The Practice of Writing and the Practice of Living: Michel Deguy’s and Philippe Jaccottet’s Ecopoetics

The Everyday Practice of Keeping a Notebook

1 Michel Deguy always carries a notebook in the breast pocket of his jacket. Philippe Jaccottet keeps a notebook during particularly hectic times in his professional or personal life in order to stay attuned to his familiar sources of inspiration. Both writers have published carnets, not as subsidiary works, commentaries on or notes towards the larger process of poetic writing, but as literary works in their own right. Deguy has recently published a series of meditative and linguistically exuberant notes that reflect on the relationship between poetry, thought, and ecology: La fin dans le monde (2009) and Écologiques (2011). At steady intervals in the past thirty years, Jaccottet has published a selection of material from his notebooks, descriptions of his encounters with material presences in his local landscape combined with short reflective or anecdotal passages, in La semaison (1984), La seconde semaison (1996), and Taches de soleil, ou d’ombre (2013). For Deguy and Jaccottet, the indeterminate form of the notebook constitutes an important process of linguistic experimentation. Both are drawn to the way the notebook combines – and hovers undecidably between – prose and poetry, description and reflection, anecdote and analysis. Both are fascinated too by the way in which this improvised or ageneric form allows them to experiment with the boundary between the everyday and the literary, the written and the lived, tracing their complex process of exchange.

2 In “Fausses notes: Pour une poétique du carnet”, Philippe Met suggests that it is useful to conceive of the notebook, not so much as a genre, but as a form of activity. He writes: “la pratique des carnets per se déplace et transcende toute préoccupation d’ordre générique.” Met suggests that the notebook form is no longer “lisible selon ou à partir des paradigmes classiques et désormais usés du vers, de la prose ou de leurs hybrides désormais peu ou prou caducs (prose poétique, poème en prose, etc.)” and that it facilitates an essentially provisional mode of writing that continually questions, critiques, and varies its means of approach. Its only guiding principles, he argues, are those of self-contestation and readjustment:

S’ouvrant ainsi sur de multiples possibles, oscillant incessamment entre dessaisissement et (res)saisissement, ce régime d’écriture délimite et redéfinit le champ originel, fondateur, de l’expérience littéraire: le lieu, le creuset où l’écrivain accorde et s’accorde à son langage.

3 Met presents the notebook as an ongoing process of negotiation. Using the verbs ‘s’accorder’ and ‘accorder’, he suggests that the carnet is the place where the writer attunes himself to language and attunes language to exterior reality. Whereas Met’s article places more emphasis on the first of these two processes, the subject’s negotiations with language, this article places more emphasis on the second process. It investigates how Deguy’s and Jaccottet’s notebooks seek to make language “accord” with a polyvalent and shifting exterior reality, using a fluid textual form to cultivate a
maximum level of responsiveness and adaptability.

In French Studies, there has been a surge of interest in the kind of marginal forms that Met describes here (the notebook, but also the essay, the diary, and the logbook) within the critical framework of life writing. This is a largely narrative- or subject-focused area of exploration. Critics have been quick to explore how experimental writing practices allow us to think in new ways about how we structure our own lives and invest these structures with meaning. Michael Sheringham’s *Everyday Life* (2006) explores:

> a new thinking about everyday life that goes beyond narrow functionalism and gives importance to different styles and priorities—to spaces, rhythms, objects, and practices [...] acknowledg[ing] that the verb *habiter* refers to human needs, but also that it can be declined in different moods and tenses, that living has its grammar, and life its mode(s) d’emploi.9

Sheringham’s study analyses hybrid or ageneric forms (essays, documentaries, diaries, installation art) that present the human subjects “at grips with experience”10, grappling with the potentially conformist or creative nature of choice, aware that “everyday life harbours within itself the possibility of its own existential or ontological transformation”11. Similarly, although analysing a different corpus of texts, Jean-Claude Pinson’s *Habiter en poète* (1995) scrutinises how contemporary poetics seeks to “nouer le vivre et l’écrire pour faire que la vie soit vraiment habitante”12. Pinson coins the term “poéthique” to describe contemporary poetry’s desire to inspire new ways of inhabiting the world: “[s]a puissance à former une existence à la fois lyrique et éthique”13. These important critical works investigate how late-twentieth-century French writers engage critically and creatively with everyday life, tracing the social, political, or ontological implications of this engagement. Critics within French Studies have been slow, however, to tease out the ecological implications of such forms of engagement and to reflect on the implications of the different “declinations” of the verb *habiter* for the environment.

