Michel Deguy’s *l'être-comme* and the poetics of ecological comparativism

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Michel Deguy has been a mainstay of the French literary landscape for more than fifty years. In the sixties, a translator of Friedrich Hölderlin, Paul Celan, and Martin Heidegger, but principally a poet and essayist, his texts and theories draw on a wide range of philosophical thought and poetic tradition to establish creative models of strictly poetic thinking. Addressing the possible collective inhabitation of Earth, and specifically that of poetry’s analogical potential to offer a radical alterity for expressing community with others, Deguy’s most recent, extensive work on poetic ecology has been at the forefront of challenging cultural capitalism and what Frédéric Neyrat describes as eco-technology.
[éco-technique]. For Neyrat, principally embodied in subsequent work in his critique of terrestrial control as a kind of mass geo-engineering, this is where modernity’s capitalist-inflected image and its alluring but unattainable promise reduce both politics and the subject’s experience of it to a game of consumption, where pre-formed identities are produced and then amplified by eco-technological apparatus (2003, 19–21). Deguy’s understanding of identity formation then offers a philosophical poetics also responding to what Jean-Luc Nancy posited as a technology of world assuming art’s creation, an endless spacing of difference and self-presented meaning which must be understood ‘like the infinity of art which replaces a nature that never had and never will take place’, and where ‘an ecology understood as such can only be a technology’¹ (1993, 66). Poetry’s complex relationship with philosophy as a kind of technology in the original Greek sense of tekhné [τέχνη] as craft certainly conjoins in activity sited outside Deguy’s texts,² but within them, such interests coalesce to ask important questions of poetry’s provision of epistemological and ontological ground for the mutable identities of individual’s and others’ modern ecological existence on a troubled Earth.

Poetry’s measures

In the recent poetry collection, N’était le cœur (2011), Deguy’s short verse ‘Nihil’ concisely announced that in a world existing no longer with nature, nor with God, where ‘there is no longer

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¹ ‘comme l’infini de l’art qui supplée une nature qui n’eut et qui n’aura jamais lieu [...] [u]ne écologie bien entendue ne peut être qu’une technologie’ [All translations my own].
² In 1977 he created and for many years subsequently ran the review Po&sie, and from 1989 to 1992 was president of le Collège international de philosophie.
even the inherited enemy,’ we might appear alone. These absences raise (and the present tense is deliberate) three adjunct questions:

From where, then, comes the terror?
There would only be the between-us
That it would be a question of managing
– and first by inventing the us?

The third, the other other than otherness, the other,
Could it be space, the astrophysical elsewhere
Where deterrestration \[déterrestration\] stirs? (2011, 37).4

The clever neologism of the latter stanza, \(d\text{é}t\text{érrestration}\), clearly indicates two processes, humanity desiring to extract itself from a finite planet – Earth; and simultaneously, its digging in the other direction to inadvertently prepare its own mass tomb. For Deguy, of the first, two distinct modes of terrestrial extraction implicate eco-technology:

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[...] \text{deterrestration} – \text{which I readily take from Jean-François Lyotard} – \text{is the ultimate project of Technology, leaving the heavy earth in the direction of space [and] extraterrestration is this distancing, leaving the terrestrial without a spaceship, this loss, the}
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3 ‘[i]l n’y a plus même l’enemi héréditaire’.  
state of detachment or abandon where Research places us […]\(^5\) (2013, 179–82).

Whilst this commentary on technological research also reflects what the late Michel Serres terms a placeless disorientation of terrestrial existence driven by science in the quest of humanity becoming astronauts [devenus astronautes] (2014, 238–239), Deguy’s other question from ‘Nihil’ on the very invention of an antipodal-challenging ‘nous’ (‘Le tiers, l’autre autre qu’autrui’), recognised the impossible, interwoven prospect of complete ontological community based upon a chimerical commun.

Neyrat has drawn attention to Nancy’s work on an ontological conception of singular-plural being to indicate how such a paradoxical, forever incomplete ‘nous’ is oddly better represented by its cross-over from French into the English of ‘no us’ (2013, 64–65). After Heidegger’s work on Being-with (Mitsein), Nancy himself delineated the alterity paradox of being’s with [avec] as how

[…] the simultaneity of separation and contact, that’s to say the most fitting constitution of the cum-, is exposed like indeterminacy, and like a problem. In this logic, there’s no proper measure of with: the other withdraws from it, in the alternative or in the dialectic of the incommensurable and common intimacy […]\(^6\) (1996a, 105).

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\(^5\) ‘La déterrestration – dont je cite volontiers l’occurrence chez Jean-François Lyotard – est le projet ultime de la Technique : celui de quitter la terre pesante en direction de l’espace [et] L’exétraterrestration, elle, est cet éloignement, ce quitter le terrestre sans vaisseau spatial, cette perte : l’état de détachement ou d’abandon où nous met la Recherche’.

\(^6\) ‘la simultanéité de l’écart et du contact, c’est-à-dire la constitution la plus propre du cum-, s’expose comme indétermination, et comme problème. Il n’y a pas, dans cette logique, de mesure propre de l’avec : l’autre la lui retire,
Following Nancy’s prescription of a major problem of phenomenological corporeal unity, across recent years a whole host of critics from several fields have been alert to how a combination of ecological crises, globalisation and late capitalist expansion, and their combination in ecotechnology have collapsed old paradigms of collective spatial orientation – and accordingly its measure – into dizzying channels of quite stochastic incommensurability. Ursula Heise, for instance, describes new scales of excess as the product of a ‘globalist consciousness’ (2008, 4); Fredric Jameson took ‘cognitive mapping’ as a critical method which can amplify a subject’s ‘sense of its place in the global system’, simultaneously inventing a radical politics ‘on a social as well as spatial scale’ (1991, 53–54); and Timothy Clark diagnoses a very recent ‘Anthropocene disorder’ as a problematic conception based upon a catachrestic care rhetoric in which old categories of politics and nature are exhausted and replaced by irreducible, relational measures always in danger of capitulating to negation, reification or, as Nancy acknowledges, withdrawal, where, indeed, one can only be reminded so many times that ‘ecology is all about interdependence’ (2015, 140–41, 147).

