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## The Time of Vigny

### Reading a Poet: In and Out of Time

Vigny exists in many times at once. He apprehends time and the times through writing, which is in turn shaped by the pressures they exert and is its own kind of temporal medium. One time that becomes his is that of an affective, reflective and poetic response to the here and now – and to modernity, which amounts to saying that he writes within a temporality that is itself wholly lacking in fixity.<sup>1</sup> The claim has been made with regard to Vigny that, in the time in which he writes, poetry came to be a discourse in which the impact of the loss of providential beliefs is acknowledged and through which the temporality of human transience, as it comes to be newly articulated, is explored.<sup>2</sup> The issue which I shall examine here is the complexity of poetry as a temporal medium, one within which Vigny's poems exist and which also extends beyond them, so much so that we are prompted to ask just how we are now to locate him in time.

The pivotal year of 1830 was a notable one for Vigny in several respects – he published one play and completed another, met and fell in love with Marie Dorval, witnessed the July Revolution and served for a time in the

1 See Malcolm Bowie on the ways in which the Revolution presented challenges of historical interpretation for writers of Vigny's generation, in Sarah Kay, Terence Cave and Malcolm Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 221.

2 On crises of belief and their impact on nineteenth-century poetry, in particular that of Vigny, see Yves Bonnefoy, 'L'enjeu occidental de la poésie', in *L'Identité littéraire de l'Europe*, ed. by Marc Fumaroli et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), p. 216; Bonnefoy's essay has been translated by James Petterson as 'At Stake: Poetry in the Western World', *Common Knowledge*, 8 (2002).

reconstituted Garde Nationale. It was also a year that mattered poetically. In 1830, he wrote a note for a projected poem with the title 'Colère' ['Anger']. Here, Vigny's 'je' ['I'] concedes that the existence of God is open to doubt, hinting both at the emergence, under conditions of modernity, of a distinctively secular view of life and at the feeling of loss bordering on desolation that accompanies it: 'Dieu, sais-je ce que vous êtes, et si vous existez?' ['God, do I know who you are, and whether you exist?'].<sup>3</sup> And indeed, both this outlook and the temporal break it seems to imply will come back into view more than once, first in 'Paris', which appeared soon after its composition in 1831, and later in 'La maison du berger' ['The shepherd's hut'], first published in 1844, collected only posthumously in *Les Destinées* [*The Destinies*].

Clearly what this fragment also indicates is that there is scope to link Vigny's writing to wider movements in the thought and writing of his contemporaries, for whom the death of God was a pervasive concern.<sup>4</sup> The problem is that of the loss of familiar meanings. The question it prompts is that of the attitude we can ascribe to Vigny in his attempts to grapple

3 Alfred de Vigny, *Œuvres complètes*, 1, *Poésie – Théâtre*, ed. by François Germain and André Jarry (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 320. Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to Vigny's writings will be to this edition, henceforth abbreviated in the text as *OC*, 1; references to 'Paris' (pp. 105–12) and to 'La maison du berger' (pp. 119–28) are by line number.

4 On the scope to distinguish between the death of God understood as the end of a Platonic belief in the suprasensory world and as a sign of the diminished authority of the doctrine of faith, see Martin Heidegger, who aligns Nietzsche and his notorious proclamation with the former view, in 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"' ('Nietzsches Wort "Gott ist tot"' [1943]), in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 61–64; on the prehistory of Nietzsche's statement in Hegel and others, see pp. 58–59. I comment further on the significance of Vigny's crisis, in Patrick O'Donovan, 'Poetry and the Discourse of Happiness in Nineteenth-Century France: The Case of Vigny', in *Joie de vivre in French Literature and Culture: Essays in Honour of Michael Freeman*, ed. by Susan Harrow and Timothy Unwin (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), arguing that his reappraisal of systems of belief extends as much to the discourse of progress, seen by Heidegger as one substitute for the dead God, as to religious sentiment; in that essay, I quote more fully from Vigny's poetry than there is scope to do here.

with it. The challenge of reading Vigny is poetic, in that precisely what is not clear is how we might read his work *as poetry*, given the philosophical orientation articulated in the fragment from 1830, given, after all, the very historicity of the angry stance which the title of this aborted 'Élévation' ['Elevation'] seems to imply. For, if Vigny's poetry does contain insights into an emergent secular and non-providential outlook, that dimension would seem only to reinforce its pastness. Even if his intimations of a world-view to which we are more or less attuned make some impression on us, the ways in which they find expression may seem to tread a fine line between the self-scrutiny of a self-questioning subjectivity and the merely portentous.