One important exception is Verena Andermatt Conolly’s theoretical work *Spatial Ecologies*14. Starting where Sheringham leaves off, Conolly presents the spatial turn that occurs within French critical theory as an ecological turn, arguing that thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Jean Baudrillard, Marc Augé, Paul Virilio, Bruno Latour, and Etienne Balibar all seek to conceive of the human production and construction of space in ways that will “enable and assure a dynamic equilibrium of habitability”15. Conolly notes the influence of Heidegger’s writings upon these existential and ecological conceptions of space, particularly his understanding of the way that human thought shapes our ways of being in the world. At the same time, however, she stresses that the notion of “habitability” or “making habitable” is appropriated by twentieth-century French thinkers in very different ways, as they investigate the opening of spaces that can be mental, social, or natural. Ecocritical studies that deal with the question of “dwelling” reveal the same kind of diversity of approach. Gerard Garrard’s chapter, “Dwelling”, in *Ecocriticism*, for example, explores modern permutations of the Georgic that offer Christian, Socialist, or primitivist paradigms for living16. Other ecocritics use the conception of dwelling precisely to resist the instrumentalist and anthropocentric connotations of the Georgic’s “model for living”. Inspired by Heidegger’s critique of the “hidden anthropocentrism” of western philosophy, what Timothy Clark describes as “its unacknowledged projection of instrumentalist or technological modes of thinking upon the cosmos as a whole”17, such critics are drawn, as Terry Eagleton points out, to a thinking that resists instrumentalism and cultivates a “releasement” of
things, “attending responsively, non-masteringly to their shapes and textures”\textsuperscript{18}, and permitting us to dwell with the things of the physical earth. The ecocritic Jonathan Bate thus embraces a Heideggerian conception of poetry as a “reawakening of the momentary wonder of unconcealment”\textsuperscript{19}. Robert Pogue Harrison writes: “logos is that which opens the abode of the earth”\textsuperscript{20}.

This article examines how Deguy and Jaccottet use the practice of note-writing to explore the subject's continual negotiations with its environment. It investigates how they treat the question of dwelling in their notebooks, scrutinising the very different ways in which language is seen to participate in the physical world and to facilitate the “releasement” of things. Analysing their divergent views on how a writer should deal with the formative nature of language, this study examines how they use its conceptual and figurative forms with varying degrees of scepticism. It explores how Deguy presents our physical interactions as a complex exchange of the real and the fictional, the lived and the imagined, and how he seeks – like many of the theorists of the everyday – to exploit the transformative potential of this fertile interplay, experimenting with the linguistic capacity that we have to reinvent our daily interactions, to reattune ourselves to “la terre”, to articulate and activate it in new ways. It examines how Jaccottet approaches this notion warily, refusing to present his texts as an on-going practice that shapes everyday life, shifting the emphasis away from the formative capabilities of language and towards to its receptive capabilities.

Investigating the tension between Deguy’s poetics of invention and Jaccottet’s poetics of receptivity, this article explores the different ways in which the question of human agency, and linguistic agency in particular, is being framed by these two French poets at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. This study asks: do ecological considerations transform the ways in which these poets think about everyday life’s inherent capacity for “existential or ontological transformation”\textsuperscript{21}? Does the verb “habiter” refer uniquely, as Sheringham suggests, “to human needs” and to human agencies\textsuperscript{22}? Or are there other presences and agencies to be taken into account? And if we do adopt a more biocentric vision of existence, does language allow us to decipher its “different moods and tenses”, “its grammar”? Or does its “prisonhouse”\textsuperscript{23} always threaten to keep us immersed in our own anthropocentric narratives?

Two Different Kinds of Notebook

Two very different poets, Deguy and Jaccottet also produce two very different kinds of carnets. Deguy is a poet grounded in a philosophical tradition, heavily influenced by phenomenology, in particular the works of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Écologiques, published in 2012, presents a series of meditations on the relationship between thought and ecology (Deguy suggests that they could be described as “les carnets d’un écolo” - FM 20). The short passages of prose are diverse, digressive, and altogether rather unruly. They take us on a journey through the internal resources of language, unpacking the etymologies of words, forging neologisms, painstakingly constructing important distinctions and analogies. Deguy is at pains – as in all his writings – to dramatise the dynamism of “la pensée”. Its élan or energy is so crucial to his exploration because he is exploring how we, as language-users, construct worlds linguistically and reside within them. Deguy presents writing and thinking as the “mode d’habitation des hommes” (FM 39). Heavily influenced by Heidegger’s readings of
Hölderlin, *Écologiques* has much in common with ecocritical works like Bate’s *The Song of the Earth*. Bate defines ecopoetics as a form of critical enquiry that asks how the text can be “a making (Greek poiesis) of the dwelling-place”, pointing out that “the prefix eco is derived from the Greek oikos, the home or place of dwelling”\(^{24}\).

