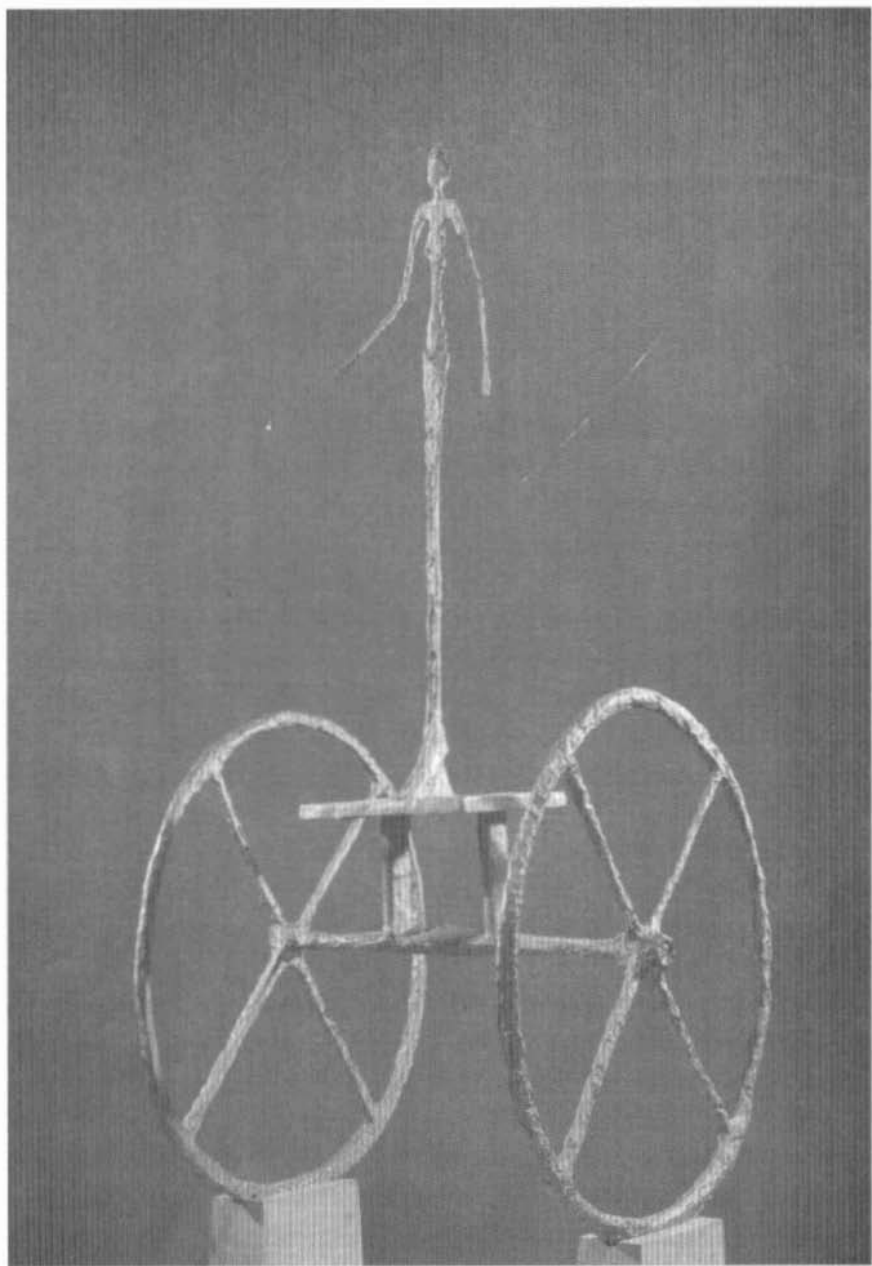


POETICITY IN YVES BONNEFOY'S *ALBERTO GIACOMETTI: BIOGRAPHIE D'UNE ŒUVRE*

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Alberto Giacometti, the Swiss modernist artist best known for his tall, thin sculptural figures,¹ has inspired numerous writings by French-language authors of fiction and poetry, beginning with Michel Leiris in 1929 and continuing through to Tahar Ben Jelloun and Yves Bonnefoy in the 1990's. In their examinations of Giacometti, these authors show their literary roots,² even when by all appearances they are aiming for a quite straightforward presentation. Such is the case in Yves Bonnefoy's 600-page volume, *Alberto Giacometti: Biographie d'une œuvre* (1991). In standard biographical and art critical form, Bonnefoy's work is organized largely in a chronological manner and exhaustively describes the life and work of Giacometti. At the same time, however, it moves outside the boundaries of both genres into the realm of the poetic. In this essay I will investigate the poeticity of Bonnefoy's text, ending with a discussion of the more general question of the attraction that Giacometti has held for creative writers.

