of the music of the place, while its origin in the author's unconscious, the significance, which can be considerable, that it has for the author's psychic life, because of its origins and without his knowledge, give it the appearance of something which

concerns us but which is hidden from us, and which we must decipher, which is mysterious, so that we can receive it as a signal that is sent to us, an appeal, the proof once more that there is another level of being. Remember that poem of André Breton's which I quoted at the beginning, the sun in the night, and this other poem as well, "The Night of the Sunflower"<sup>20</sup>-- still, moreover, this same idea of the other light-- which he imagined was prophetic of his existence to come. In this surreality which comes to life as he passes, he feels that he is expected, watched for, he feels that more is known about him than he knows himself; in short, Breton interprets what I denounced before as the wrong presence, as the syncope of the meaning which reduces the object to its slough, leaving it bare in front of us-- Breton interprets this as the vigilance of great and secret forces from whose point of view our ordinary idea of reality is only a veil. But precisely to the extent that the Surrealist text is burdened, as I said, with unconscious determinations, it becomes the concrete expression, as soon as it is finished, of the author's deep personality which is all the same--these obsessions, these needs, these whims, even these neurotic traits-- part of the reality of here; these are the laws, the

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<sup>20</sup> "La Nuit du Tournesol," L'Amour fou, 1937.

values, the servitudes of our world, refused but active despite everything, even real and pressing as never before in poetry, since the ancient introspection did not allow the unconscious to speak its language so freely. Certainly there is no longer any question in automatic writing, of hiding what one is beneath a conventional figure. The reality denied by Surrealism "comes back" in image after image as the sum of these imaginations, these sketches of dreams, and in the end one can even perceive, in each of André Breton's books--to return again to the great example--this finitude at work which may perhaps be refused but is never avoided. . . . This is its ambiguity, and from this ambiguity we may draw several consequences, for the necessary next step. And first of all, why not establish oneself in ambiguity, taking it as a given of experience, instead of refusing any knowledge of it, as did the Surrealists, with the possible exception of Eluard? In other words, a dreamer as one always is, "definitive dreamer," to remain of course within the dream which writing opens to us, but in order to watch it live, as well, to "critique" it, as I said: and that will be to work on oneself, and therefore to work on the dream, which will be simplified if it is elucidated in this way, and will make the writing more transparent. Not to refuse the image, which is an unleashing of our secret language--this

dash is meant to avoid giving the impression that I am suggesting the paroxysm, that ruse, once again, of the censor<sup>21</sup>--but to analyze it as if with a prism, to liberate the forces which are too cramped there; and not to refuse the desire, which bears the image, but to disentangle desire from the too specific objects in which it is estranged, and to bring it within the universal. Already at the end of my Surrealist period, I foresaw a poetry which would not try to formulate our existential problems--that is the business of thought--nor to present me in my particular figure which one might take as a measure of truth (as with Verlaine or Laforgue,<sup>22</sup> I do not say Baudelaire for he is so much more)--that would be a presence from the outside, and a rhetoric, despite all appearances--but would from the very beginning carry the consciousness in act into the field of forces which are at work, the forces which

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<sup>21</sup>"Déchaînement" can mean the act of un-chaining, as it does here, or a frenzy of emotion. Bonnefoy is anxious to avoid the second meaning.

<sup>22</sup>Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), Rimbaud's "pitoyable frère," wrote very musical verse which reflected the shifting moods and currents of his life. Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), in his efforts to create an original prosody and to blend disparate tones within his lyrics, seems to have been concerned above all to develop a personal voice. This was also Baudelaire's goal--among others, as Bonnefoy makes clear.

determine as well as those which desire, the forces of the unconscious as well as those of being, and would arrange these forces while fading into them, extending the self, detaching the self from the name, from the psychic past, by examining the transformation of the infinite of language by the finitude of the fact. And I tried to create this poetry, which means that there was no distinct break between my attempts in this new period and my earlier writing, but instead a recentering, which allowed the images, in their sustained irrationality, to propose themselves to the act of poetry, of which I still had everything to understand (and I have groped a good deal since).

Can this perspective explain the short Traité du pianiste, your first published book, which dates from 1946?

I would see it now as the beginning, still rather unconscious, of the reflections I have just recounted. For if before writing this poem I had practiced free automatic writing, if I can call it that, the writing which goes straight ahead page after page, delighted by encounters that are soon forgotten--there, in that unsifted material, I gathered figures, situations, brief



evocations of acts and gestures which, when brought together, were revealed as the archetypes and the symbols of a sort of drama in which one could easily recognize the Oedipal knot, though it was hardened, deformed. Here was a beginning of anamnesis, which started me thinking. How obscure this theater was, and how static! Was that really my relation to the world, forever blocked by a few obsessive images; wasn't it necessary to conceive instead that this petrification of the origins was the consequence, first, of my fantasies of excarnation, favored by the practice of Surrealist writing--writing in whose heart a drama had been reflected, a drama that was ancient in me, an eternal drama whose reflection was darkened in the incomprehension, now, of its first words, in the loss of affection and confidence which bound its protagonists, in the forgetting of its great potential, left undeveloped? I believe that we have the Oedipus we want, according to whether we hear a few memories which haunt us as language or as the word, with distrust or with faith. And since then I have thought that in changing my relations to words, thanks to the poetry which would reinvent the word, these immobile forms down below, this drama which holds all the meaning, would be clarified and brought to life. Thus encouraged, in any case, I worked during this same time on another poem, "Le Coeur-espace," which in its very

first words turned towards the situations of my childhood, rediscovering certain of these situations by virtue of automatism. These memories reappeared, I looked at them from the place I had come to, which was evidently transitory, and some of them were still sealed in a night: there were salons, chandeliers which were still paralyzed in anxiety by the wrong presence I had re-learned from Max Ernst; others, however, I saw penetrated with light, I saw them unravel as phantasms, and become signs, allowing something like an earth to emerge in their own being.

LETTER TO JOHN E. JACKSON (1980)

Dear John, on re-reading the discussion we had in 1976, I see that there is a question I did not answer although you posed it very precisely, when you said, and I am quoting you more or less exactly: "Yves, what interests me is to understand how you passed from Surrealist writing, which held you for a moment, to another use of the image." I accepted this suggestion at the moment you made it, but I did not come back to it later. Trying to convey my impression of Surrealism, I failed to explain what were the concrete forms which allowed me to go beyond. In answer to your penultimate question which, significantly, returned to the first-- "Speaking practically," you insisted, "how was the passage accomplished? Not so much in reflection, now, as in writing, where this danger exists?"--I did pause over my book from the next few years, the poems of Douve, but only in order to speak, very allusively, of a "re-centering, which allowed the images, in their sustained irrationality, to propose themselves to the act of poetry": an act which I only defined as a will to presence among the psychic forces at work within us, forces which it is

important to clarify, I said, in order to "change life" (these last words are not mine).<sup>1</sup> Was I so brief on this occasion, simply because I lacked the time to speak more fully? Or did I hesitate then to confront this two-fold difficulty, the thought which seeks itself and the memory which hides? I told you in any case that in 1947 "I did still had everything to understand," concerning this act. Adding: "and I have groped a good deal since."