Jaccottet is far more sceptical about the capabilities of language and the insights of the human subject. He writes what might be described as an anti-conceptual poetry, devoted to the present moment of experience. For him, the practice of keeping a *carnet* is a way of training himself to keep reverie in check and to return his attention to the concrete details of his physical surroundings. The notebook is the place where he tries to cultivate a state of receptivity to the physical world, an attentiveness to “the elusive and the remote within the familiar things of the world” (to use Andrea Cady’s formulation)\(^{25}\).

The selected notes of *La semaison* thus present descriptions of Jaccottet’s local landscape, viewed at different times of the day or year, interspersed with more meditative or discursive passages. Unlike Deguy’s *Écologiques*, Jaccottet’s notebook in no way advertises an ecological concern. Its resistance to such theory or advocacy, rather, is where its ecological sensibility can be seen to reside: in the quietness, delicacy, and caution with which the poet approaches the natural world, and meditates on the nature of language and thought.

In an entry in *La semaison*, published in 1984, Jaccottet highlights the distinct ways in which he and Deguy conceive of poetry and its relationship to everyday life. He writes:

> Le quotidien: allumer le feu (et quand il ne prend pas du premier coup, parce que le bois est humide, il aurait fallu l’entasser dehors, cela aurait pris du temps), penser aux devoirs des enfants, à telle facture en retard, à un malade à visiter, etc. Comment la poésie s’insère-t-elle dans tout cela? Ou elle est ornement, ou elle devrait être intérieure à chacun de ces gestes ou actes: c’est ainsi que Simone Weil entendait la religion, que Michel Deguy entend la poésie, que j’ai voulu l’entendre. (S 121)

Jaccottet describes simple domestic activities with a genuine fondness and makes it clear that he is drawn to the idea that poetic or literary activity might present in these ordinary gestures: “intérieure à chacun de ces gestes ou actes”. He is quick to affirm the attraction that he feels towards Deguy’s conception of poetry as “un mode d’habitation” (FM 39) but he immediately worries that such a conception of poetic activity risks turning everyday life into something worked or deliberate, something intentionally artistic. He continues, “Reste le danger de l’artifice, d’une sacralisation appliquée, labo-rieuse” (S 121). He therefore puts forward an alternative conception of poetry’s relationship to “le quotidien”.

> Peut-être en sera-t-on réduit à une position plus modeste, intermédiaire: la poésie illuminant par instants la vie comme une chute de neige, et c’est déjà beaucoup si on a gardé les yeux pour la voir. Peut-être même faudrait-il consentir à lui laisser ce caractère d’exception qui lui est naturel. Entre deux, faire ce qu’on peut, tant bien que mal. (S 121)

Jaccottet suggests that, within the course of everyday life, poetry attends to abnormal or unusual events, moments that surprise, illuminate, and allow him to see more clearly. Amidst the worries and chores of everyday life, it is the writer’s task is to remain receptive to these exceptional moments. Between the busyness of everyday life and these simple moments of clarity or revelation, his writings serve as an intermediary.
The important divergence that Jaccottet observes here, the two different ways that he and Deguy understand the relationship between poetic activity and everyday experience, has a profound effect on the shape and style of their respective carnets. On the one hand, Deguy’s exuberantly experimental notes explore the different ways in which language shapes our experiences and our perception of things. The ecological force of his ebullient jottings resides precisely in the way they set themselves up as an inherently creative form of interaction with the physical world. On the other hand, Jaccottet’s tentative notes critique our linguistic tendency to intervene and to alter. His searching and self-critical texts try to find a way to be more receptive to all that is challenging or resistant – all that is exceptional – about a particular physical presence.