With the maxim of interdependence generating so much prevalent ecological or ecocritical discourse in response to fears of the future and communal disharmony, by instead exploring independences and opposites in a radical ethics of poetic meaning, Deguy’s work then helps emphasise new spaces of identity in an innovative middle-way located between and crucially separate from the dualisms of proper and improper, self and other, sameness and difference. This search for a creative orientation of common measure which acts to maintain irreducibility has seen his work concentrate and evolve through two prominent areas.

dans l’alternative ou dans la dialectique de l’incommensurable et de l’intimité commune’.
First, by inverting Heidegger’s notion of ‘work-being’, which ‘opens up a world’ and ‘lets the earth be an earth’ (2001, 42–43), there is a poetic reason of ontological comparativism taken after Heidegger in Deguy’s advance of the bivalent analogical signification of l’être-comme [being-like (it)] where the subject’s work is simply the spacing of being ‘like’ the human; and second, this ontology’s connection to a mode of ecological thought which distinguishes between an individual world and a collective Earth in the latter’s prospect as the ecumene [l’écoumène].7 As with the neglected tiers in ‘Nihil’, the indistinct gap between the human and its surrounding space is then inhabited by a uniquely poetic epistemology where Deguy urgently rethinks the very act of comparing. Henceforth, I interpret this as a poetics of ecological comparativism, and the qualification in this genitive is key: it recommends that we read comparison in a different way to that which it may have been predominantly performed, instead, one in which creative interpretation of ecology follows the movements of poetry’s own comparative apparatus – its metaphors, analogies, figures, and imagery.

Accordingly, ecological comparativism helps form a poetic identity and delineates a middle-way for ecological co-existence following two principle presuppositions: analogy is fundamental to human expression; and conceptually applied to the whole Earth (its social and natural spaces), its ‘cultural’ comparison follows but also modifies a ‘natural’ ecology’s rule of interconnection. Specifically, this poetic identity might

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7 This term is taken from Augustin Berque who defines its field of existential relations as ‘the whole sum and the condition of human environments, in that they are properly human, but no less of ecology and physics. This is the ecumene, which is fully the abode (oikos) of the being of the human’ ['l’ensemble et la condition des milieux humains, en ce qu’ils ont proprement d’humain, mais non moins d’écologie et de physique. C’est cela, l’écoumène, qui est pleinement la demeure (oikos) de l’être de l’humain’]. Cf. Berque (2015) p. 17.
challenge the speculative tradition of Kant’s noumenal world and its transcendental dialectic (2007, 258–64; 316–19), as well as Hegel’s own immanent dialectic of sublation [Aufhebung] and its reliance upon opposites preserved in a determinate negation producing universal, synthetic unity annulling contradiction and driving towards historical completion (1977, 67–70; 50–53). Accordingly, poetry’s comparisons see poetic identity hold or maintain contradictory differences whilst producing a semblance of interconnection only by affirming two separate alterities: the ontological, material, and pre-verbal encounter with otherness – both human and non-human; and the otherness of different epistemologies expressing specifically singular places and spaces through different languages and ideas. Rather than sublating these alterities and reinforcing sameness through a totalizing dialectical synthesis – Hegel’s Aufhebung – poetry’s comparison then becomes an affirmative motor on which differences are configured together separately as measures of incommensurable, non-dialectical relation.

Before looking more closely at Deguy’s work, it is important to stress how as an expression of judgement on the world, but also as a potentially inherent ontological condition, the analogy of poetry’s comparison provides this measure for reorienting the existence of ecological being on Earth. As a critical heuristic, ecological comparativism then resonates with Jacques Derrida’s invocation of removing poetry from the literary rubric of comparative literature, opening space for a specifically comparative poetics placed alongside ‘discursive arts of which is not certain from the outset that they belong to literature’ (2008, 34). This is where an autonomous poetic subjectivity creatively acts at and radiates from ecology’s very epicentre, unbinding an ontological-epistemological dialectic encompassing human-nonhuman, subject-place dualities but possibly also that of any
conceivable self-other alterity. This motion beyond categorization shares César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, and Dario Villanueva’s epistemological imperative of comparativism as a principally cognitive operation connecting two or more elements, where ‘[b]y comparing we build sense’ (2015, xi). For them, the comparison of similitude and difference establishes ‘a minimal correlation of analogy’ which affirms that ‘comparison is a logical-formal act, a dialectical relationship between a differentiating way of thinking (induction) and a totalizing attitude that looks for what is constant (deduction)’ (idem., xvi). Alternatively, however, both as creative and critical heuristic, ecological comparativism is opposed to totality presupposition and a dialectic of deduction as operating through negation. Instead, it perceives poetics as formally configuring difference non-dialectically through comparison’s speculative affirmations, instead producing a non-totalizing fragmentation in which the only constant invariant is the dialogic spacing of referential separation existing in the expression of poetry’s very contingent analogies.