Let us start from these last words, if you are willing. I would indeed be angry with myself if I gave you the impression that in those first years or since, I have always clearly understood--or even thought I understood--what I was doing or wished to do. On the contrary, if I have always remained in touch, as it now seems to me, with more or less the same intuition, it was not without imprecision in the categories or vocables which I used to express this intuition. In other words: I can, after some thirty years, re-read On the Motion and Immobility of Douve, sign after sign; and I have re-discovered the key, which I had lost for a time, to Hier régissant désert, the second book, relying moreover on another text in order to do so--I am thinking of The Back Country--much more than on a thought which could be

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<sup>1</sup>Rimbaud, "Délires I," A Season in Hell.

explicitly formulated; but I have yet to completely express, to demonstrate in a way that satisfies me, this idea of poetry which I have felt present within me since I wrote "The Objective Lighting" or "Make us Live,"<sup>2</sup> these very early pages grafted from another's vocabulary, in this case Breton's. Will I succeed, this time, or will I again propose insufficient or uncertain notions--that is what I do not dare decide, even today. And I accept in advance to be placed in contradiction with one or another sentence that I wrote before, or even recently, though I will still dream of understanding, one day, the reason for these wanderings, which perhaps are only the differences in perspective provoked by the shifts in priorities--intellectual or affective--which take place in an existence. Each of my four books

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<sup>2</sup>"L'éclairage objectif" was published in Les deux soeurs, 3 or 5 (1947). [Bonneyfoy's own note indicates that it was in the third issue but does not give a date; Prothin's bibliography cites the fifth issue in 1947.] "Donner à vivre" was Bonneyfoy's contribution to Le Surréalisme en 1947, the catalogue of the international exhibition of Surrealism organized by Breton when he returned from the United States (cf. the "Interview with John E. Jackson," note 10). Bonneyfoy's contribution is really an answer to "Rupture inaugurale" (cf. the interview, note 11), using the manifesto's terminology to ask that art make us live and not simply make us see. Creation must enter existence, must extend beyond the painting or poem. We must go beyond mythology to life, beyond the solitary dream to reach the freedom which can be lived by all men.

of poetry, through the present, having also reflected a turning point in my life, even if this turning point was not specifically mentioned.

Let us therefore proceed step by step to make these clarifications which are, for the most part, retrospective. I believe, first of all, and to summarize what I tried to say during our interview in L'Arc, that if I loved Surrealism it is because it revealed--and even seemed to make immediately and easily practicable--what was later called writing, that is, the reception which can be made to last, in the words we trace on the page, of the many voices that haunt our unconscious and already trouble, moreover, our ordinary speech. Familiar as I was since adolescence with the work of Valéry, the domination he claims for intellect over the forms, I welcomed the automatism of L'Immaculée conception or of L'Homme approximatif<sup>3</sup>--two of the books that touched me most closely, especially the second--with avidity. For these images, tightly clustered like grapes on the vine, opened a world to me, the world of the psychic depths which had been censored until that moment; and they led me to read differently--which saved it--the entire past of poetry, still so intense for me: they even gave

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<sup>3</sup> L'Immaculée conception was written by André Breton with Paul Eluard (1930); L'Homme approximatif is the work of Tristan Tzara (1931).

valéry back to me, or at least those of his poems which are not purified as he dreamt they should be. But soon I had to recognize, unhappily, that these Surrealist texts which at times came so near to reaching the quality of totality, of living organity which should characterize writing in its very being, were also dissociated--more often than not, in fact, and notably in the work of André Breton--into two very distinct levels which hardly communicated at all. Look at the segment formed, for example, by the "Night of the Sunflower" and its commentary in L'Amour fou. Because, on the one hand, the flux which was called automatic did not reach far enough down into the unconscious but was content to foreshadow its contours, to receive a little of its light, there was room left for the discourse, still naive, of a subject who does not know himself, who mistakes his illusions--his mythology--for the truth; and who thus continues, with only slightly other thoughts and values, the dogmatizing word that had been Symbolism's weakness.

In other words, I quickly saw that Breton dreamt his thought and did not think his dream. And this was at the moment when, thanks to Kierkegaard and Chestov, I was first penetrated with an evidence which allowed me to understand why. We are double, I would say with the words I have now, at once language and existence.

From the first point of view, there is the intellect which articulates our horizon, from one vocable to the next, and interprets it, and constructs a world. But the words only select aspects of objects or beings and not, directly, specifically, their en-soi, their existing, their particularity as such, which is sometimes aware of itself: so the words lack any knowledge of temporal precariousness, as is also true of the notions which claim to express time or limit or death in their very being, for to give a name to finitude and to live it are two very different things. It follows that any formulation, if not any speech, any use of words, is a forgetting of finitude, and for us an invitation to dream, a denial of our being-in-the-world. - But we are not any the less mortal beings, isn't that so? Our ultimate truth is on the plane of incarnate existence, where experiences are begun which break the continuity of discourse, where specific values take form, where we find suffering but also joys which are unknown on the level of fantasy: and which may be the only true joys. It follows that language or in any case its use can cut us off from ourselves. Our writings in particular will never be able to reach beyond the surface of what we are, and of things, what can be called matter: though they are filled, when they speak of existence, with these representations that are as



luxuriant, and how promising, as they are unreal. These representations of what we live, these images, often these "marvelous images,"<sup>4</sup> are what I called our gnosis, whose field, at the confines of science, is art and literature. Allow me not to say: poetry.

There is in us--and what a pity that we have no word to indicate it, but that is the work of the censor--someone who refuses these fantasies, understanding that we pay too dearly for their more or less enduring illusion. In the experience of finitude, whatever its tribulations, the human subject is in the world, he participates in the unity of this Universe which is then immanent to him, and which assures him from the start his depth of being and his substance. If he takes refuge in the image, on the other hand, he will sacrifice entire sections of his potential life, those which would not lend themselves to the image; and the unity he will live will only have been the unity of this form, in constant battle with other forms. Is that, I asked myself, and this is still my way of thinking, is that a future our earthly presence can desire, is it even a possible future? Must we not fear

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<sup>4</sup>Rimbaud, "Après le déluge," from the Illuminations. Cf. the first interview with Bernard Falciola, p. 242.

some disaster, in this state of tension which sets the image against being, and doubtless also the unconscious against itself? For if we use our desires to construct a self which is a form, outside time, it is by alienating these desires, which have no conceivable maturation except in the field of finitude. With insufficient categories, for I reduced the peril of words to that of the concept, and spoke awkwardly of the "object" when today I would speak of the presence,<sup>5</sup> I said in Anti-Platon that we must devote ourselves to the here and now which are the epiphany of finitude, and we must force language to this devotion. Our virtuality recaptured at the very heart of the words which dismember it: that would be poetry.

And to return to André Breton, I soon came to regret--not immediately, in fact, since in Anti-Platon, which I wrote in 1946, I still wanted to believe, and I said, that Surrealism was the way--that his mythology,

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<sup>5</sup>Author's note: "For example in 'The Objective Lighting' (Les deux soeurs, no. 3): where in conformity with Surrealist poetics, I used the word images for the rapid confluence of words which automatism favors. At the same time and just as awkwardly, I named theme what I now call the image. . . . I also wrote: 'The poem's images must always contradict the theme which objectively forms in it; interrupting the theme's current with short-circuit after short-circuit, the images must angrily repulse the theme until the end, and to the end must mold the theme's features.'"

his fantastic which was, on the whole, without novelty, had thus flourished without really flowering, despite this proximity of the unconscious in which I felt there would be other resources; and so I desired a writing which would circulate more freely between the unthought depth and our consciousness, a labor, in other words, which with the help of consciousness would allow us to maintain contact with all the polysemias of our words, which would allow us to listen, in the mass of forces which speak in our words, to something other than what our fantasy uses for its own ends. Must we not fear, in effect, and this is only one example of the loss which takes place, that what our fantasy seeks is allied with the culture of the epoch--look at the repetitions behind the great artists, and the reflected structure of styles, especially in periods of Mannerism, much more than with our own profound needs, which are always hidden? Practically, this was to wish that our will to lucidity and our alienated virtualities could have an opportunity, in poetry, to meet--without really knowing what that would require of the writing to come. Let us say that I wanted the interpretation of the givens of automatism, which would allow me to coordinate these givens within a meaning, for I believe that a hypothesis of the whole is necessary in order to clarify what takes place in us, from one level of desire to

another; but that I also feared this interpretation could become--as the Surrealist poem had already become--could find itself once more a representation of the world, an image so much more closed on itself because it was imagined to be inclusive; and that I therefore wanted my interpretation, far from prospering in the text, far from establishing itself, satisfied, in a space which would remain imaginary, to question itself in a way that I had yet to find, for another stage, already closer to the truth, of writing understood as a search.