**Deguy: Writing, Thinking, Dwelling**

Deguy’s conviction that our everyday activities constitute a form of literary or philosophical activity is hugely important throughout his career but it manifests itself with particular urgency in his recent Écologiques. His first entry begins – as his work so often does – with an etymology. The word “écologie”, he writes, comes from “oïkos, traduit souvent par maison, et logie par savoir-de, discours-sur, parole-de” (E 22). This definition is very similar to the etymology that Bate uses in his definition of “ecopoetics”, but whereas Bate reads the second half to the term “logie” simply as “language”, Deguy interprets it in more philosophical terms. He defines “l’écologie” as a logos, as “une pensée de l’oïkos, c’est-à-dire de la demeure terrestre et mondaine des humains” (FM 39). Ecology is defined as the “thinking” of how we use language to measure and to map the spaces through which we move. It is presented as a process of linguistic experimentation, an exploration of the unique transformative capabilities that are accorded to us by language. Deguy therefore insists that poetry and ecology “disent et visent le même” (FM 39). They are both “la grande chose”, “une pensée radicale” (E 22).

Écologiques thus makes a strident case for human exceptionalism, setting up rigorous distinctions between animals and humans, the earth and the world. Repeating many of the arguments of Heidegger’s The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, Deguy insists that language grants humanity a unique capacity to transform “les modes d’habitation des hommes” (FM 39). “Le génie humain”, he writes, “à la fois invente et transforme les modes divers, indéfiniment transformés, de son habitation” (FM 40). He argues that, whereas animals are bound to their environments, human beings are rich in worlds. And he presents the exuberant and digressive notes of Écologiques as a highly performative demonstration of this richness, of the creative potential of language and the capacity that it gives us to open up new spaces and to reside in new worlds. “Dans ces pages que vous lisez”, Deguy writes, “[ce monde] cherche à se faire entendre philosophiquement comme la Dimension, ou Grandeur, à quoi s’ouvre l’homme pour être l’être qu’il est (être-au-monde)” (E 30). Stressing the importance of the figurative capabilities of language in particular, Deguy insists that comparison is the crucial process that gives humanity the ability to cultivate difference, rather than to suppress it, allowing us to attend to the material and biological diversity of existence.

We can perceive the importance of figuration in Deguy’s definition of “la chose” in Écologiques. He writes:
la chose est une connexion ouverte, un centre attractif (dans l'attraction universelle) de correspondances, i.e. de possibilités métamorphiques, synapse de synapses (pour reprendre un terme à Catherine Malabou, philosophe de la plasticité), qui en fait une grande chose.... Ce qui est possible est réel. (E 48)

A thing is defined as a centre of potential correspondences. “La chose” inspires endlessly new metaphorical possibilities and finds itself endlessly metamorphosed. Its latent figurative potential is what constitutes its irreducibility, its mysterious force of becoming, making it a powerful imaginative presence in our world, what Deguy describes as “une grande chose”. As his reference to Catherine Malabou’s theory of plasticity suggests, Deguy conceives of each act of reference or relation as a potentially transformative engagement, an act that participates in the wider and distinctly human process of world-making. It is this limitless process of transfiguration, he argues, that allows humanity to reside in what Rilke refers to as “the open” and what Leopardi refers to as “the infinite”. As Deguy phrases it, “Ce qui est possible est réel”.

Throughout Écologiques, Deguy presents “la pensée” as a force that is at once “tropologique” and “topologique” (E 107). He suggests that it is a way of observing difference and sameness, of forging distinctions and comparisons, and of measuring and mapping space. It is a form of work that makes us, as Heidegger writes, rich in worlds. The careful maintenance of language is thus a prerequisite to the careful maintenance of the oïkos. It is only if we keep plotting these spaces and opening up language’s figurative possibilities that we can attend to the earth’s manifold possibilities and protect the diversity of humanity’s terrestrial experience. The practice of writing is thus inherently ecological, and the poet the natural guardian of the oïkos. As Deguy writes, quoting Pythagoras, “L’homme est la mesure de toute chose” (E 112).

Jaccottet: Leaving Room for the Other

Whilst Deguy embraces highly constructivist conceptions of how language shapes the ways in which we inhabit the earth, presenting language as the medium through which the physical world can come to a fuller state of articulation, Jaccottet is reluctant to invest language or the human subject with such power. He suggests that if language plays such a formative role in human existence, it is more likely to be because of the way it distracts humanity from illuminating moments of physical or embodied experience. We are all too susceptible, he suggests, to being wrapped up in human affairs. The abstractions and figurations of language tend to limit, rather than heighten, our capacity to see clearly. Quoting Borges in his journal, Jaccottet writes: “écrire, c’est un peu le contraire de penser” (S 152).