Each of these difficulties is compounded by that of register, in that the very language of Vigny's poem may seem today to be at odds with its speculative substance. Malcolm Bowie applies self-consciously experimental approaches to Mallarmé's verbal art with a view to affirming what matters in his poetry, namely its 'tracing within the text of an irreversible human destiny'.<sup>5</sup> The point is that Mallarmé's engagement with open metaphysical questions is indissociable from the difficulties of his poetic practice. Although Bowie concludes that Mallarmé's aesthetic is incommensurate with that of earlier poets of the same century, I hope that a way of reading can be found within which Vigny's treatment of destiny, a term to which, after all, he gives special emphasis, can still be read alongside that of others, including Mallarmé.

Indeed Vigny's poetry has been received as emblematic, in contexts which do impinge on the temporality of a poetry which we can call modern. For Yves Bonnefoy, he is, with Baudelaire, Nerval, Rimbaud, even Mallarmé, a 'grand mort' ['one of the great dead'] – one of the begetters of a modernity which at the beginning of his career seemed to Bonnefoy to be in a sorry state.<sup>6</sup> Here, it is with Mallarmé and others that he appears as a poet to whom we must appeal so as to understand something of the role of poetry in modernity. The temporal vicissitudes of modern poetry here precipitate a shift in the time to which we might choose to assign him.

5 Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 153.

6 Yves Bonnefoy, 'Entretien avec François Lallier', *NU(e)*, 29 (March 2003), *Relectures de Pierre Jean Jouve* 1, pp. 18–19.

For Bonnefoy, then, as for some other poets who are our contemporaries in a way that Vigny is not, Vigny continues to make temporal claims on us. It is on this basis that he can be called upon to sustain the effort to think about and reaffirm the place of poetry today. With great force but at the same time very elliptically, René Char characterizes poetry here and now as a violent transformation of otherwise utilitarian discourse.<sup>7</sup> Today, poetry is constantly under threat from 'la mort du verbe' ['the death of the word']. For Char, a poem comes into existence because a poet contrives to adopt an elusive stance with regard to the appropriations to which language has become inescapably subject in 'notre monde de l'image' ['our world of the image']. To illustrate the currency of such a stance and the poetic outcomes it yields, Char appeals to Vigny (as to Villon, Baudelaire and Mandelstam): what we witness, as he presents Vigny as saying in the closing stanza of 'La maison du berger', is an unexpected and dramatic shift in the face of what he ends simply by terming 'la fin' ['the end']. The poem's 'impérissables derniers vers' ['imperishable closing lines'], which Char quotes in full, amount to something that continues to be distinctively poetic. At the end of Vigny's poem, time becomes secular. In other words, it becomes subject to a mortality which we know to be irreversible; but this time remains the indispensable medium of human capacity, such as it is. What Char identifies as poetic, namely the condensation of the poet's words, compounds the singular reversal which we witness in this stanza with regard to human time and the projects which it can be said to sustain.<sup>8</sup>

In the account Bonnefoy gives of his own practice, indeed, of his existence, as a poet, Vigny becomes the bearer of a temporal identity that is again decisive, though more indeterminate. Bonnefoy states that, in the poems he read as a child, what distinguished poetic from everyday language

7 René Char, *Sous ma casquette amarante: entretiens avec France Huser*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean Roudaut (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 823.

8 On Char's view of Vigny as the true originator of Romanticism in French poetry, see Bertrand Marchal, who sees in Char the perpetuation of an encyclopaedic conception of literature characteristic of Romanticism, in Bertrand Marchal, 'Le romantisme de René Char', in *René Char en son siècle*, ed. by Didier Alexandre et al. (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2009), pp. 53–54, 60.

were elements of prosody – alliteration, assonance, rhythms – which, while different from music, ‘conféraient pourtant à l’écoute une importance aussi spécifique que primordiale’ [‘conferred nonetheless on the act of listening an importance which was as specific as it was fundamental’].<sup>9</sup> The experience of poetry cannot be equated with the act of reading the printed word, but rather with sound-events inherent in the words as they are heard and half-repeated. It was this, as a distinctive way of experiencing poetry, that drew Bonnefoy, as he tells us, to Racine, on the one hand, and to ‘La maison du berger’, on the other.