Well, it was precisely at this point, and under the sign of this desire, that the passage opened towards the poems of Douve. I had written a story, the Report of a Secret Agent, about a hundred pages that I subsequently destroyed, in which I described the arrival in a city which was more or less Paris--I had not lived there for a long time myself--of beings whose nature was uncertain, and who had received as their mission, not to destroy places, but to alter, to ruin whole aspects of the world's figure, at least as it is perceived, so that habits would be unsettled and an orthodoxy of existence would even collapse, as they felt this to be the Evil, and denounced it as the Enemy's mode of being. These agents, three or four, or five--

their number grew, not so much by the arrival of new ones as through an internal differentiation, or their basic inaptitude for individuality, characterization, perhaps even form--had to make the system of representations crack, had to dislocate our glance, to spill some black, a brilliant black, in this dim light, and to do this through acts which I could only evoke and even so only with difficulty, by means of contradictory notations, obscure if not encoded allusions, brusque and elusive images which filled the reports addressed at times by one of my characters, I did not say or know where, to the unknown master, "master of the night," who had charged them with this series of tasks. And they had indeed acted, and acted effectively; many signs had fallen from the ancient sentence of the world, there were holes now in its being-there, vast wastelands in the vestiges of appearance, under the sky in which the black sun rose--that was also the impression I had then of a few paintings which I loved or rather imagined, midway between Chirico and the furtiveness of our night dreams--still, despite their breaches, their openings, these bearers of the absolute were repulsed, vanquished, or were going to be vanquished when my book reached its end in a series of dots, their defeat expressed in the alteration which their essence, already so unclear,

suffered more and more strongly. One of them, the last reports announced, was now only an old photograph of the sky, yellowed, its corners torn off, burnt; and another had become a field of stones if not even the insects which wandered among the scattered bushes.

But why, you will wonder, all these details of a story which I had long ago decided not to keep? Because, among these figures, one of them called Ruin and another Plate--a rather unfortunate name, but I was thinking of a photographic plate, which I also evoke in Anti-Platon--there was another named Douve; and because this Douve had taken on more and more importance during the last days of work, to the point that at the end of the text, which was in sum a prose poem, I had been forced to add, in verse, "Seven poems on the motion and immobility of Douve," of which two or three remained though very much changed, in the section called "Theater" of the book I wrote later. A metamorphosis had begun, that is clear to me now, in an evolution of my writing which caused a first structure to crack. But this metamorphosis was taking place without my being conscious of it, and so while I was writing my Secret Agent, even its last pages, I had not yet begun the deep-reaching interpretation which I had demanded a short while before. Once the book was finished, on the other hand, and immediately judged inadequate and abandoned, I felt a

strong desire to continue the seven poems which had formed at the end, to differentiate them in their depth, to prolong them with others. And thus I found myself faced with this name, Douve, which no longer denoted, in the network of other words, anything but an empty vessel, since its earlier meaning, the one I had sought in the Secret Agent, had dissipated with the story, having annulled, at least as the first meaning, the acceptations given by the dictionary.

A signifier had separated from the text which had carried it, demanding however that I still make use of it. Though it riddled with its void, its lividness, the space of a few sentences which remained under its influence, it still seemed to call me to pursue the act of writing. . . .

And wan't this the moment to observe that, if I had accepted the Report of the Secret Agent as it was, if I had consented to this verbal form's claim to enduring existence, well, this word, Douve, would have had a meaning that would certainly have been complex and largely implicit (if not, in its farthest depths, unfathomable) but still limited, definable: except that the completed text would have kept it prisoner of a certain moment of consciousness? While in proposing itself as if anew on the ruins of a first text, "Douve," this noun but also this name, this most general word,

suggested that I widen the first clearing, perhaps gave me the means to do so, and allowed me in any case to keep in mind my obscure need to go beyond, to decrystallize any text, any fixed relation--or any relation which is becoming fixed--of consciousness to itself? In short, in the word "Douve" I recognized, rather consciously I believe, the emblem as much as the agent of the transgression one must always accomplish. And as it came to me--this was clear--from the very heart of my most intimate and spontaneous associations of ideas or images, I could think, too, that it was the thread which could most effectively help me to escape from the labyrinth of fixations and Oedipal inhibitions which had been revealed to me, as I told you before, in my recent Traité du pianiste: and so I hesitated even less to trust myself to this guide. Recognizing in this word and memorizing the collapse of a structure of meaning, failure which is so fruitful if it allows us to awaken from a dream, I could at least preserve in myself the glimpse of this light which is there, ahead of us, but which is screened by any text that closes on itself, any ideology that affirms itself. I insist: if we stop, content with ourselves, at any one state, even and especially if it is seductive, of the images that we are drawing, it will be the triumph of our "self" as it is, with its repetitive and egocentric desire,



perfect equivalent of death. If we feel so strongly that being exceeds the figure that we no longer, on the other hand, draw images, write poems or books, that refusal would be the fallow ground where the most contradictory impulses would grow wild, and destroy each other. But if we know both the lie and the strong impulse to construct ourselves which the text begins though it also stifles it, if we can both hear and transgress it, then life begins again, the labyrinth is dispelled, and the other person appears, for an exchange of affirmations: in a word, that is poetry. This is my conviction, more clearly expressed than before; and I will simply add that to express it in this way, with this sort of assurance, does not in any way signify that I think I have gone far enough myself along the road I have indicated.

But a clarification now, which I can also formulate more precisely than I could earlier. I have often been asked, concerning the poems which took form at this time, who or what was Douve--because an effect of words, produced in these pages, suggests that a being is there, a particular being, one can even believe a person: although the text as a whole does not seem to assure this presence the permanent characteristics which belong, more or less, to any existence. And I am the first to

have felt this effect, for to give oneself the task of delivering the word from its entanglement in the image does not in any way signify that one has necessarily broken with the objects of our most profound desire, objects of our mind or our memory; and one encounters them in one's work, where they always try to control the entire field of our consciousness. And so there was from the start, and there certainly remains, an entire virtuality of meaning in the word "Douve," which is even one of the sources of its life, and which could be associated with a feminine figure, whether the Oedipal figure who haunted the place of the unconscious, or the more active, freer figure who was formed by my desiring imagination or my reflection on life. During the same period that I was writing Douve, moreover, I tried my hand at a second story, almost a novel this time, The Ordeal--again this idea of the trial which all writing imposes on us--and since fiction becomes a frozen form more quickly than poetry, I allowed myself to be caught in the trap of more clearly defined figures, who appeared to me as explicitly feminine. Who were they? Let us say the Oedipal and the one I dreamt, differentiated by this prism, language.