In exploring Bonnefoy's work, I will use a definition of "poetic" which includes not only the idea of special sensitivity to the evocative properties of language, but that of a more fundamental transgression of boundaries, of genre categories themselves. It is offered by Maurice Blanchot (a friend of both Bonnefoy and Giacometti). In his essay, "La Cruelle Raison poétique," he describes the "essence of poetry" as "[the refusal of] limited genres and the affirm[ation of] a more original language" (435).³ In Bonnefoy's text, the "refusal of limited genres" is already evident in the title, *Biographie d'une œuvre*. It announces a work that will not exactly be an artist's biography, nor will it precisely fall into the category of art criticism. True to this promise, the text takes as its framework not only



Giacometti, Alberto (1901-1966). *The Chariot*, 1950.
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events in Giacometti's life but images that both evoke the artist and contribute to the formation of a poetic work on its own terms. Through the complex network of images and themes which thread through the book and the subtle melding of the written with the visual—abundant and sumptuous reproductions of Giacometti's work and photographs of the artist and his sculptures—Bonneyoy affirms an "original language."

His book takes as its main organizing elements three inextricably intertwined figures: those of the mother and of the "pierre dorée" and the "pierre noire," large, monolithic stones which were part of the young Giacometti's physical and emotional landscape in his native Stampa, Switzerland. Like most writers on Giacometti, Bonneyoy describes the great importance in the artist's life of his mother, Annetta, with whom he spent weeks or months of every year and whose death occurred only two years before his. Bonneyoy presents her as tender, communicative, full of good humor: "[G]râce à elle il y avait beaucoup de lumière, les premiers dessins de Giacometti en sont preuves" (10). Also near the beginning of the book, Bonneyoy analyzes Giacometti's descriptions (published during his surrealist period)⁴ of a giant "pierre dorée" which his father showed him at an early age and which contained near its base a small cave where the boy could nestle. The shining rock, according to Bonneyoy, mirrors the figure of this luminous and generous mother. Later on in his boyhood, however (again according to the artist's essay), Giacometti and his friends came upon another large, pyramid-shaped rock which, this time, did not contain a sheltering cave: it was the "pierre noire" mentioned above. This second stone, described by Giacometti as "hostile" and "threatening"—("Elle menaçait tout: nous, nos jeux et notre caverne" [24])—suggests to Bonneyoy the mother again, but in a different, negative light: the mother in the role of keeper of the law. (Annetta, a Calvinist, possessed a conservative side). Bonneyoy continues, "La pierre noire est en cela une chute, de la sorte qui ferme les paradis" (25). Thus, it more widely connotes the world that the growing Giacometti will discover: the complications and disappointments of his life; "une décomposition de ce qui, avant, était unité" (25).

Bonneyoy here notes the unusual degree of clarity with which Giacometti describes his discovery of and reaction to the "pierre noire," as representing the end of the harmonious and welcoming world of his

childhood, and wonders if the neatness of the artist's analysis is not a bit suspect. He sees Giacometti's interpreting as legitimate, however, explaining it as part of the artist's continuing and serious process of self-investigation. Moreover, he describes the echoes of this analysis in Giacometti's later writings, interviews and in his work. This explanation encourages readers of Bonnefoy's text to do the same as far as the author is concerned: to view his classic, double-sided representation of the mother, not as the reductive image that it may first appear to be, but as an organizing figure which will expand in dimension and complexity as the text continues. The "pierre noire" in particular, with its connotations of both mass and emptiness, presence and absence, becomes emblematic of the artist's struggle to deal with the contradictory aspects of existence and to affirm presence within absence:

La tâche de Giacometti, [. . .] ce ne fut pas la mimésis, ce fut la résurrection: non celle de la vie dans ce qui meurt, mais celle de la présence dans ce qui se ferme sous le regard, se fait non-sens, pierre noire. Et son lieu, ce n'est l'art que pour autant que l'art peut toucher à ce plein, mais aussi ce vide, infinis . . . (55)

It was especially in Giacometti's sculptures, says Bonnefoy, and particularly those which he created toward the end of his life, that the artist captured this "résurrection" of the "plein" within and including the "vide."