The appeal to Vigny proves to be a recurrent thread in Bonnefoy’s thinking about musicality in poetry. Bonnefoy explores what he sees as the equivalence between musical instruments and the ways in which word-sounds sustain discourses of thought as much as of art: sound is the ‘réserve des occasions où à tout moment peut se déclarer le tout autre’ (Bonnefoy, *L’Alliance*, p. 52) [‘a reservoir for those occasions where what is wholly other might suddenly declare itself’].<sup>10</sup> This equivalence explains, he says, the affinity certain poets feel with certain instruments. But, in Vigny’s case, the temporality of this identification, while manifestly poetic, is nonetheless ambiguous: ‘ainsi du cor chez Vigny, qui dit dans un poème qui fut célèbre qu’il en écoute avec émotion la sonnerie triste errer au loin dans les bois’ [‘so it is with the horn in the case of Vigny, who, in a poem which was once famous, says that he listens with emotion to its sound ringing out sadly in the distant woods’]. It is almost as if Vigny’s poem has become as distant as the horn it evokes, as if the emotion which the poet experiences must somehow, if we are to recover its poetic significance, be translated into a discursive claim which is non- or extra-poetic. Thus Bonnefoy concludes for Vigny, in doing so, he transplants him into a new temporal space, the ‘ici’ [‘here’] of an indeterminate ‘nous’ [‘us’]: ‘ce son du cor est pour lui un déchirement de la figure du monde, une invite à chercher là-bas, dans l’invisible, dans l’inconnu, la voie d’une évidence en notre ici impossible’

9 Yves Bonnefoy, *L’Alliance de la poésie et de la musique* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), p. 15.

10 Here, of course, Bonnefoy refers to Vigny’s ‘Le Cor’ [‘The Horn’]; see Roland-François Lack’s essay in this volume.

[‘the sound of the horn is for him a gash in the face of the world, an invitation to search over there, in what is invisible, unknown, the path towards some manifest and incontrovertible thing in our impossible here’].

For both these writers, in brief, Vigny’s time continues to be that of poetry, albeit in ways which have their own ambiguities, temporal and other. To justify his view of poetic language, Char invokes Vigny’s example: the experience of reading him recreates something that is ‘impérissable’ in a world where time and other forces – the insatiable demands on our attention of the universe of the visual, the devaluation of language – threaten the existence of poetry.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, this effect is produced within a time which is that of a single poem, in that the impact of the seven lines quoted by Char derives from the very notable shift which they represent in the context of ‘La maison du berger’ as a whole, as the poet is prompted to re-evaluate the apparent withdrawal from the world which he seems to initiate at the outset. This is an outcome that is drastically compressed in Char’s transformation of the poem into something that it is not, namely a brief text. For Bonnefoy also, Vigny, among other poets, belongs to that past which precedes the beginnings of his existence as a poet, the moment at which, in other words, he was able to ‘me porter au-delà des vers sans véritable nécessité qui s’étaient succédé sous ma plume depuis l’enfance’ [‘go beyond the verses lacking a true necessity which had emerged from my pen since childhood’].<sup>12</sup> With that of Hugo, and then in turn Racine and Chénier, as Bonnefoy came to read them, Vigny’s poetry testifies to a virtuality of words, the virtuality of a ‘parole’ [‘utterance’] which is (again) ‘tout autre’ [‘wholly other’] and which nurtures a desire for poetry that he was ultimately to assume fully for himself. But then Vigny, among these other poets, becomes at least residually suspended in the virtual state with which the emergent poet has broken. Even gestures that make a virtue of identification are subject to their own imperatives. What remains to be seen is just how we can align the times of poems and of projects which

11 Char’s characterization recalls, of course, ‘La maison du berger’ itself, where poetry is described as the ‘impérissable amour’ (line 196) [‘imperishable love’] of ‘vrais penseurs’ [‘true thinkers’].

12 Yves Bonnefoy, *Traité du pianiste et autres écrits anciens* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2008), pp. 78–79.

have their differences. I shall return to this as a question for our times at the end of this essay and shall now turn to a direct discussion of some of Vigny's writing.