The evolution of Deguy’s work has then notably outlined this potential, analogical union of ecology and comparativism. Recognising how any relationship to the Earth is threatened by cultural capitalism, and in turn its ontology of equivalence, Deguy has asked ‘how resist this Threat, if not by renewing our attachment’ (2002, 60). Merely imagining the Earth’s space as a unified topology, its alterity scales can affirm subjectivity’s attachment-through-detachment by non-dialectical relation. For Neyrat, the act of separating the parts of any posited whole to understand their relations has emerged as the instrumental

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8 It’s interesting to note that already in 1997, Verena Andermatt Conley recognised that ecology was an epistemic praxis of relations in which ‘it will be impossible not to think in an ecological way’. Cf. Conley (1997) p. 42.

9 ‘Comment résistér à cette Menace, sinon en renouvelant notre attachement’.
paradox of what he terms an ecology of separation. To the cleavage of Humanity (subject) and Earth (object), he urges that it must be shown at what point nothing exists in isolation but is merely separate (2016, 33–34). This strives to reconnect by relation exactly what has been cleaved [clivé] or welded [soudé] – two contronyms representing abusive separation and excessive connection (idem., 34). This means, for him, that an ecological ontology endorses neither ‘radical distancing’ [éloignement radical] nor ‘absolute interconnection’ [interconnexion absolue] (idem., 34–35). Neyrat affirms cleavage as a radical rupture between two realities which can produce active rather than passive denial (‘dénégation’) (idem., 267–268). Separation, on the other hand, affirms otherness but also a dependence which logically destroys relations by gathering them into an absolute totality (idem., 269–70). Challenging an epistemology of ecology to deconstruct a sense of cleavage but maintain relational difference then centrally addresses two broad yet unequivocally interconnected fears endemic in the modern world – planetary destruction and the presence of the other. The second concern lead Deguy to tentatively propose that “‘Poetry’ serves to measure the gap, the naked proximity of strangers: the other, at a null and infinite distance”10 (2006, 31). In his ecological vision, however, the other fear, planetary destruction, makes for what he terms géocide, ‘the global phenomenon that ecology takes in view, in vision’, whereby of its prospect, ‘there will be only one – and it’s in progress’11 (2012b, 65). Offset by globalisation, this prospect presages the terrifying singularity of the end in the world. From a European perspective, the genesis of this fear resides in

10 ‘« Poésie » sert à mesurer l’écart, la nue proximité des étrangers : l’autre, à une distance nulle et infinie’.
11 ‘le phénomène globale que l’écologie prend en vue, en vision […] il n’y en aura qu’un – et il est en cours’.
successive World Wars and the atrocities of the Holocaust. But as technological expansion radiates cultural sameness to all corners of the globe, this fear now also represents designation of the Anthropocene era – the epoch in which human activity has visibly been the dominant, disproportionate planetary influence.  

The *end of the world*, then, despite the coupling of Godlessness and absent nature in ‘Nihil’, might be less an eschatological anxiety and more a portent supplanted by the very real prospect, from a human perspective, at least, of the *end of the Earth*. Addressing misperception of the boundaries between the finite and the infinite, Deguy’s early work recommended ‘we have to talk about the earth in the imperfect’, and asked of language approximations of this space, ‘does this distance measure the difference between “earth” and “world”?  

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If poetry’s textual space is where conceptions of world and Earth, but also self and other collide, then to see these relations anew it’s important to find comparison’s invariant reason. In *La Raison poétique* (2000), a text which undertook this search, Deguy’s summary of his ongoing critique of the effacement of cultural difference affirmed poetry as still inscribed against difference flattening doxas, such that ‘the spirit of poetry […] knows how to treat, by bringing to a paroxysm, the paradoxicality of the “oxymoron”, the unsurpassable condition that makes of thinking the there is [il-y-a] of phenomenality’  

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13 ‘nous devons parler de la terre à l’imparfait […] cette distance mesure-t-elle la différence entre « terre » et « monde » ?’.  
14 ‘[l]’esprit de poésie […] sait traiter, en portant au paroxysme la paradoxalecté de l’« oxymore », la condition indépassable que fait à la pensée le il-y-a de la phénoménalité’.
late, only posthumously published work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty – in particular, his figure of the chiasmus [chiasme]. In the incomplete Le Visible et l’invisible (1988), Deguy’s forebear proposed the interweaving of subject and object where mind and body are processes of exchange rather than coincidence. Whilst this recognises the difficulties in assigning meaning or definitions to terms such as see [voir] and world [monde], for Merleau-Ponty it is philosophy which is tasked with voicing their correspondences, delineating the conceptual paradoxes of their facticity and adjusting us to ‘these figured enigmas’ [ces énigmes figurées] (2010, 1639–1640). This sought a sensation of being-in-the-world located in the gap [l’écart] between world and body, where the seeing, feeling subject is implicated in ‘the intertwining of my life with other lives, of my body with visible things’\(^{15}\) (idem., 1681). Merleau-Ponty indicated a so-called hyperdialectic as capable of expressing this interweaving’s truth, ‘because it unrestrictedly envisages the plurality of relations and what has been called ambiguity’\(^{16}\) (idem., 1723). However, this hyperdialectic perhaps neglects that an economy of images might be visible through poetry’s speculative, figurative perception, a point on which he took a different direction to Deguy’s pending decision and sought a concrete phenomenology for being’s dialectical definition of two movements colliding in the there is [il y a] of something [quelque chose] (ibid.).

L’écart, however, became Deguy’s focal point of separate spacing for poetry’s non-dialectical formation as a kind of relational, autotelic topography. In a speculative holding of difference, confirming the world through figurative separation

\(^{15}\) ‘l’entrelacement de ma vie avec les autres vies, de mon corps avec les choses visibles’.