Jaccottet uses the poetic notebook to resist habitual forms of thought and to turn language outwards, towards all that exceeds its conceptual structures. If Deguy’s carnet bears a resemblance to Valéry’s cahiers, Jaccottet’s carnets have more in common with early manifestations of the journal intime, conceived by Pierre Pachet as an early form of secular but spiritual work on the self. The difference is of course that Jaccottet’s perspective is not turned inwards but outwards. He seeks to cultivate an attentiveness and receptivity to the physical world. When Jaccottet writes, “Je voudrais m’en tenir au particulier, à l’intime, à l’intimement vécu” (S 156), he is interested in the intimate act of relation. He cultivates what he describes as “la totale soumission” to the scene before him, allowing its presence to deconstruct his particular linguistic or literary impulses.
He tries to find a way, from within the structures of language, to be receptive to its particular way of being. One entry in La semaison describes this process:

Brûler, en esprit, tous ces livres, tous ces mots – toutes ces innombrables, subtiles, profondes, mortelles pensées. Pour s’ouvrir à la pluie qui tombe, traversée de moucherons, d’insectes, à ce pays gris et vert; aux espèces diverses d’arbres, de vert; à un craquement dans les pierres du mur ou le bois de la porte. (S 157-8)

Jaccottet presents the burning up of language, literature, and thought as the necessary condition for an “opening” onto the physical world. He suggests that it is by forgetting books and words, by quieting the activities of the mind, that we might attend to the things of the world – falling rain intersected by flying insects, oak or ash trees, cracks in the smooth surface of things – in their radical alterity.

The next passage suggests what form this “burning up” of language might take in a piece of poetic prose. Jaccottet evokes a patch of irises and his description is dominated by a rhetoric of correction. A literary association arises, only to be dismissed as “sottise, littérature” (S 158). A childhood memory is offered up and discarded. The opening lines are a matter of getting linguistic or imaginative distractions out of the way, so that the poet can actually attend to the irises. The motif of opening recurs once again here but, now, the irises themselves are the opening: “ Ils s’ouvrent ici sous le figuier, sur fond de verdure inégalement sombre. Ils s’y ouvrent comme des éclaircies entre les nuages, comme du ciel, du lointain, une fraîcheur de source” (S 158). As the poet describes the way that the irises open beneath the fig tree, one simile is quickly followed by another, suggesting the impossibility of finding the right textual equivalent. As these similes proliferate, the comparisons become more unreachable, more ethereal. The flowers are like a clearing between clouds, like the sky, like distance itself. The more the poet describes them, the more they open, which is to say, the more they retreat into their essential inappropriability.

Jaccottet’s conception of the exceptional nature of such moments of perception manifests itself in the final lines of this passage. The poet writes: “Mais ne pas se pencher sur eux trop longtemps: on les aperçoit au passage, on a d’autres soucis, d’autres travaux, d’autres chemins”. This reminds us of Jaccottet’s fear of making the things of the world an object of human study, turning them into something deliberate, considered, or artificial. The irises are to be glimpsed in passing, lightly, briefly, as we go about all the other tasks of daily life. This form of attention acknowledges that they cannot be worked or put to work in any way. It recognises that such work will not bring them closer to us, quite the contrary. Their airiness and levity is best appreciated in a moment of vacancy or thoughtlessness – a moment of receptivity – that arises in the short space between daily tasks, or perhaps even in the short pauses between the poet’s many tentative similes.

The same cautious treatment of language is evident in the next entry in this notebook, in which Jaccottet considers the possibility of adhering to a system of political thought. Bearing the title “Empirisme et théorie”, the entry explores his “[t]endance naturelle à se méfier des théories” and his desire to think “à partir des menus faits, à partir du bas” (S 159). Refusing any kind of political or religious faith, Jaccottet observes that he can only “exercer une fraternité discrète, relative, mais réelle” (S 159). Jaccottet conceives of the political in relative and singular terms. The act of relation is perceived as provisional and ephemeral, always to be repeated without securing any more solid bond and, yet, it is nonetheless “une fraternité”, that which we share or have in common. Jaccottet’s use
of the adjective “discrète” to describe this act of relation is particularly suggestive: it implies that it is singular but also, in a very Jaccottetian way, moderate, delicate, and restrained. Jaccottet cultivates a form of engagement that is solicitous but unassuming, fraternal but tentative. Jaccottet suggests that the attraction of this discrete thinking of the political is that it “reconnaîtrait la part de l’inconnu – comme on laisse une place à la table pour le voyageur inannoncé” (S 159-160). It accepts our shared humanity (its atrocities and kindesses, sharing and divisions, mortality and birth) as that which exceeds conceptual systems. “Ce que la condition humaine a de plus scandaleux”, he writes, “c’est peut-être cela même qui oblige à maintenir la pensée de l’inconnu – au sein duquel ces scandales prendraient un sens” (S 160). Etymologically, “un scandale” is a stumbling block: an obstacle to faith or reason. It is that which surprises due to its originality, its novelty, its lack of conformity. Jaccottet envisions a political practice that would be meaningful to the extent to which it interrupts received systems of thought, embracing the unpredictability of the act of relation, and remaining open to all that is unthought and unknown.