## A Poetry of the Present

Vigny's own concern with time – with moments, conjunctures, with the links and the disjunctions between discrete temporalities – goes some way to accounting for the kinds of questions which his writing poses and for the mobility which proves to characterize it. The fragment entitled 'Colère' gestures towards a process of self-questioning amounting to an existential crisis. A poem begun in the same year, entitled 'Paris: élévation' ['Paris: an elevation'], maps several of the other dimensions of such a crisis, which extend to issues of ideology and belief, and ultimately to a whole world-view. Here, as elsewhere in Vigny's poetry, one effect of the loss of familiar meanings is that his work becomes permeable to a wide range of other discourses. The poem's engagement in the present of modernity is connoted by its references to a number of contemporary political ideologies and, more pointedly, its caustic portrayal of Benjamin Constant. Constant died on 8 December 1830. His funeral, which took place on 12 December, was the largest public gathering seen in Paris since the July Days of the same year. In April 1831, Vigny published 'Paris' in a *plaquette* of twenty-eight pages. Ostensibly written on 16 January 1831,<sup>13</sup> it contains the following lines:

'Liberté!' crie un autre, et soudain la tristesse  
Comme un taureau le tue aux pieds de sa Déesse,  
Parce qu'ayant en vain quarante ans combattu,  
Il ne peut rien construire où tout est abattu. ('Paris', lines 115–18)

- 13 Contrary to the date given by Vigny, the poem was composed between the autumn of 1830 and the spring of the following year. I discuss briefly the poem's treatment of political ideology, in Patrick O'Donovan, 'The Death of a Liberal: Four Lines on Constant by Vigny', *French Studies Bulletin*, 100 (2006).



['Freedom!,' cries another, and suddenly sadness  
 Like a bull kills him at the feet of his goddess  
 Because having fought for forty years in vain  
 He can build nothing where everything is in ruins.]

The demoralized apologist for a freedom of and for the moderns is none other than Constant, his identity being confirmed by Vigny in a footnote. The death of Constant and, no doubt, the July Revolution, are the occasion for a restatement of the conditions of modern life. As the poem progresses, however, it seems to be just the opposite: to be a disabused retreat from the contemplation of the world of which Constant and others claim to give an authoritative account. But the gesture of retreat itself amounts to a novel kind of engagement.<sup>14</sup>

In this poem, what seems at first momentous about the modern world is that it exceeds even an apocalyptic perspective. At the opening of the poem, the poet and a figure to whom he refers as the *Voyageur* [*Traveller*] climb a tower from which they survey a world in motion. In this oneiric space, the *Voyageur* can make out what the poet confirms to be a vast wheel – in other words, Paris. The city is then presented as an axis through which the rest of the world is put into motion. The *Voyageur* can also make out a furnace, whose flames bring forth what is clearly an altogether new world, though the eventual outcome of this process remains disturbingly uncertain.

The emphasis in the poem's closing lines is irreducibly secular: in Paris, as in every other city in the world, people are exposed to suffering and death. While the prophetic strain may indeed be misplaced – once God is dead, things can hardly get worse – the poet is compelled, for precisely the same reason, to acknowledge that any redemptive perspective is open to doubt. The crisis, which is at once intellectual, spiritual, political, extends into an open present. When it comes, then, to '[les] choses de la vie' ['the realm of life'], the poet can only say: '*Je ne sais*' (line 251) ['*I do not know*']. All that may come of this world is ashes and dust, but crucially we do not know this. What the *Voyageur*, in his turn, will be able to say for certain as he goes about his travels is that '*Pour longtemps le monde est dans la nuit*'

14 See André Jarry, for whom Vigny's stance is a rejection of *engagement*, in André Jarry, *Alfred de Vigny: étapes et sens du geste littéraire* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), p. 313.

(line 258) [*For a long time the world will be in darkness*]. This is a veiled prophecy: what the speaker holds is that the conditions of the present bring us to the brink of an imponderable future.<sup>15</sup> In an essay on 'La maison du berger', near the end of some comments on the music of sounds and colours in Western culture and, especially, Western poetry, Bonnefoy translates this statement of Vigny's into one which is no less daunting: 'L'univers est dans la nuit' [*The universe is in darkness*].<sup>16</sup> He appropriates Vigny's closing line as a conclusion of his own, though in the process converts the predicate into a gnomic present, seemingly independent of any here and now. Vigny's present does find itself, once again, absorbed into the future, but is in the process abstracted from the now of the subject.