\(^{16}\) ‘parce qu’elle envisage sans restriction la pluralité des rapports et ce qu’on a appelé l’ambiguïté’.
from, rather than negation of it, Deguy maintains if not Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical modification, then certainly its gap. For Merleau-Ponty, this was the diplopia *diplopie* of double-vision conjoining being and signification within the reciprocity of the chiasmus, ‘the identity of coming in and out of self, of experience and distance’¹⁷ (idem., 1750). Christopher Watkin reads Merleau-Ponty’s *diplopie* as the product of an ‘indirect ontology’ acting as a pre-dialectical parallax which is comparable to ‘the relation of figure and ground’, an ontology that ‘cannot be reified, completed or contemplated; it is dispersed, always incomplete in itself and yet calling for its completion, while at the same time denying that possibility’ (2009, 31). However, whilst maintaining similar principles by bringing this ontology to expression (post-contemplation), separation from the object – and accordingly identity divorced from its speaking subject – sees the truly radical relation of poetic contingency emerge. Its mutability makes creative becoming a split mode of being held in a comparative ontology’s non-dialectical, relational structure.

Deguy early on emphasised this ontological feature of poetry’s figuration because its transcendental potential to sublate singular identity through negation is held in reserve, carrying difference(s) without effacement. In *Figurations* (1969), responding to the inevitable Cratylism for the writer, Deguy deemed that the relationship of words to things was an ‘intrinsic metaphoricity’ [*métaphoricité intrinsèque*], a word’s flesh potentially the metaphor of its meaning [*sens*] which makes the poem sonically articulate a same [*même*] which exists within it. Referring to Merleau-Ponty, he described how as inherent sign-users, those of the west are haunted by this inevitable union as the product of a prevalent Western metaphysics, ‘incurable, of two in

¹⁷ ‘l’identité du rentrer en soi et du sortir du soi, de vécu et de la distance’.

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one [...] the dialectic which restricts play itself\(^{18}\) (1969, 143–145). Accordingly, he reasoned that ‘if we talk about trans-figuration, this can only be understood as passage to figuration, as if the trans(port) gave figure’ – a relocation of meaning deemed the very ‘status of metaphoricity’\(^{19}\) (idem., 146–147).

### A poetics of figurative comparison

As the poetic figure’s non-dialectical relational structure posits a form of common engagement for the subject seeking reality’s purported visibility, Deguy added a condition to Hölderlin’s maxim of how poetically man dwells on Earth [dichterisch, wohnet der Mensch auf dieser Erde],\(^{20}\) because in his modification, it is also poetically that we see. Refusing closure to the infinite metaphoricity of analogy’s possibility to refer to finite things, Deguy has then affirmed poetry as endlessly ongoing, suggesting that ‘let’s not say that there are images in the poem, but that the poem is in the imaginarium. The poem is imaging rather than imaged’\(^{21}\) (2000, 45). Against the logic of the universal imaginarium of images in which all of reality is translated into an economy of cultural terms, divided and effaced as such, Deguy indicates how poetry’s imaging is the very tenor of diversity, the poem holding difference within its own aesthetic, but also potentially ethical, timeless economy.

\(^{18}\) ‘inguérissable, de deux en un [...] la dialectique qui restreint le jeu même’.

\(^{19}\) ‘si l’on parle de trans-figuration, cela ne peut s’entendre que comme passage à la figuration, comme si le trans(port) donnait figure [...] statut de métaphoricité’.

\(^{20}\) To which Heidegger declared that ‘poetry and dwelling belong together, each calling for the other’. Heidegger (2001) p. 25.

\(^{21}\) ‘Ne disons pas qu’il y a des images dans le poème, mais que le poème est dans l’imaginarium. Le poème est imageant plutôt qu’imagé’.
early poems examined the semiotic value of comparison given how poetry’s speaker can always declare ‘My life | The mystery of like’ ['Ma vie | Le mystère du comme'] (1973, 49). Deguy’s understanding of the poetic image as an unfixed thing-in-reality has for its foundation a reservoir of possible meanings merely configured into the poem to create its singular contingency. The implied risk of identity effacement, however, seriously affects the poetic’s endlessly possible immeasurable scales and their potential for being otherwise. Poetry’s analogy is in this sense threatened by an infinite supplement, that indicated when Deguy’s Ouï dire (1966) portended the ‘Apposition that monitors the like | While waiting for its inevitable turn | The analogy that expels us from this world’ ['Apposition que surveille le comme | Tandis qu’attend son tour inévitable | L’analogie qui nous expulse de ce monde] – note here, however, expulsion from this world (idem. 72). This expulsion, one might say onto the Earth, might appear an abstract assertion. But the movement of poetic ideation is a turn back to perception in which thinking operates in language subject to contingency. Accordingly, if ecology is a vision, then it must be exposed to its most terrifying perception: if humanity until now has only sought survival or expansion, or it could be argued, survival through expansion, then its common being must be looked at again as a comparative ontology. Nancy’s reading of the impossible possibility of the in of being-in-common [l’être-en-commun] incentivised this prospect, emphasising that ontological singularity relies on a conception of shared finitude in which ‘finitude co-appears [com-paraît] and can only co-appear [com-paraître]', always present in ‘being-in-common and like this being itself’.

This exposure to an immeasurable exteriority, however, relies on an equally singular relationality, where

22 ‘la finitude com-paraît et ne peut que com-paraître [...] l’être-en-commun et comme cet être lui-même’.
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[...] this outside itself is in turn nothing other than the exposure of another areality, of another singularity – the same, other. This exposition or sharing gives rise, from the outset, to a mutual interpellation of singularities [...]{23} (1986, 73).