But there was also, and just as quickly, as I listened to this word, the presentiment of an earth--a vast country full of murmuring sounds although still

merged with night: the place where the sacred would again take form if we only knew how to advance far enough in the depth of our great vocables, in their substance which is simplicity. There were other beginnings as well, more or less insistent, even a few ideas. The book took form as my reflection came and went from each section, each meaning to all the others, somewhat as a painter works, and so reflected in Douve, in this word which preserved the opening, the future, another thought also had to appear, provoked by the suggestion of a word shared among the very figures who seized the word and tried to reseal it. And thus I lived "Douve," under the sign of the transgression I evoked, as the emergence into words, notionally this time, of what all writing censors: finitude. In Douve I recognized the mortal being whom we all are even if we refuse all knowledge of it; and the word, both immediate and full, which would be found, at the end of the dream, by the one who would truly know he was mortal. - It remains true that these interpretations are valuable in my eyes--escape being, simply, the dull image of the polysemias usual in what is still writing--only if I have been able to subordinate each interpretation, at least for myself and in the time of the book, to this movement of search and transgression which their shared name required by its very excess over each separate meaning. I did not

want to signify but to make an ordinary word the agent which would dismember these systems that the signifiers-- as we say today--always set in place. I wanted to assure this word the capacity to be, not the notion this time, not the figure, but beyond, that is in the immediate, and directly, fully, our contact with the One, what I call presence.

As you can see, I am suggesting that poetic invention is not the displacement of one meaning to benefit another, more general or even more interior, as the philosopher does when he reveals a law, or the psychoanalyst who brings a desire to light; nor am I suggesting that it is the relativization of all meaning at the heart of a text's polysemias; but that it is the return from absence--for all meaning, all writing, is absence--to presence, the presence of a thing or a being, it does not matter, which suddenly rises before us, in us, in the here and the now of an instant of our existence. Presence in its rebirth, since writing had censored it. Buried light which poetry uncovers as the spade uncovers the source. The transgression of stereotypes, the denial of the image, that is the resurrection, not the truth. And if for my part I felt such a strong attraction to a vocable which a moment of my writing had emptied of all meaning, it was first

of all because its syncope in the text had urged me, as I said, to a freer circulation, to hope, but also because "Douve" was already a noun, a name, which suggests a vigil beneath its enigma, a vigil which concerns us, and not an en-soi, not an indifference. A face, not an essence. In poetry there are only proper nouns.

All this supposes, of course, that the poem, having hesitated at some nodal point of one's writing, has not therefore hidden the light which rises from beneath the notions. And I will now try to formulate a question which has preoccupied me on several occasions but especially perhaps during the time that I was writing Hier régnant désert, the second book: the question of whether this more open poetry I had desired, this poetry in progress, was genuinely possible. And it was not, need I say it, simply of my own poems that I asked this question; I am willing enough to admit that my poems have been no more than the search for an experience and not the experience itself, in its unknown quality; it was of any search which has taken the form of writing and has perhaps only ceded--this is at any rate our fear--to an illusion. Who can be sure, in effect, that what he felt, at a given moment, as presence, was not merely the intensity which is inseparable--as is evident in any dream--from these figures of our unconscious

life which are charged with our deepest desires? In certain paintings of Poussin's, do the eyes of Pharaoh's daughter shine in this seemingly mysterious way because a painter has succeeded in reaching, as if at a second vanishing point, the flame of unity, of immediacy which in other paintings is only reflected in the mirror of the image?<sup>6</sup> Or are this Egypt and this river, these servants, these beautiful painted cloths, this child who holds out his still unconscious arms to this rising sun, are these no more, once again, and despite the emotion which penetrates this work, than the clenched structure of the Oedipal demand which seeks and finds its symbolic satisfaction in seductive objects? We may well fear the "ruse" of the dream which only wants to close itself over an idea of the world that will permit it to endure, plant that would otherwise be too fragile; the dream which only transgresses, only accepts the transgression of a few superficial representations in order to rest more securely in itself when it reaches, on the other side of this water, the vast immobile image. In a word, isn't writing always mythology, always the rift between the mythic self to which writing gives life

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<sup>6</sup>In the two versions of The Finding of Moses. Cf. "The Back Country," note 41.

and the subject who fumbles--Orion who is still blind--in search of itself?<sup>7</sup> And isn't it vanity, in both senses of this word, to try to breach this circle of the poetic? Vanity and worse, perhaps. For this effort turns away from a naive, instinctive affirmation of our desires which, imbued as it is with individual visions and values, is like all other human conduct, always avid: so that from the start it has a universal importance. We are, certainly, prisoners of the image which we substitute for the world. But if this substitution is a fatality which language imposes on us, then isn't the image our real condition, which we must not refuse--that would be vainglory--if we want to win incarnation?

That is the question, and also a warning. Must I add that there is someone in me who is always ready to accept this disquiet? I believe that I have written often enough that all writing is closure, and that if poetry is what denies closure, then poetry owes it to itself to be the refusal of what is yet its most interior

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<sup>7</sup> Orion loved Merope, daughter of Oenopion, king of Chios, and asked for her hand in marriage. When Oenopion repeatedly deferred his consent, Orion tried to take the girl by force. Her angry father made Orion drunk, blinded him and threw him on the shore. The sightless lover found his way to Vulcan who gave him a guide to the sun god, who restored his sight.

fatality, which is to use words. In these moments I think for example of Baudelaire in Brussels, filled with anxiety before Rubens' vast paintings which he feels are more fully than his own poems an opening towards the other person, a gesture of acceptance which would authentically revive Christ's sacrifice: except that a moment later he decides that these works are only another closure, and even more dangerous, because it is less easy to see, than the self-confessed aestheticism of the Flowers of Evil.<sup>8</sup>

But I also looked at the statues of Boddhisatvas in Japan, and the statues of the Egyptian gods; I paused beneath the vaults of chapels to see the Pantocrator or

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<sup>8</sup>It is certainly true that, in the Museum of Brussels, Baudelaire shifts very quickly from praising Rubens' Venus in Vulcan's Forge (1614-1617)--"A superb Rubens. The buttocks of Venus, who is surprised but flattered by the audacity of the satyr who kisses them--to damning his "fatuity," his "decadence," his "banality." (Edition de la Pléiade, II, 937). Bonnefoy suggests, in his long essay entitled "Baudelaire versus Rubens" (1977), that Baudelaire felt threatened by Rubens, "goujat habillé de satin," lout dressed in satin. Bonnefoy cites the earlier poem, "Damnation," to demonstrate that Baudelaire was familiar with the original meaning of "goujat," servant; and that the servant is associated in that poem and elsewhere (most notably in "La servante au grand coeur") with love: so that in insulting Rubens he may simply be defending himself against his own self-doubts, denigrating Rubens' power to love because he fears that he himself has been incapable of love. (Le nuage rouge, p. 28)



the black Virgin;<sup>9</sup> and I cannot forget, either, that in these figures--and in many others, which have been produced on every continent, in every society--something very different appears, something much more than the intensity that belongs to myth. In fact, it is even the opposite. I felt that this awakening of a force which rises in the work like a flame to consume it, cannot be located in any identifiable point of a symbolic network born of the artist, which would suffice--as is perhaps the case with Poussin's two paintings of Moses--to explain its strength. One certainly encounters signs, in these religious works of art--the meditative hand held beneath the chin, the full-blown flowers on the robe, or this lamb on the Good Shepherd's shoulder, in the Roman catacombs--but one feels that these signs have only been retained because there is nothing better, if one aims to express a transcendence perceived beyond--parables straining towards more than they say, through the intuition of a higher desire than that which usually reaches from consciousness to the object. Isn't it the essence of the experience of transcendence, moreover, that one senses the sudden tearing of the envelope of

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<sup>9</sup>Byzantine icons: the Christ Pantocrator raises one hand in blessing and holds a book in the other; the black-faced Madonna denotes sadness, and sympathy for men.

myth? And if this epiphany occurs most naturally, I imagine, in the moments of what is lived or after wordless meditations or contemplations, there are still works which can retrace this road even through the field of signs.