As for Vigny's own stance vis-à-vis the modern, it is equivocal for specifically poetic reasons: where it leads ultimately to the cultivation of a prophetic outlook, the poetic engagement with politics, with '[les] choses de la vie', is potentially harmful. Alongside the poem's almost overblown symbols there is a reflexive dimension which borders on the momentous – something apocalyptic, but just possibly something bordering on the vacuous.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, it is the exclusion of the prophetic outlook that gives rise to a paradox which is, for Vigny and indeed for his readers, distinctively poetic: the refusal to prognosticate simply projects the questions the poem asks into a present, that of today, where we may indeed feel that they remain unanswered. Perhaps ultimately, Vigny anticipates this present as much as he can be said to describe it, instilling in us a mode of anticipation through which we in turn can approach his future and indeed our own.<sup>18</sup>

15 On the currency of the present as an enunciation of the future when modified by a future time adverbial, see Suzanne Fleischman, *The Future in Thought and Language: Diachronic Evidence from Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 17, 93.

16 Yves Bonnefoy, 'Vigny, le peintre', in *Vigny: romantisme et vérité*, ed. by Jérôme Thélot (Mont-de-Marsan: Éditions Interuniversitaires, 1997), p. 52.

17 In Bowie's account, Mallarmé brings something like this ambiguity to bear on thought, in that 'the more scrupulous [...] thought becomes the thinner the partition which separates it from total vacuity' (Bowie, *Mallarmé*, p. 18).

18 In this, he could be said to bear comparison with Kierkegaard considered as an anticipatory thinker; for just such an approach, see Ronald Grimsley, *Søren Kierkegaard*

## 'La maison du berger': The Present of the Poem?

We have already seen that for his commentators today the time of Vigny could simply be said to be that of 'La maison du berger'. Its preeminence can be linked to the uses to which Vigny himself puts the poem. It first appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* in July 1844 – one of a sequence of five poems published by Vigny in support of his repeated efforts in the course of the 1840s to win election to the Académie française. Though it appeared last in this sequence, it came, in the course of the protracted elaboration of the collection as a whole, to occupy a quasi-independent position as the opening piece in his projected collection of 'poèmes philosophiques' ['philosophical poems'], eventually to be published posthumously in 1864 as *Les Destinées*, but with the poem 'Les destinées' inserted before it as the opening text.

At the time in which the poem was completed and published, Vigny was no less concerned with the duality of time: the transience of the time of the subject is greatly intensified by the finality of an unredeemable death, the suprasensory domain being transformed into a limitless void. Vigny also brings these two temporalities into contact in a further gnomic fragment, under the title 'Poème', where he writes: 'Nous vivons dans la mort' (*OC*, I, p. 336) ['we live within death'].<sup>19</sup>

'La maison du berger' contains a series of vivid illustrations of the ways in which the temporal stakes of modernity have been misrecognized – the emergence of railways, to cite a notorious instance, results in a new relation to time, one which Vigny first castigates and then reappraises, in that he comes to see it as a symbol of a kind of harmonious globalization. Even so,

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*and French Literature: Eight Comparative Studies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), pp. 130–58.

- 19 The fragment is dated October 1844. See Jarry, who links Vigny's alliance of art and philosophy to Heidegger's being-towards-death, in André Jarry, 'Vigny philosophe', *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises*, 45 (1993), pp. 193–94; he comments also on the dissociation of the divine from religion in Vigny's imagination (p. 183).