For Nancy, this later allowed identification of Deguy’s conception of *comme* as offering a barely recognised ontology, one ‘slipped into the intimate interstice of the hiatus of sameness, triggering all the waves of resemblance, all the collisions of proximity’;{24} for Nancy, *comme* as an ontological category can then express immeasurability, such that

[...] anything can be the measure of anything. Anything can be the common measure of the immeasurable commensurability of all, and of the difference-indifference of the whole, of its proportionate disproportion. *Comme* makes the measure: the common measure of being is what makes the presence of being like another presence, and being as such [comme tel] nothing other than its own analogy [...]{25} (1996b, 175–176).

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23 ‘ce dehors lui-même n’est à son tour rien d’autre que l’exposition d’une autre aréalité, d’une autre singularité – la même, autre. Cette exposition, ou ce partage donne lieu, d’entrée de jeu, à une interpellation mutuelle des singularités’.

24 ‘glissé dans l’interstice intime du hiatus de la mêmeté, déclenche toutes les déferlantes de la ressemblance, toutes les collisions de la proximité’.

25 ‘Toute chose peut être la mesure de toute chose. Toute chose peut être la commune mesure de l’incommensurable commensurabilité de tout, et de l’indifférence différence du tout, de sa disproportion proportionnée. *Comme* fait la mesure : la commune mesure de l’être, c’est ce qui fait la présence être comme une autre présence, et l’être comme tel n’être rien d’autre que sa propre analogie’. 
To hold the transcendent in reserve without affirming it, because such affirmation would separate the subject’s world from the Earth, Deguy urges the creation of comparings [comparants]. Emphasising ontological difference in poetic thought’s immeasurable encounter with a specific place, this modified Heidegger’s ontology of beingness to create a bivalence of poetry’s comme producing comparants. Opposed to identity’s exclusion inherent in a negative dialectic – the neither-neither of Hegelian sublation, which Heidegger himself attempted to deconstruct 26 – Deguy’s and-and uses comme to assert poetic language’s holding of same and other. This extensively uses analogy’s grammar as poetic apparatus expressing comparative ontology’s relational structure. In the collection Jumelages (1978), one of Deguy’s increasingly predominant prose-poems, ‘Anniversaire de l’éclipse’, exemplified poetry’s world-making:

From the sun removed, the moon remains the neither-day-nor-night. The one the other are eclipsing says the one, which does not exist. The one the other eclipsing, something appears that is neither one nor the other, neither object nor third party. Two disjoined join together to make a world 27 (1986a, 64–65).

Towards affirming separate, dialogic attachment to the appearing Earth, Deguy’s commentaries on a range of preceding French poets in Choses de la poésie et affaire culturelle (1986) then contracted this analogical principle of difference’s spacing of conjoining into the comparative ontology of l’être-comme. A discussion of phusis and tekhné sustained distinctions on the

27 ‘Du soleil ôtez la lune reste le ni-jour-ni-nuit. L’un l’autre s’éclipsant disent l’un, qui n’existe pas. L’un l’autre s’éclipsant, quelque chose apparaît qui n’est ni l’un ni l’autre, ni objet ni tiers. Deux disjoints de se conjoindre font un monde’.
shared comparative operations of poetry’s images and figures, its physics and its craft. As a modality that reunites these differences, Deguy reasoned

[…] if I pronounce image, I speak on the side of things; if I say ‘comparison’, I mean logical, discursive activity. And perhaps every effort of the poetic (reflection of poetry) is to rise up again (ana-logically) on this side of sharing, of partition, towards a simulation of indivision, of a ‘genesis’, of a parturition of this indivision retained by words of our language, say precisely those of ‘phenomenology’, which fit together, hold together (in the promise of a synthesis they don’t attribute to themselves) the phainomenon and the logicon; or this word of figure which says the conformation of the res extensa and the res cogitans, both the aspect of what appears and the finery of saying in its capacity of reception, or its capacity for a ‘content’.

Appearing, in as much as co-appearing, would be at the measure, at the mercy, of the euphemistic ‘comparative’ […]28 (1986b, 34–35).

An essay on Mallarmé’s trope of the dancer then stressed the dialogic separation of referents sharing a comparative differential and an impossibly complete measure. Outlining

28 ‘si je prononce image, je parle du côté des choses; si je dis « comparaison », je parle du côté de l’activité logique, discursive. Et peut-être tout l’effort de la poétique (réflexion de la poésie) est pour remonter (ana-logiquement) en deçà du partage, de la partition, jusqu’à une simulation de l’indivision, à une « genèse », à une parturition de cette indivision que retiennent des mots de notre langue, tel précisément celui de « phénoménologie », qui emboîtent, font tenir ensemble (promesse d’une synthèse qu’ils ne s’attribuent pas) la phainoménon et le logicon ; ou ce mot de figure qui dit la conformation de la res extensa et celle de la res cogitans, l’aspect de ce qui paraît et l’atour du dire en sa capacité d’accueil, ou contenance pour un « contenu ».

Le paraître en tant que comparaitre serait à la mesure, à la merci, du « comparatif » bien disant, euphémistique’.
that ‘the principle of comparison (A is like B) is not the principle of identity’, he urged that poetic thinking, ‘by approach and approximation, in reconciliation, deals with the comparable-incomparable’. To distinguish poetic statements on identity from rhetorical judgements, Deguy argued that

 [...] poetry’s principle is wary of identification; respectful of the fold of difference displayed by \( l’être-comme \), it deals less with the common-as-unity \( [\text{comme-un}] \), more the experience of common \( [\text{comme-une}] \) diversity [...]