And if one wanted to use the stylistic elements which can be observed in these statues to analyze their clarification of the form, one would only find relations, effects--the symmetries, for example, the numbers, the simplification of contours, the massive suppression of aspects of this world--which can perfectly well, and even by choice, serve the economy of an artist's work in its particularity, its closure: and from this point of view, the theophanic work will not seem manifestly different from others, so that many, though they mean no harm, will reclassify it among the others, in the history of art or civilizations or simply of ideas. But isn't this the moment to pose the problem in other terms? I note that these archaic or medieval statues, these icons, these sacred buildings in which the labyrinthine structure is begun but then dispelled, are from a period in which the artist's own universe--his "self," as we would say--was not valued in itself, was not an accepted end, as primacy was accorded to practices or values belonging to the society as such. In contrast with today, all that was personal in these works was the

author's effort to leave himself behind in order to attain the more highly esteemed truth of the group's proposition. And as this proposition had matured in a variety of needs and perspectives, and therefore touched on diverse aspects of life, and their antagonisms, that is finitude, this field which the artist cleared for himself still allowed him to free himself from his dreams. No, the great Romanesque or Byzantine or even Baroque work is not born of the self's refinement in the solitude of the image. Modeling a handful of clay to his first naive idea, then stepping back, speaking with others under the sign of continuing rites and traditions, and only then returning, renewed, to the continuing work, the artist will repeatedly leave, transgress, metamorphosize what would otherwise have been no more than his particular form, transposed into a personal mythology. He leaves himself as one makes a hole in the sand, in which the water rises, catching the light. The Presence has grown at the heart of a dialectic, and only through this dialectic. - For you must not believe that I feel it is born from on high, come from elsewhere, that I am using sculpture to forge the proof of God's existence: I have remained an unbeliever, as we say, or said, before the most detached, the purest creations, where I formed instead my idea of what I call meaning. If the Presence has thwarted the

myth which concealed it in the work, that is good reason, isn't it, to avoid disguising it in yet another name, burdening it with a fiction and a sacred history; and good reason to feel (this is the ultimate suggestion of all great art) that it is only, and almost literally, the water I evoked a moment ago. The absolute is what takes our place, immediately, simply, there where we still remain. It shines in a word we have given away with a light heart, more clearly than in an entire book which is turned in on itself, and which hoards.

Don't you think that this could be true of poetry as well, and even in our time whose new characteristics I have not forgotten? I admit that poetry offers more of a temptation to particularity than do the plastic arts, since it uses words which are so profoundly impregnated, in the West, with the finalities of what we call the individual. And our societies, on the other hand, no longer rest on the common foundation of beliefs which allowed the collective elaboration of spiritual truth--in fact, they are characterized by a rivalry of ideas, of values, even representations of the world, which forces us to make choices that are by definition personal, and thus urges us to attach ourselves even more strongly to what we are, this little universe which is more coherent than the group's consciousness, even

if it is only in dream. But life, life in which one is born and dies, in which one worries or hopes, this life of each day, each instant yet remains, whether we like it or not, the school in which we sometimes learn to reclassify our relation to ourselves among higher ends, as did the Romanesque sculptor before us. I imagine a dialectical elaboration, in any case. Yes, first the writing, and I certainly mean the lure which I denounce, these sentences which only lead to the glaciation of the image, this frost--as Mallarmé said<sup>10</sup>--in which is caught the wing of our aspiration to the opening, the presence. For if we remained outside the writing, if we did not accept this encounter with our ambiguities, our polysemias in their recurrent formation, we would think we had conquered them, when the victory would still be no more than a dream: from which it follows that there has never been a true poet who did not struggle, intensely and even with as much joy as dismay, with what is from the beginning a structure of words, as fascinating as it is enigmatic, the structure in which his desires crystallize, in which his memories are metamorphosized. Writing is the poet's solidarity with the individual whom he is as well, in his native egocentrism, his blind violence; and so it is also his solidarity with the other,

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<sup>10</sup>In "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui."

if not in his will to be, which is still refused, at least in his mass of ambiguities and of dream which the writer does not deny, in contrast for example with the ideologue. But if there is no substance except in words, which are the only repository of our relation to ourselves, let us not forget that words are also what estrange us, and let us critique this medium a second time, in order to rejoin the evidence of our limits, at the heart of what is lived, in the silence of life's great choices. The "second time" of poetry is the return towards incarnation of a consciousness whom writing has tempted with the illusion of the infinite. It is the hour in which one understands, while anxiety knocks at the window--I am reversing André Breton's phrase, as you can see--what is incomplete and phantasmagorical in these desires which we see behind the glass, in which one understands how this artificial atmosphere may be exploited in order to create a shadow of flowers. In the real place the winds blow cold, and there too is the true desire, for beyond our fantasies, our Oedipal nostalgias, isn't it true that we profoundly desire the meaning, that is to say this organization, these values which, with the consent of other beings, would give this place of our passage a coherence which we would experience as what we once called its being, because it

would be a reason to live? With this discovery, feeling that our desire can be delivered in this way from its superficial forms, we are surprised by the blindness of the first dream: after which there is more writing, of course, since it is still our most concrete being that is in question, in the plurality of our determinations which modify each other but are still there--a new text and a new refusal of the new text.

. . . In truth, the two moments of the dialectic do not follow each other, chronologically, but collide with each other, in the adventure of each text. It is their victory or defeat, clear or not, which is marked in the work of art when one has decided that it is finished, and this decision is therefore of paramount importance.

And as for the evolution which is thus drawn from work to work through a life, how can we doubt that frequently it is, once again, the illusion and an entanglement in the difficulties of destiny, but in a few cases--why not?--a maturation all the same: as the writing is clarified, and the experience of the true object grows like a dawn. There are passages in the work of some poets, even if they are as brief as a ray of light between two clouds or as distant as the radiance low in the sky when the day first appears, where I cannot

doubt that it is, like the vault at Tournus,<sup>11</sup> the presence itself which speaks. No more than a grain of gold dust, I admit, in all of a vast crucible of phosphescences which are still obscure: but it proves that the act we name poetry is very precisely the alchemy which breaks down and transmutes the first mythological self, through finitude that has been lived, and lights in its place, if only for a moment, the red cloud of the simple.<sup>12</sup> Poetry, when it exists, conquers the image. And it conquers in the image itself, and that shows us what is its true nature. For you must also note that in the beginning, it was the object of naive desire which, become a fetish in the image, veiled the approach of presence with this perverted absolute; then, as desire separated from its utopia, clarified itself, became the desire of meaning which is also the desire of the other's presence, this first object did not disappear from the desiring thought but was revealed as the representation, which in fact is impoverished, shallow, of a reality that has proven to be more resonant

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<sup>11</sup>Tournus is on the Saône river, in the North-east sector of the Massif Central. There is a Romanesque church with narthex, St. Philibert, dating from the tenth to eleventh centuries.

<sup>12</sup>Mondrian, The Red Cloud (1907-1909). Cf. "The Back Country," note 61.



as well as unifying, when it has spoken for itself. And isn't this liberation of the object through an act of knowledge the definition of love in opposition to idolatry, or perhaps of agape--in a sense which we have yet to understand fully, it seems to me, beyond Paul's intuitions--in opposition to eros? The poetry which conquers the image in writing is love, precisely because it conquers. And that is exactly what Shakespeare says, first showing us a Hamlet who thinks that he loves Ophelia, when he only wants to rediscover his idealized childhood in an image of purity, of innocence--Mallarmé said it first<sup>13</sup>--and so devotes himself to the image, which leads to the death of both the one and the other: after which the poet who has survived his dream will go on to write The Winter's Tale.