the poet's preference is ultimately for a relation to the world shaped by the quite different temporality of reverie. But poetry has been no less affected by modern times: in the second of the poem's three parts, its progressive immersion in the affairs of 'la cité' ['the city'], of the practical world, are said to have devalued it. From many angles, then, the poet appears to denounce what he terms the servile city and all it stands for. This claim to truth, when it comes to capturing the state of the times, is, of course, liable to be challenged. Alain Badiou repudiates Heidegger's stance vis-à-vis the 'nihilism' of modernity, denouncing its empty pathos and in the process identifying Vigny as the begetter of a 'nostalgie réactionnaire' ['a reactionary nostalgia'] in the face of the supposed ascendancy of technology in today's world (ours as well as Vigny's).<sup>20</sup> Badiou then characterizes the enigma of the present in terms which somewhat echo Heidegger's: it remains poised between the disabused exploration, typically in poetry, of the residual appeal of the sacred, on the one hand, and a pervasive version of this anti-technical and archaizing search for the 'pseudo-liens' (Badiou, p. 38) ['pseudo-connections'] of ersatz religions, on the other. But what he claims nonetheless is that we have witnessed not the end but rather simply a suspension of philosophy, an outcome that can be remedied by breaking with the attitude ascribed here to Vigny. On this reading, Vigny is, at a stroke, disavowed philosophically, as well as poetically.

The poem, which is presented as a 'Lettre' ['Letter'] addressed to an absent Éva, is one in which the future plays a prominent role: it is the tense in which the poet rehearses for her something of the life that awaits her beyond the city. The future, then, is that of a desired project which will be fulfilled, it would appear, only if the identification with Éva which is intimated in the opening stanzas comes to be realized. This vision is presented as an alternative to the time of modernity, subject as it is to demands of the commercial state of society. But what gradually emerges as the poem's true focus is a series of painful experiences which shape the poet's understanding

20 Alain Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 33; here Badiou quotes Vigny's famous characterization of the train as a 'taureau de fer' ['bull of iron'].

of the time of the subject. For in the finality of death the subject is confronted with a temporality it cannot control, yet which determines much of the scope and meaning of human agency. This sentiment comes to be stated in words which the poet ascribes to Nature: "Aimez ce que jamais on ne verra deux fois" (line 308) ['Love what can never be seen twice']. The future in which the poem's closing stanza is expressed gestures towards the fragility of a present marked by both the experience and the prospect of death:

Nous marcherons ainsi, ne laissant que notre ombre  
Sur cette terre ingrate où les morts ont passé (lines 330–31)

[So we will walk, leaving only our shadow  
On this ungrateful earth where the dead have passed]

It signals an acceptance of the limits of human time, but also the realization that its transience is the sign of its distinctively human potential: it exists as such precisely by virtue of its co-occurrence with the past, which is the time of death. Here, the thinking which the poem incorporates takes the 'nous' ['us'] into a future that is expressed literally, in a future tense form, and that belongs only to us.

If Bonnefoy claims that 'la poésie, c'est le refus de la mélancolie, un refus sans cesse oublié mais sans cesse réaffirmé' ['poetry is a refusal of melancholy, a refusal which is constantly forgotten but constantly reaffirmed'],<sup>21</sup> it is perhaps because this attitude is anticipated in 'La maison du berger', in its oscillation between a present laden with anxiety and a future devoted to muted reflection in the shadows. If we believe this to be a possible effect of poetry, then there are grounds for contesting Badiou's characterization of Vigny, irrespective of the stance he takes vis-à-vis Heidegger. Among the many reflections by Bonnefoy on nineteenth-century poetry, there is one intervention on Vigny to which I have already briefly referred, a piece written, tellingly, as a commemorative essay in 1997, entitled 'Vigny, le peintre' ['Vigny, the painter']. Published seemingly as the direct transcription of

21 Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Imaginaire métaphysique* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 66.

an earlier paper which opens with the words 'Mesdames, messieurs, mes amis' ['Ladies, gentlemen, friends'], Bonnefoy's essay originates in a shared reading as the space of a double identificatory movement of its own – with the poem and with its readers. This gesture initiates its own temporal process within the lecture-essay: in drawing on elements of Vigny's poem, it brings us to the verge of a response where we can, after all, identify Vigny with modern poetry seen as a tradition extending into our own present. Bonnefoy alludes to the musicality of the poem's closing stanzas; but then, in a move which is significant precisely because it amounts to a temporal shift prompted by this complex poem, he claims that this musicality is in fact to be understood as a form of painting. For Bonnefoy, this painterly dimension matters because it amounts to a space of and for thought (see 'Vigny, le peintre', pp. 45–47).