With this latter ambivalence as its value, poetry takes the element of a thing, whether an immaterial idea or physical matter, so that poetic nomination, and accordingly its expression, becomes symbolic but not in itself a substantial symbol, ‘the whole in a particular sense of being that develops the expression being-like’. Although Western thought has only recently awoken to the simultaneous ecological value of the non-human and the immeasurable plurality of other cultures, Deguy early on maintained their relation in an important polysemy qualifying beingness. He noted that ‘a thing is in being-like, like another in the measure where it refrains from self-identifying with its other, by comparing itself to understand itself’, whilst admitting, however, this was more easily accomplished when ‘the thing is an activity’. Playing on words he explained that

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29 ‘Le principe de comparaison (A est-comme B) n’est pas le principe d’identité [...] par approche et approximation, dans le rapprochement, traite du comparable-incomparable’.

30 ‘le tout en un sens particulier d’être que développe l’expression être-comme’.

31 ‘Une chose est en étant-comme, comme une autre dans la mesure où elle se retient de s’identifier à son autre, en se comparant pour se comprendre [...] la chose est une activité’.
(...) comparison interrogates the incomparable; the distinction of things between it.

Poetry prohibits violent identification by the comme: refusing simplification while wresting from diversity a common [comme-un] being or configuration [...]32

With thing here extendable to any object, including the thing in question of self-identity, poetic thinking refuses absolute identity thanks to the inverted negation of two negations (thesis and antithesis). Against an act that metaphysically expels from the world, poetry instead affirms analogy’s opening in the incomplete agreement of comme, ‘the paradoxalisation of is-and-is-not’, holding and-and to conserve and transform – ‘which lifts into the world its figurings [figurants], making differences abound in “correspondences”’33 (1986b, 64). Comparison’s separation and what is then only figurative rather than actual reconciliation in comparants or figurants requires no transcendental ground. Instead, every identity is an incomplete analogical process.

Transcendence of self or other carries the possibility of elevating compared differences into synthesis, and so Deguy has iterated how l’être-comme is immanent spacing and represents a faithful figuration of thought. Poetry must recognise this, for him, because

(...) it’s with the things from here, provided that they are treated in “figurings” and arranged in comparisons [...] that we can say everything that is here; the there

32 ‘La comparaison entre-tient l’incomparable ; la distinction des choses entre elles.

La poésie inter-dit l’identification violente, par le comme : refusant la simplification tout en arrachant à la diversité un être comme-un ou configuration’.

33  ‘la paradoxalisation, au est-et-n’est-pas [...] qui fait lever dans le monde ses figurants, fait foisonner les différences en « correspondances ».'
The ontology of l’être-comme

The conjunction of and-and then inspires Deguy’s modulation of the paradox of comme inside his comparative ontology, l’être-comme. One thing juxtaposed with another is both ontologically equivalent – being-like-it – because, in its spacing, it is analogically or comparatively equivalent – being-like-it. This bivalent configuration arose in Deguy’s reading of Heideggerean Being. Sceptically rejecting becoming as coming-into-essence, Deguy saw comme as pointing thought towards poetry’s speculation where it might raise ‘the other movement, that of l’être-comme, or “assimilation”, on the condition of hearing in this word a becoming similar and in no way a (re)turning-to-the-same: outside the superstition of the essence-substance’.

Working into French the German of Heidegger’s als (as much as) and wie (the same as), the French comme, as with the English like, holds comparison’s bivalence at the surface, ‘an indivision of als and wie’ where

[…] since A will not become B... in the “literal” sense of the identity “being”, and especially not by becoming more and more A (A als A) or B (B als B), the future (its

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34 ‘C’est avec les choses d’ici, pourvu que traitées en « figurants » et agencées en comparaisons […] qu’on peut dire tout ce qui est ici ; qu’il y a de l’ici. Et non pas tournées « à usage transcendant ».


Foreclosure of the future exchanged for the comparative becoming of the poem and its produced subject means being is not re-evaluated as Heidegger’s Beingness of being, but instead as the being of being-like (both modes together). To this, Deguy concludes ‘we must invent what re-sembles; invent the case of semblance’ (idem., 51–52). Comparative ontology as analogical resemblance then ultimately posits a logical chain, one in which Deguy refers to the behavioural model of Wittgenstein’s language games:


This possible series suggests a potential comparativism established as a planetary network. An ecological poetics, however, will have to firmly establish l’être-comme as strictly contingent in order to reflect the complex, stochastic formation of identity within modern planetary space. Accordingly, Deguy’s reprised commentary on the chiasme warns that if the value, rather than the circumstance of comparison is contingent, then

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36 ‘une indivision du als et du wie […] [p]uisque A ne deviendra pas b… au sens « littéral » de l’identité « être » ; et surtout pas en devenant de plus en plus A (A als A) ou B (b als b), l’avenir (la possibilité) se recèle dans le devenir-comme : A wie B, B wie A’.

37 ‘Il faut inventer ce qui rassemble ; inventer le cas de semblance’.

38 ‘Un propre, un soi-même, qui n’est donc présentable que sur le mode du comme, à entrevoir à travers une série en « a comme b comme c comme x », logé (logique) dans la « famille » (Wittgenstein) de ses airs. Être, c’est avoir l’air ; avoir l’air, c’est être comme’.
its configuration might only be arbitrary. On the condition that if ‘for the “inside” and the “outside”, l’être-comme (each its being-like the other) did not determine its being in an a priori “chiasmus”;’ comparison will itself be catachrestic (1986b, 31). Whilst the poetic provision of paradoxes might initially appear unclear, this indetermination is a privilege of poetic expression. As a new and old configuration and an a priori property of thinking – rather than identity – poetry’s paradox then indicates rhetoric’s failure.