This being the case, I do not claim, my dear John, that I am exceptionally qualified to speak of the concrete forms which this intention I call poetry can take. In this complement to our first exchange, my only

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<sup>13</sup>In "Hamlet," from Crayonné au théâtre, pp. 185-91 in the edition of his prose which Bonnefoy prepared in 1976 for Gallimard. Mallarmé calls Ophelia Hamlet's "virgin childhood objectified," and then summarizes Hamlet's "morbid duality" as follows:

. . . mad beyond and beneath the contradictory flagellation of duty, but if he turns his eyes inward to an image of himself which he keeps intact like an Ophelia never drowned, she!

ambition was to explain fully, by designating a horizon which for the most part remains outside my reach, what I meant when I spoke before of a "recentering of images"; and so I will simply say, having come this far, that it was this sort of reflection which on the whole is non-literary, that I already had in mind when I left Surrealism, though I still held this movement in very real esteem. For Surrealism, from the very beginning--I insist on this point, and that this was the center of Surrealism, if you only think for example of the "objective" chance, and the "explosive-fixed" beauty, and of André Breton wandering through the great city, watching for signs, imagining a grace<sup>14</sup>--posed certain values, even conceived certain rites, and therefore reconciled the idea of transcendence with the practice of writing; and if this transcendence was only expressed in yet another mythology, that did not in any way weaken the indication which was given. Just as we had to dispel the dream called "surreal," going beyond this dream to the vast and simple real, so must we, simply, go beyond Surrealism but along the line it traced, to re-define as the human community in the broadest and most open sense of this word, what Breton restricted to a small group, which was

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. "Interview with John E. Jackson," note 9.

moreover very embarrassed by itself, of the predestined or elect.

And so this last of the great literary movements carried many virtualities within itself, and to a greater degree than the poetics, overly preoccupied with language, which have followed it, Surrealism can serve as a point of departure for our reflection today, provided that we strip it of its gnosis, its theater, and rediscover beneath its theory, always more passionate than meditated, the "unshatterable kernel" not of night but of hope--a hope indeed inadequately examined, mixed with magic, not without reason proclaimed nocturnal. No one has ever been able to express intensity as well as Breton, for example, this tide which one feels in others or which one experiences oneself, surge of an emotion, a desire--a times simply of an idea, brusquely awakened to measureless speculation--at certain moments, on certain occasions which one can neither anticipate nor describe, but which map the only roads that matter, over our earth that is so encumbered with absurd paths, mined with useless goals. And if it is true that Breton did little more than to lose sight of what he saw outlined in these instants which he knew were of lightning, covering them with a grid that could not have been more distorting--why the lyrebird rather than the sparrows, if not because

of the vain belief that the truth belongs to another world, that the sign is more than life, that life is simply a veil--even this choice of the bizarre can have a positive significance if its violence is understood, which carries the certainty--as well-founded as it is instinctive--that in living one can have no use for this jumble of things, of situations, of so-called psychological or linguistic assumptions which the scientific view, neutral as death, wants to convince us is real. When he wrote that he was only willing to recount his hours of beauty, his most disturbing experiences--a thought with which he has been much reproached, in the name of a truth that is in sum psychological--Breton was recalling a higher truth, to wit that certain of our needs must be endowed with more importance than others, and that human existence has certain strong points, that consciousness has a duty to return over and over again to these mysterious diagrams of our relation to the world, which earlier societies placed moreover at the very heart of their sacred. Let us try, yes, to leave the theater of the self, which is both too rich and so poor, the "ebony room" with its "celebrated garlands," so soon faded! But the evidence which will take form, outside, like the mist which dissipates, like the rising sun, let us not think that it will therefore be the disordered mass of things, the disconnected wires; there will be centers,

radiating points, margins of shadow; certain objects will be revealed as more fundamental than others, and figures, words, will be freed in order to express them: the burning fire, a river in the light, a circle once traced on stone, symbols of the infinite in finitude, signs which are all the same more encompassing--more resonant--than the worlds which shine briefly when the net of dreams stirs that neutrality, that opacity which today we call "objective" reality. Life structures what it finds outside itself, and from age to age the word enlarges, deepens this inscription, this form: what we may call the earth.

And in words it is what I call the Word, as Mallarmé did although hardly anyone is willing to hear him on that point.<sup>15</sup> The Word, that is an ensemble, which is of course open, of vocables naming the essential realities, those which poems, our conscious word, can list as together they approach but never attain the "authentic sojourn on earth." The earth is the future of the writing which will not yield to the image--the image, this vision which is only true when it expresses the frustrated need, the revolt, lying if it consents to its too brief coherence, which will soon engender only

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. "Fragments et notes" in Bonnefoy's edition of Mallarmé's prose, pp. 383-84.

pride and tyranny. And it is the earth as well, the earth and not nature, the earth-place which I saw dawn as presence and ultimate finality in the transgressions attempted or dreamt in the name of Douve--as I have already suggested.

But I have one last remark to make, which will summarize, I imagine, everything I have just tried to say. We have thus understood today, in radical opposition to Romantic thought, that the "self" who seemed the master of its word is only an effect created by the language, a crystallization of forces which are in the words, which act through the words, and come from elsewhere than the self, say other things than we say, arrange themselves in an entirely other way than we think or would like: and that in sum is what I have rediscovered, for my part, in my own practice of writing since Douve, the first book, and these reflections on what I call the image. But often one adds to this first thesis a disinterest in ourselves as subject--subject of our most ordinary action in the place of our existence, subject who feels joy or sorrow, who has sentiments, values--frequently one also refuses, and these two refusals are certainly related, to engage in any thought of being, which one wants to see as no more than the persistent illusion of a naive metaphysics: and on these points I must express my disagreement, and first of all

that I see an ambiguous attitude in these refusals, one which has not learned the lesson of what takes place in the image, so much as it has ceded to the will of the image, and always for the same pleasure of dreaming that one is infinite. It is true that any image--let us keep the word that I used--has in itself and not outside, has in its evident unity, an appearance of substantial background (this is its teaching, when one has exposed the trap) which strongly resembles what is designated by the ontologies one accuses as a so-called foundation. The image proposes a world, and one understands that the reality of this world is only the reality of a certain psychic force which assembles its elements, signifying nothing more profound than its furtive pregnancy: and here is revealed the similarly illusory character of this impression of rootedness in some absolute offered by the larger representation which philosophies have interpreted as world. . . .

But must we be satisfied with this conception, in sum static, of the relation of words to illusion? Didn't I feel justified in saying that any image is a particularity which is clenched in fear of finitude, so that it has as a beyond, as an alternative, not scientific law with its infinite off-centering, but a different relation of the individual to himself, a relation in which, through incarnation, it is the instant, what is lived as most

elusive and precarious, which can appear as the absolute? In truth, there is an ambiguity in the very notion of being, which it is important to understand more fully. It is true that one can call being a mirage, inasmuch as one sees in its relation to the physical object that it has been inferred from a verbal coherence, for example the Greek language, and even if it was savored in these cases as much as it was thought, in a semblance of direct intuition: for the depth of the idiom has its savor as well, which seems a transcendence. But we must also observe that if the plurality of cultures contributes powerfully to the unmasking, the accusation of these reflected ontologies, it may also hide an entirely other search, one which denies within particular languages, and always in the same way, the crystallizations, the conceptual structures which these languages are. What is this search? The one which holds as real not what can be formulated but what must be lived; the one which recommences in a mystic's intuition or a poet's work what archaic or, as I would rather say, dawning societies seem to have begun in their relation to the earth; the one, in a word, which seeks to found on existence as it is lived, and not to uncover foundations. In short, being--in the broadest meaning this great word can have, in its censored dimension--is not to be understood as a substratum which intelligence can recognize in a world,



it does not precede, it does not underlie us in matter or through matter, it is what will come, through meaning, and in sum what one finds. Like humanity itself, when it rose from the first empty duration through the invention of the future which was the sign in its virtuality as the word: being is its own cause.