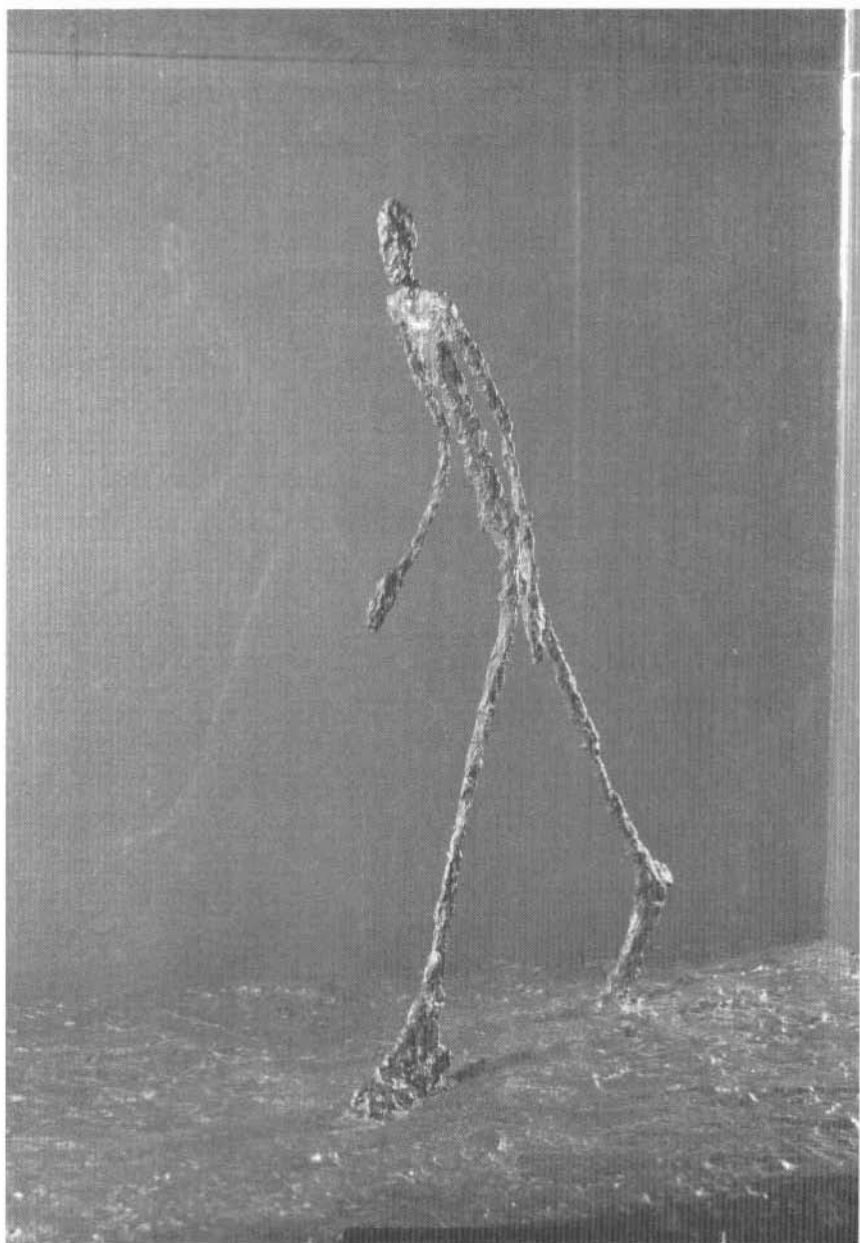
The element of the mother and the connected figures of the "pierre dorée" and the "pierre noire" are present from the very beginning of the book, both visually and in the written text. As indicated above, it is in part the sensitive and multiple meaningful integrations of the illustrations with the written commentary that takes Bonnefoy's work into the realm of the poetic. (Even the physical properties of the book as a whole play a signifying role: its unusually long, narrow form of 13 by 9 1/2 inches and its surprising heaviness echo the form and weight of Giacometti's bronze figures and busts.) The first two pages of the text, for example, feature the mother of the artist. On the left we see a photo by Henri Cartier-Bresson of the adult Giacometti on the street in front of his home in Stampa waving to the aged Annetta on the balcony above; on the right, Bonnefoy

has placed an early drawing by Giacometti of his mother sewing. The written portion begins, "Pour comprendre Giacometti, prenons d'abord cette voie, puisqu'elle s'offre d'emblée: sa relation à sa mère" (9). The choice of photograph is telling, with the mother above, guiding her son, and Giacometti preparing to set out on the road ahead, to take his own "voie." This road is, however, according to the sentence just cited, inextricably linked with that of his mother.