Accordingly, Deguy suggests that in any dialogue, ‘thinking is judging, judging is comparing’ ['penser, c’est juger, juger c’est comparer'], where l’être-comme permits thinking resemblance. In its process of selection, whilst judgement is arbitrary, its transportation is not, and ‘comparison is the pivot and the operation of discernment of the same or not’ ['la comparaison est le pivot et l’opération de discernement du même, ou non’]. Consequently, Deguy gestures to radical implications this could have for modern thought, poetic operations whereby

[

] as long as the rationality of an economic mathematical calculation does not definitively prevail as “the last word imposed” on all human choices, thought, i.e. judgment, the freedom of thought with its comparative estimations, decides what it is and from the other […]40 (2009, 229).

Poetry’s decision arises in Deguy’s own comparants. The poem ‘Les plaisirs du seuil’ implies that poetry requires a leap of faith

39  ‘pour le « dedans » et le « dehors », l’être-comme (chacun son être-comme l’autre) ne déterminait pas son être dans un « chiasme » a priori’.

40  ‘tant que la rationalité d’un calcul mathématique économique ne l’emporte pas définitivement comme « le dernier mot qui s’impose », sur tous les choix humains, la pensée, i.e. le jugement, la liberté de pensée avec ses estimations comparatives décide de ce qu’il en est et d’l’autre [sic]’.
Narratives of fear and safety
Michel Deguy’s l’être-comme and the poetics of ecological comparativism

(‘La poésie limitrophe exige un saut’) to attain ‘the gift of like’ [‘le don du comme’], a world view in which ‘wandering sees itself | And things share in a comparative of world’ [‘l’errance se voit | Et les choses se partager en un comparatif de monde’] (2012a, 83). Because the indistinctness of configured comparison is poetry’s expression, both modes of l’être-comme require textual space to think out resemblance. Deguy lays out the dialectic that threatens the ontology of comme, specifically the placement of the figure as subject apart from the world. He takes up the principles of a favoured paradoxical formula, being-here as not-being-here, and extends them to suggest that ‘the poem says poetry, or often passes back over by poetry’ [‘Le poème dit la poésie, ou repasse souvent par la poésie’] (idem., 330–31). If Deguy had initially presented his own life as the mystery of comme, its later appearances bring subjectivity into innovative fields of poetic comparison acting as a latent ecological ethics.

It’s in this sense that Deguy offers a textual space for hospitality of the other in renewing speculative attachment to the Earth, that where ‘the unattached being that we are | Descends now paths without turning back’ [‘L’être sans attachement que nous sommes | Descend maintenant les marches sans se retourner’] (1986a, 85). Whilst for Deguy this has as much to do with estrangement from the sacred, hospitality is resolutely taken up on ecological principles. This is a key component to the assembly of le tiers inclus. He asks, ‘What is the third party, the host of the host and its host, the other? It takes everything to make a world, and more than two [plus de deux] for hospitality41 (2006, 305). Poetry’s pluralism contributes to the making of that singular world, where meaning is both the hospitality of the other, and the hospitality of that which is meaning for the other. However,

Deguy is sceptical but also extremely cogent in posing questions as to how such hospitality might retain common aesthetic meaning given that globalisation purports to create conditions that are hospitable for equality but more often manipulate modern media to collapse a sense of the local and amplify dislocation. Deguy urges that thinking must then turn away from technology to a modification of the sacred. Interpreting Heidegger’s dictum *only a God might save us*, salvation is posited as lying beyond our domination. This might seem reactionary at first, but Deguy’s incision is lucid for thinking ecologically, ‘regarding and having regard to what is not masterable-possessable’ [‘*en-regard-de et eu égard-à ce qui n’est pas maîtrisable-possédable*’]. Warning against a cinematic reification of the Earth’s image – that which inspired what Heise terms a globalist consciousness – Deguy suggests that

[...] Echo-graphy for the ecumene cannot avoid using technological echo-graphy, for example high definition photography of the Earth seen from the sky, but it serves to return our view from this view to a single end for a moment of “disinterested” [*désinterressée*] enjoyment [...](2002, 56–57).

As a collision of disinterest and uprooting – or even unearthing – being *désinterressée* is then a modern state of contingency to which poetry can bring much needed critical currency.

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42 ‘L’écho-graphie pour l’écoumène ne peut pas ne pas recourir à l’écho-graphie technologique, par exemple à la photographie à haute définition de la terre vue du ciel, mais c’est pour retourner notre vue de cette vue à seule fin pour un instant d’une jouissance « désinterressée ».

The poetic ecology of ecological comparativism

Beyond its representation as tekhné, it is then poetry as poiesis – as making and remaking – which recrafts attachment to the visible but no longer merely natural Earth which attaches us to this vision:

[…] in its restraint, detachment [détachement], by this withdrawal marked by the movement of its dice [dé] (its dice throw [coup de dé], if I dare say), gains the point where it merges with sublime height to glimpse the place of this world […]43 (2012a, 374).

In order to speculatively rebuild attachment and see the oikos of the Earth as a planetary household, Deguy strives to annul a corrosive thinking of difference. Towards the end of the uncollected poem, ‘L'iconoclaste’, this stresses that poetry’s principle is its hospitality hosting circumstance, because when two hosts encounter,

Relation teaches them how to be
Imagination is the host of the unknowable
Having plunged into the depths of the unknown
It returns in poems with humans
Tells them with images
It’s unimaginable but it’s like that44 (idem., 424–425).

43 ‘Dans sa retenue, le détachement, par ce retrait que marque le mouvement de son dé (son coup de dé, si j’ose) gagne le point où il se confond avec la hauteur sublime pour entrevoir le lieu de ce monde’.