That is what I think, in any case, nothing has yet persuaded me to adopt another philosophy; and to finish, here are two convictions which follow from my philosophy, and which concern our word. The first is that the course of poetry, far from accepting the deletion of the category of being--the experience of presence--because of a critique of illusion which is only valuable as a weapon against the image, must on the contrary denounce the dream wherever it is, and even in the accusations of those who oppose us. It is all very well to remind us of the drift of signifiers, the relativity of values, and that the self has no substance: modern poetry with Baudelaire and Rimbaud--think of the "Swan," which judges allegory, think of "What Is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers," and of the last pages of A Season in Hell--has described this lure in a very similar way, and even with more merit since these are indeed the poets who imagine the most "marvellous images," and who love them, God knows, who wish they were real,

who have a "passion" and a "cult" for them.<sup>16</sup> But if the theoreticians of verbal forms denounce the coagulation of poets' lucidity, and prefer the transgressions we see multiply today in the textual mass, only because they perceive these transgressions as languages released at the heart of another language--crediting this labor of polysemias, of figures, to the language which would then become, and establish new objects, and extend and secure its dominion--isn't it because they have not perceived the dimension of finitude, which is the censored realm outside any language, whether now existing or in formation; isn't it even that they deny finitude, in the very place where the poet reinstitutes it; and isn't it that they dream life, since they no longer admit that there is death? Where poetry calls the word to its highest responsibility, which is to question its very instrument, language, in order to regenerate the words, transmute the object into presence, tear off the masks, in the end to "change life," that is where a voice which comes from the concept--but we used to say the devil--whispers to us that there is only the game, and

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<sup>16</sup>Bonnefoy refers to Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" from Les Fleurs du Mal, in which the traditional resonances of this symbol are examined and extended; and to a passage in Mon coeur mis à nu (cf. the "Interviews with Bernard Falciola," note 2). The other poems are Rimbaud's; the "marvellous images" are from "Après le déluge" (cf. note 4 above).

painstakingly cauterizes, by joining significations and forms, this impatient denial of signification, this crack in the very idea of form which is the Presence that rises--what Rilke called the Open. - A voice which comes from the concept? In fact from farther back, which explains this anachronistic thought of the devil. For a question comes back to haunt poets, they wonder whether the meaning they want to establish is not merely a house of cards which the wind from outside will bring down with its first tempest, or whether there is something, outside, which will lend itself to a poet's phrase, let itself be included, virtuality, in his project which would then become the beginning of a second degree of life, even if still in the enigma. Who has not imagined, while writing, that the thought of finitude which one would live fully, burning what is conceptual in the word, is--the difficulty suddenly comprehensible--the maturation of what is, and soon its metamorphosis? That what takes place in the poem is on a scale with all of reality, which would indeed transform the author's relation to himself? But then one can suppose, in opposition to this effort, a resistance of matter: these laws accumulated by our science, which also fill the space of the word, rivaling our symbolic capacity, stifling the intuition of finitude. And it is therefore, if you

will allow me this extravagance, what is crudest and most inert, what we are least able to penetrate or grasp in the cosmos outside, which appears to be represented and re-signified in these textual analyses we are discussing.

In sum, what this critical thought has proven is not the decidedly outmoded character of ontological speculation but the difficulty which so many seem to experience, today, in conceiving the reality of a meaning which has no cause except itself: in wanting being to exist. - And, in these conditions (this is my second proposition), the enigma posed by our epoch's abandonment of poetry is easily read; but we can also understand what makes this form of the word more than ever necessary: what makes this form, I would even say, the only reality in the growing unreality. The image as it unfolds in the text, the representation of the world which remains individual, even if it hides its individuality in what today are called subversions or transgressions, is a mirage, a solitude, absence itself, as I have always said, and the poem must try to escape this lure; but it is also, as I have said as well, irrepressible, since everyone "writes," even on the level of acts and behaviors, everyone arms himself with stereotyped significations, with dogmas of intellect or sentiment which deny other voices, which will stifle them as soon as one

has the power (only the truly destitute, only the poor do not write, as they lack the means to do so, whence their striking intelligence which we can legitimately call mysterious, a momentary remission of the original sin of language). The image, which is the speech in which unity is fragmented, in which presence is quenched, is therefore our most universal and constant condition, like finitude which provokes it in reaction; and when it is a question of speaking, of communicating with other beings, for the transparence, the advent of the spirit, it is the image which will remain the obligatory place of exchange, even if we must then suffer its mist-like or prismatic effects. But if such is our lot, imagine the power of poetry, where a moment ago I saw only its dismaying weakness! Having intensified the image, having denounced it as well, trying to force it open, to simplify it and at the same time to preserve its richness of dream, that is the poetic experience which more than any other human practice lives the ambiguity which marks all human activity--and therefore poetry can understand the other person in a more immediate and active way than can the philosopher or the sociologist, and come so much closer, when that truly is its desire, to this relation of reciprocal intimacy between "I" and other beings which is the only conceivable way. Poetry knows the secret of the evil which torments the speaking being.

And it is poetry which can help him most directly to health, if it only accepts what it knows; that the writer's dream is not a higher prerogative, the science of a wise man or an angel which would justify his pride,<sup>17</sup> but, simply and so much more richly, our ordinary condition. What must characterize the poetry to come is not a refusal to say "I," but that it tries to speak this word in another way, opening the "self" which only disposes of a world because this world, which is the image, is nothing; and which therefore reduces the subject in us, this free will, this future, to the condition of slavery. To say "I": may this no longer be to lend oneself to the self's excess but simply the act of knowledge in its most natural place, where illusion and lucidity both have their source. May it be the tentative approach towards the "we," under the star, even if the road which must lead far, in the night which is still original, and natural in the full sense of that word, is always barred by collapses, trappings, clamors which poetry does not master.

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<sup>17</sup>Rimbaud, "Adieu." Cf. "The Back Country," note 51.

PART VI

THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE AND OTHER POEMS

To G.N.<sup>1</sup>

You whose name hides mana, the occult power;  
opens as aman, the pardon; doubles as nada, nothing,  
whose name shimmers far off like the Hebrew man, the  
miraculous substance.

And whose work always joins two forces, one  
ready to hurl the javelin or the thunderbolt, the other  
to enclose with the magic of nets.

(Sun and moon. The frank strength of color  
and the dangerous, shimmering force of the guilt. A  
giddy call from the depths, the magnetic field of the  
large flatly colored lines. Sacks cruelly bound with  
cords.)

Take these pages into your oven, friend, heat  
them to calcination; make meaning the powder that is  
dispersed, the vibration that remains.

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<sup>1</sup>George Nama, contemporary American printmaker  
who has published a bilingual handpress edition of these  
poems, 150 numbered copies signed by Bonnefoy and by  
himself. He created eleven images (hand-colored etch-  
ings) to accompany the texts.