Bonnefoy ends by reaffirming the claims of the 'poème', both 'La maison du berger' as a poem in its own right and the genre of the philosophical poem which Vigny seeks to bring into being. He explicitly espouses the poem's orientation to the future, arguing that Vigny's 'peinture d'hier' ['painting of yesterday'] can be brought into contact with a 'réflexion sur demain, sur le demain de l'esprit' ['reflection on tomorrow, on the tomorrow of the mind']. But this movement also draws him towards modern poetry understood as a historical phenomenon, towards meditations just like these on the claims that can be made for poetry as a form of discourse, and away from individual poems. The poem and the time it occupies are somehow effaced. Because of the thoughts it contains and because of its writing, Vigny's poem is, Bonnefoy says, a source of value: it is 'une valeur pour le temps présent' (p. 67) ['a value for the present time'], but if this is so, it is with regard to poetry and to the problems which confront it now, in the present in which Bonnefoy writes. As a result, the time of the poem as it becomes subsumed into the discourse of poetry (becoming, as Bonnefoy declares, its mirror), becomes indeterminate.

I mentioned earlier that, for Bowie, Mallarmé's distinctiveness as a difficult poet aligns him with his Modernist successors, separating him decisively from Romantic writers like Vigny. On this point, Bonnefoy's reception of Vigny seems to diverge from Bowie's, in that he appeals to some tangible continuity with him. Bowie, by contrast, identifies him

with other poets who operate within a paradigm which ultimately cannot equip us to engage with forms of Modernist writing that are concerned with conceptual and existential crisis. For Bonnefoy, by contrast, a vital link to Vigny creates possibilities for poetry today, but even then such a connection is secured only by means of an unmistakable break with the poem's own temporality.<sup>22</sup>

What do I conclude from this seeming impasse? Mallarmé can be said to be like Vigny in that he assumes the full transformation of the temporality of poetry as it converges with the thought of the death of God. In a famous letter, he says as much, intimating something of how he understands human destiny to be an issue for poetry. Poetry tells us, he seems to say, that what has value in life is indissociable from the vastly extended temporality of death, as it confronts the subject and as it exerts its transformative influence on the suprasensory realm, which as a result he is prompted to re-evaluate.<sup>23</sup> It is the same stance as Vigny's, though expressed more trenchantly and more exuberantly.

At the same time, with Vigny, we will always wonder whether there are any anxious latecomers<sup>24</sup> – in other words, whether there are poets, or readers of poetry, for whom he is ultimately a figure who must be overcome. Bonnefoy's invocation of Vigny's loyal readers will spontaneously seem to many to be something of a fiction, or a veiled concession to the happy few – and also a tacit admission that, when one reads Vigny, one is likely to do so within a more prolonged immersion in French poetry that

22 For a sober assessment of the shifts in its conceptualization which may make it difficult fully to identify today with Vigny's practice of a poetry that claims to be philosophical, see Dominique Combe, 'Le poème philosophique ou "l'hérésie de l'enseignement"', *Études françaises*, 41.3 (2005).

23 See his letter to Henri Cazalis of 28 April 1866, where he redefines the task of poetry as to reinvent something of the sublimity of the realm of the imaginary divine, even though it amounts to a 'Rien' ['Nothing'], to nothing more than a glorious lie: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète: 1862–1871, suivi de Lettres sur la poésie: 1872–1898*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 297–98.

24 For Harold Bloom, 'priority in divination is crucial for every strong poet, lest he dwindle merely into a latecomer', in Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 8.

will take us 'beyond' him. Even if we feel compelled to return to Vigny, the movement away from him may never be fully reversed, in that we now read him (and others) differently in the light of what we have subsequently read, in the light even of the responses which he provokes and through which he is somehow superseded. On this reading, what is distinctive about the encounter between Vigny and Bonnefoy, or between Vigny and Char, is indeed the movement of identification – with what the later poet's invitation to subsume the poem into the present conveys by way of intimations of poetic possibilities. This is a gesture that does not exclude its own Bloomean swerve in some new poetic direction. For the poet who precedes, who foretells, but does not tell, the death of God, whose poems remain as open as Vigny's do both to the flux of known history and the imponderability of what is to come, can perhaps have only an afterlife, can exercise only a fitful influence, strangely exempt from the anxiety which impels 'strong' poets to affirm themselves. But he illustrates no less powerfully the paradox of the poet who is not a 'strong' poet: so as to read him at all, we must surrender to the text in ways which its very remoteness makes supremely unpredictable.