On these first pages one sees not only Annerra but indications of the as yet unnamed "pierre claire" and "pierre noire." The written portion of the text opens with two epigraphs, the first, a quotation from Giacometti. In this statement he makes reference to both a nostalgic and unreachable brilliance and the inescapable darkness with which he deals in his work: "Oh, je vois un tableau merveilleux et brillant, mais il n'est pas de moi, il n'est de personne. Je ne vois pas les sculptures, je vois le noir" (8). In addition, the first illustration in the book, the frontispiece, also suggests both the "pierre dorée" and the "pierre noire." It is a photograph, again by Cartier-Bresson, in which the mature Giacometti is walking in the rain on the Rue d'Alésia in Paris, his raincoat pulled up to cover both his head and body. Thus sheathed, his form, made of both lights and darks, echoes each of the two "pierres" described later in the text. Throughout the book, Bonnefoy multiplies both overt and subtle references to the shape, creating a rich and imaginative texture.

The nature and placement of the illustrations in the book's first pages is typical of the way in which they are used in the work as a whole: to suggest ideas and themes rather than being strictly connected to the chronological period under discussion. Later in the volume, for instance, when describing Giacometti's 1934 sculpture, *l'Objet invisible*, the author includes not only representations of that statue but also a much later picture from the 1960's of Giacometti modeling a bust. This second photo connects to Bonnefoy's interpretation of the earlier piece, which depicts a woman holding "une absence" in her palms. In the author's view, the figure is actually in the process of creating something with her hands, "[de rétablir] avec l'Autre ce lien de sens, de partage que [l'enfance de Giacometti] a senti se rompre" (241). Bonnefoy implies through both the photograph and the text that this project was realized some thirty years later, in Giacometti's own process of shaping his sculptures.

As is evident in the several examples that I have given, Bonnefoy does not hesitate to create his own strikingly personal interpretations, to take ideas to their limits. From time to time he begs the reader's indulgence for perhaps going too far, speaking at one point, for example, of "Précaires indicés, c'est vrai, simples fanatismes, peut-être de l'interprète..." (244). But the apologies only serve to underscore the joy that he so obviously takes in his play with words, concepts and images. Even a single word can suffice to set off an almost hallucinatory series of associations and cogitations. Bonnefoy recounts one episode in Giacometti's life that signaled an important change in his artistic production, an event in which the word and image of the "pied" figure prominently and emblematically. In 1938, while crossing the Place des Pyramides in Paris, Giacometti was hit by a car and suffered a broken foot. His subsequent period in the hospital permitted him to reassess his life, including his artistic work. Giacometti later spoke of this fact and noted some interesting linguistic coincidences involved in the incident. Before leaving his studio that evening, he had just said to his woman friend of the time that he was feeling uncomfortable in their relationship: "Je perds absolument pied" (264). As she stood there, immobile, he played on the figure of speech, saying, "[R]egarde comme on peut bien marcher sur les deux jambes. N'est-ce pas merveilleux? Un équilibre parfait," executing a spin as he spoke. Bonnefoy takes up on the irony that these comments held in retrospect, noting that when Giacometti was struck by the car he was "at the foot of" what "must have been" one of his favorite statues, that of Jeanne d'Arc ("au pied d'une statue...[qui] lui fait perdre absolument pied! [264]"). Bonnefoy goes on to remind us that Giacometti was born "au pied des montagnes" and, most importantly, to discuss the importance of the large base, the enormous foot in the sculptor's figurative work to come. It was the experience of this accident, in which Giacometti felt so close to death, that in Bonnefoy's words "delivered him from nothingness." In a sense it restored him to life, permitting him to move from a period of stagnation in his work to a time of investigation and growth. This exploration led to the elongated, heavy-based figures for which he is best known: "{U}n art plus vrai, un art de la Présence enfin reconnue, va naître de là-même où le sculpteur perdait pied" (269). Typically, the illustrations chosen for this portion of the text comment



upon and amplify the "foot" episode. They include Giacometti's lithograph entitled "Homme qui marche sur la pointe des pieds" and his bronze, "Homme traversant une place," both from the more fruitful period following Giacometti's accident on the "place." Bonnefoy's embroidery upon the word "pied" is one example of how his use of language and image, both literary and visual, poetically enrich his biography of Giacometti.

Throughout his career, Bonnefoy has written essays on art and on particular artists, from Bernini and Poussin to Balthus and Mondrian, usually in conjunction with writers, most prominent among them, poets Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Perse, and Jouve (5). In these essays Bonnefoy explores some of the concepts which most interest him in the work of Giacometti, including his oppositional evocation of the notions of presence and absence at work in both visual art and poetry (6). But none of Bonnefoy's other pieces possess the length, scope and depth of his tome on Giacometti.