The Origin of Language

The light was so intense! Reflected from all sides, ebbing from the flagstones and the walls, even from the vaults, the palms, the light discolored beings and things, burning their shadows: nothing that existed there, perished there, meant any longer that these could be matter, or reveal chance; one would have said an endless present, space without "here" or "elsewhere"; the essences alone existed in their clear ample rustling, as of air that rises, throbbing above a fire.

And I understood that the summer is language. That words are born of summer as, at the moulting season, a snake leaves behind him his fragile clear envelope. That it could only have been in the south, in the shimmering of salt on the rocks--and these burning bushes! these great storms, that wander . . . --that words were invented, and through them absence; only in the south could speech have been dreamt.

A Memory of Traveling

In a rain like the world's end, at Seville.

I enter the museum, and see in the darkest corner of a room the statue in wood or painted stone

(I no longer know which), figure of a young woman who lifts a hand mirror almost to her face: the frame is of silver. On the back of the mirror, another face is smiling. And as a little sunlight, come from I don't know where, has caught the face supposed to be true, the image in the image, remaining dark, is hemmed with light.

Later, it is night in San Salvador and I am looking from a distance at the chapel to the right of the choir; raising my eyes, I see a shadow cast high on the wall--immense, distorted, the lightbulb which is its source burns too near a panel of the retable--shadow of a head in gilded wood, which a forgotten sculptor once crowned with rays.

### The Real Presence

Some horsemen arrive in haste. And at a distance they are already crying out that God is, that he appeared, that on the beach of . . . , the deposit of salt and driftwood has finally formed, for an instant and by chance, the sign--is that their word? their voices blend--which till now was missing from all alphabets, from all foliage laced with sky, from all clouds and lines of surf.

Harsh Voices

In the dark, I feel for my place in a loge. The performance has already begun. Men and women sing--one would say in a fire, something red--and it is an intense music like an Italian opera heard at sea, when for a few hours the ship's radio captures the broadcasts from shore. I have just time to think, "It is beautiful," cautiously taking my seat (everyone is listening so well!), but am at once distracted from this whim to pass judgment, by the strangeness of the words rising from the depths of the work. Incomprehensible as they often are, yet in another way; somehow more vehement, harsher than any language I've ever heard, and in the center one would say there were fissures, and rumbling echoes rising to the edges of a precipice, and still further the quiet of the hills strewn with large stones. I murmur, "One would think the gods spoke."

And someone next to me, turning halfway in surprise, says, "But they are the gods."

How is it I did not realize? And I look quickly back to the stage.

But it is covered now by a thick fog, and I can distinguish nothing, though the music has not ceased and one still hears the voices--but faintly, as when the signal is lost, when the shore's left behind.

A Performance of Phèdre<sup>2</sup>

I had arrived late. When I entered the hall, the performance had already come to that famous moment when the queen appears on stage, accompanied by her confidante who was once her nurse, and speaks the first of those lines which had shaken my adolescence. I heard, as I looked for my seat, my eyes lowered on the shadow's obstacles, careful not to jar the brilliant knees, or the ringed hands laid flat on the books:

Let us go no further . . .

but then nothing; and in the end I was surprised despite my mind's tension during this long moment; and I raised my eyes, my throat at once tight with misgiving.

The stage was bare and very dark. One could only see two silhouettes, two bodies draped in tunics which were probably white; the two bent forward, as if beneath a weight; living only through the large masks which were yet blind, colorless, smooth from top to bottom.

And it is true that the actresses, if that is the word, were silent. Facing each other, with sudden

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<sup>2</sup>Racine's famous tragedy. Bonnefoy quotes a line from Act I, scene iii. Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 9.

thrusts of their absent brows, with humble gestures of their short arms (their hands hidden in the cloth), they struck each other, or rather brushed against each other, two ants standing upright, two servants burdened with a death or with a birth. Hesitations, rapid retreats--the hall holding its breath in the shadow, not to live--acceptance of a sudden step, in the void, as a drop of water, collected over time, will suddenly fall; then in a single breath:

Let us stay, dear Oenone,

from one of the celebrants. After which the silence was renewed.

For hours--what am I saying? for nights and nights, as I wrote, as I crossed out words, formed others--I watched thus anxiously the performance of Phèdre.

The Enneads<sup>3</sup>

It had only been an error, which would be quickly remedied. The seven from before would be sent back to studying the Cabala, and then the eighth and ninth days would play without end, returned from exile--clinging to

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<sup>3</sup>Plotinus. Cf. "The Tombs of Ravenna," note 7.

each other, nipping each other, laughing, rolling together in the water like two bare children on an empty beach.

### The Vulture

I looked at a painting, a landscape, of which I had been told that there at last, and "indubitably," or "obviously," had appeared a glimpse of another world. And I searched, I questioned those great horizons, the clouds, the trees with their sparkling leaves, but in vain. Must I resign myself to thinking that the other world is only, as Leonardo decided, the almost perfectly invisible vulture which gently in its claws holds our lights and our colors: the only ones, ever?

Time passed, they prepared to store the painting in a closet.

And it was only at the last moment, when they were taking it away, that I understood that the enigma, or the surfeit of evidence, was gathered into the green splash that was the shadow of a certain tree, on a road, in a hollow, where there was also a low wall warmed to a grand clear red by the sun, now of evening.

The Cricket<sup>4</sup>

"Your earth," this slow voice was explaining to me, scarcely muted, one would say hesitant at times, "your earth does not hold the cricket, does not proffer the cricket even as its sacred word, its ingenuous word; the earth is the cricket, which vibrates or sings--as you like--and has its own invisible life, and will die one day, in some meadow of another. . . . However," the voice added after a silence, "do not believe that these mountains here, as you say, and these trees, these shimmering waters, 'are' each the members, in a material sense, of this insect--diaphanous wings or black legs--and the insect you know only a poor image on your scale, something like a concept. No, each segment of your universe assures its corresponding part of the humble life which haunts you, only as a word evokes the thing it means, with all the arbitrariness which you willingly admit has marked the sign. A branch of a certain oak, let us say, somewhere in a Himalayan valley, is itself one of the little insect's little eyes. But perhaps you'd need the Ganges and the Indus and all the world's rivers to signify--if we insist a little,

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<sup>4</sup>Mallarmé. Cf. "A Cupola," note 1.

do you see,--one of this eye's facets, or one of its lashes, or one of its tears."

"Would the earth be a sentence? Tell me."

"And a long one. It is even because the earth is this sentence, this description which does not finish--one would say it hesitates at times--that its signs, arbitrary as they are, have the appearance of things. If the author were to finish his sentence, decide (at least for the heart of the matter) the cricket's essence, and thus assure its place in some chapter of the book--well, these lighted peaks, these stones rolling beneath your steps, this torrent sounding in the ravine, this joy you feel so naturally in deserted places: these would all retreat into the non-figure, the non-substance, the non-presence of the sign. And the cricket would still cry, or sing: but only as the words 'cry of the cricket' cry (and that is little, that is perhaps already the evil) on the page where you have just written."

"God! Will the author finish dictating his sentence?"

"No, since he hesitates, as I told you; and since he also speaks of the bird, the fruit, the lighted tree there, all the rivers. And of you, who have lifted the veil. And of myself, still, the obscure."



THE AUTHOR: Selected Bibliography (1946-1982)

This bibliography is a revised version of the one prepared by Ivar Ivask for the issue of World Literature Today dedicated to Yves Bonnefoy (vol. 53, no. 3, Summer 1979). A more detailed bibliography was published by Annie Prothin in the Bulletin of Bibliography (vol. 36, no. 3, July-September 1979).

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Susanna Lang has been read and approved by the following committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

12/9/82  
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