44 ‘La relation leur apprend la manière d’être | L’imagination est l’hôte de l’inconnaissable | Ayant plongé au fond de l’inconnu| Elle en revient en poèmes chez les humains | Leur dit avec les images | C’est inimaginable mais c’est comme ça’.
Because of this unimaginable pluralism, and in order that the gap of comparativism’s differences aren’t themselves flattened by ecology’s doxa of all-encompassing interconnection and interdependence – what Neyrat terms saturated immanence (2014, 7–8) – Deguy posits poetic ecology as the logic best placed to modify cultural hegemony. He conjectured that

[…] if “ecology” is the logy concerned about the “survival” of humanity, then, as much as an ethology, it will have to take charge of ethics, and enact a radical criticism of the “cultural” […]⁴⁵ (2002, 136–137).

By this ethical critique, Deguy distinguishes an epistemological ecology from political environmentalism, theological Manicheanism, or the symbolism of a primitive regression. As he notes, paraphrasing Mallarmé:⁴⁶

[…] well understood ecology, that is to say non-utopian, is the opposite of returning to nature. “Nature” has taken place, we will not return to it. Ecology is anti-Rousseauist. What it’s talking about is neither good nor bad. It talks about the exhausted earth, seeking a relationship with this earth […]⁴⁷ (idem., 144).

With its speculative conception of phenomena, if relation with a capitalist-exhausted Earth is to survive into the future,

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⁴⁵ ‘Si l’« écologie » est la logie qui s’inquiète de la « survie » de l’humanité, alors, en tant qu’ethologie, elle devra prendre en charge l’éthique, et procéder à une critique radicale du « culturel ».


⁴⁷ ‘L’écologie bien comprise, c’est-à-dire non-utopique, c’est le contraire du retour à la nature. La « Nature » a eu lieu, on n’y retournera pas. L’écologie est anti-rousseauiste. Ce dont elle parle n’est ni bon ni mauvais. Elle parle de la terre épuisée, cherchant une relation avec cette terre’.
accordingly it requires, or at the very least could learn from, poetry’s comparisons. Although then only recently adding to Hölderlin’s maxim, Deguy’s concept of géocide at the same time represents the ideologically accidental destruction of the Earth and all its contents. In Écologiques (2012), he declared that even political intervention on the environment is insufficient because ‘ecology is radical – or insignificant’ [‘L’écologie est radicale – ou insignifiante’]. Given how the circulation of poetic thinking and the exercises of its non-dialectical paradoxes are the measure of poetic production, radicalism requires paradoxical reconception of the logie of logos. Deguy asked ‘how could ecology transform the world if the rationality of the possibility of this change escapes the order of logos’?\(^\text{48}\) (2012b, 82). This changed measure must be philosophically vigorous yet poetically grounded, otherwise it falls into hyperbolic environmentalism, what Deguy terms ecology’s mask (idem. 90). Its possibility is predicated not on ‘the poetics of there is’ [‘les poétiques du il y a’], but as an imaginative power of seeing, ‘that is to say, of comme’ [‘c’est-à-dire du comme’], where ‘utopia is ecology’ and ‘ecology is a poetic’ [‘l’utopie, c’est l’écologie […] l’écologie est une poétique’] (idem., 110). The merging of ontological comparativism and poetic ecology saw Deguy’s most recent écologique, L’envergure des comparses : Ecologie et poétique (2017), cover questions of cultural patrimony, advertising, screen existence, artificial intelligence, pollution, and post-truth communication whilst reminding that selection and choice are constant invariants of being human, whereby ‘comparison alone grasps the difference; far from “assimilating”, it arranges the incomparable’\(^\text{49}\) (2017,

\(^{48}\) ‘how could ecology transform the world if the rationality of the possibility of this change escapes the order of logos’.

\(^{49}\) ‘La comparaison seule saisit la différence ; loin d’« assimiler », elle ménage l’incomparable’.

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84). Because changing the epistemological paradigm changes the comparant, poetic ecology addresses ‘the world of the Earth’ [‘le monde de la terre’] Deguy insisting that

[...] one thing is what it can be in being-like, like with others whereby identity recoils. Its preferability among the possible alloys (hypallages) is estimated by poetic reason. For the poem, thinking is comparing [...]\(^{50}\) (idem., 49, 70, 54).

As poetry’s comparativism potentially informs all ecological thought, a subject’s figurative separation from the Earth creates a vast liminal space where poetic creation opens gaps in the writing act’s preclusion of sameness substituted for metaphors of shared non-dialectical difference. The latent ecology in poetry’s dialogic spatial separation becomes the antecedent for comparison, an affirmation of diversity, and in a vast ecological, comparative ontology, it points to a time and space in which subjectivity’s singularity requires difference to attain identity. In Deguy’s work on the poetics of phenomenology, comparativism, and ecology, the move into difference between meaning and non-meaning is such that ‘Not being one to another in being the one for the other | Incomplete relation prevents separation’ ['N’être pas l’un à l’autre en étant l’un pour l’autre | La relation inachevée empêche la séparation'] (1986a, 27). To combat the divisive culture that has generated humanity’s fear of géocide, Deguy persuades that ‘ecology is a vision’ ['l’écologie est une vision'], and that all is ‘like that ['comme ça'], where ça is becoming comparant and reality enters into its ever mutable figure (2012b, 9). Whilst it remains to be seen what will come of them, as its critical and creative

\(^{50}\) ‘une chose est ce qu’elle peut être en étant-comme, comme avec les autres où son identité reculé. Sa préférabilité parmi les possibles alliages (hypallages) est estimée par la raison poétique. Pour le poème, penser c’est comparer’. 
configurations conjoin comparativism and ecology, Deguy’s work stresses the important argument that these two critical loci perhaps exist as two sides of the very same *comparant*.
Sam La Védrine

Bibliography


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