Significantly, as I mentioned earlier, Bonnefoy is not the only French language author to have chosen Giacometti as a subject. These writers constitute a who's who of modern and contemporary literature in French: Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet, poets Michel Leiris, André Breton, Francis Ponge, René Char, Jacques Dupin and Charles Julier, and Tahar Ben Jelloun. It may be that Giacometti's work has particularly inspired creative writers and produced variously poetic transformations of art critical writing because it is suggestive of the temporality that is so much a part of the production and reading of a literary piece. Many of these authors, including Bonnefoy, mention the lengthy process of creating, destroying and recreating, that characterized Giacometti's work style. He would spend weeks, sometimes months on a single piece. (Interestingly, one of the very few times when Bonnefoy mentions personal contact with the artist is in a description of watching Giacometti model a figure in his studio.) Bonnefoy, for example, describes Giacometti's way of painting, over-painting and re-painting individual portraits, such that "[cette tête est] moins un fait qu'une durée" (378). Jean Genet, in his wonderful essay on Giacometti, describes what he sees as the result of this manner of working. For him, the artist's sculpture is marked by an impression of movement between ancient eras and the present, between feelings of

remoteness and intimacy; the work transmires a sense of its existence through time. In Bonnefoy's book, we see a comparable reworking of images, ideas and events that produces a similar density.

In the case of Bonnefoy as well as the other authors mentioned, it must not only be the component of temporality which links Giacometti's visual creation to their own linguistic invention, but the fact that Giacometti himself possessed literary, or at least verbal tendencies. He kept a journal throughout his life and published writings on his own and others' art, especially during the surrealist era, with its strong connection between the written and the visual. Previously unpublished journal and notebook entries by Giacometti, assembled and edited in 1990 as part of the volume, *Ecrits*, include texts that he had revised several times. This rewriting paralleled his artistic method and undoubtedly the literary practice of the authors who have treated him and his work. In addition, he loved to converse with authors who would choose to write about him, including friends and acquaintances. He respected and enjoyed the precise use of language. Bonnefoy, making great use of Giacometti's writings and interviews as starting points for his analyses of the artist's work and life, certainly was attracted to and influenced by Giacometti's linguistic interests and talents.

We have seen, then, how Bonnefoy transforms both biographical and art critical modes in his book. The complexity and pervasive nature of the images that he uses, including the intricacy of their intertwining, makes the text extend beyond both categories, as does the subtle integration of the visual and verbal levels. In addition, the photographs and reproductions subvert and enrich the basically chronological nature of the biography. One might say that Giacometti, the object of the study, has contributed to its "poetization." This occurs in part, through his visual art, the density of Bonnefoy's text corresponding to that of Giacometti's pieces. But it also takes place through Giacometti's words. In examples that I have given, notably the figures of the "pierre noire" and the "pied," Bonnefoy develops his ideas using Giacometti's writings and quotations from the artist as a basis. Giacometti's words help Bonnefoy to see, to "read" the visual works. They influence his choice and placement of illustrations on the page as well as his written text. Bonnefoy's interlacing of the visual and the verbal echoes Giacometti's own use of both visual

art and language, including language as art during his surrealist days. Through Giacometti, Bonnefoy affirms the "présence" of his poeticity.

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NOTES

¹ Alberto Giacometti, a sculptor and painter, was born in 1901 in Stampa, Switzerland and died in 1966 in Paris, where he spent most of his adult life. He was initially recognized for his surrealist works during the 1920's and 1930's and went on to become one of the major figures of postwar modernism, with his elongated, often heavy-based figurative sculptures and busts and intense portraits and still lives.

² See Lamarre, who selects certain of these texts and sensitively analyzes them for their degree of "literarity." He does not choose to include Bonnefoy in this category, however.

³ Translated and quoted by Laura Oswald in *Jean Genet and the Semiotics of Performance* (xiv-xv). Other translations in the text are my own.

⁴ Giacometti's description of the "pierre dorée" and the "pierre noire" appeared in his essay, "Hier, sables mouvants" (*Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, 5 (1933): 44-45, reprinted in *Ecrits*, 7-9).

⁵ Bonnefoy has gathered together his essays on art and poetry in collections such as *L'Improbable, Rome 1630: L'horizon du premier baroque* and *Le Nuage rouge* and published the essay, *Miró*, as a separate volume.

⁶ See Caws for illuminating analyses of Bonnefoy's essays.

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