Reading across these passages on plants and systems of thought, on the biological and the political, it is interesting to see how a common ethos emerges. In the passage on the irises, Jaccottet writes approximately, trying to get a little closer to the iris’s precise way of being, knowing that his formulations will necessarily fall short. He cultivates a spacious mode of relation that leaves room for the flowers’ airiness and levity. He describes them as “compagnons” at the end of the passage in a way that chimes with the conception of “fraternité” in the passage on politics. As the prefix “com” here suggests, he seeks to be “with” these presences, to enter into relation with them without altering or influencing them. He writes at the end of this passage: “J’écris à la clarté de ces lanternes bleues, fragiles, hors de leur soie”. He tries to write in their light, to allow his words to bathe in their particular ambiance. Yet, he also perhaps writes to or towards it, “à la clarté de ces lanternes bleues” [my emphasis], knowing that, if he is not discrete in his use of language, which is to say precise and restrained, he will lose it entirely. Aesthetically, ethically, the flowers must remain “hors de leur soie[ ]”: an excess, an exception, a scandal, an unpredictable and illimitable force of becoming.

Two Distinct Ecopoetics

Deguy and Jaccottet are both writers who privilege the text’s act of relation. They are both eager to engage with the material world in its alterity and its excess. They have very different conceptions, however, of how language might go about this. For Deguy, the things of the earth invite figurative activity. They ask us to awaken their latent possibilities and to allow them to participate in an endlessly dynamic process of transformation. He conceives of the daily gestures of everyday life as a linguistic praxis, as a process of spatial interaction that is inherently creative and endlessly capable of transforming its own environment. Cultivating the interior resources of language, the writer attends to difference and protects material or biological diversity. Linguistic “husbandry” – and herein lies the connection between his Écologiques and the classical form Les Géorgiques – inspires ecological “husbandry”. The notebook form shows us this process in action. Figuration, conjecture, and invention are presented as daily negotiations, thought processes that are always to be reactivated. The writer’s task is to resist closure and to expand possibility, to show us, here and now, that language’s transformative capabilities allow us reside more intimately and more freely within the
physical world. Hence Deguy’s tendency to mine every etymology, forge every neologism, pursue every digression. Each is another potential opening, another path, the possibility of a richer world.

28 The ethos that underlies Jaccottet’s descriptive and reflective writings – and the whole tone and texture of his notebooks – is very different. He uses the practice of note-writing to train himself to resist habitual modes of behaviour and habitual linguistic tendencies (abstraction, reverie, introspection), performing a kind of deconstructive work that seeks, at the very limits of language, to engage with all that is exceptional about physical existence. And so, the ageneric or marginal form of the notebook suits Jaccottet very well too, but for very different reasons. His carnets present a carefully garnered selection of those rare moments in which language hesitates or wavers, and opens outwards, embracing the physical world in its essential mystery. Whereas “la chose” is presented as “une connexion ouverte” by Deguy, as an opening for the human imagination, Jaccottet simply presents it as an opening. Figurative activity does of course flourish around this presence, but Jaccottet crucially suggests that this figurative activity is not constitutive of its richness. Jaccottet’s notes gesture lightly towards it, trying to leave enough room for its singularity, cultivating what might be described as an ethics of falling short.

29 Deguy and Jaccottet think a Heideggerian “releasement” of things in two very different ways. One proposes that we know the physical presences of the world more intimately by lending them a voice. The other suggests that we can start to know them only at the very limits of linguistic experience. Deguy’s approach is profoundly humanist, whilst Jaccottet’s represents a more deconstructionist thinking, what might be described as a thinking of alterity. These two stances represent two important poles in the French ecopoetic debate. One might point to Luc Ferry’s staunch defence of a humanist approach to the ecological question and Michel Serres’ insistence on the need to think “la nature” using a different paradigm. It is possible that this deeply rooted divergence has been one of the inhibiting factors that has made an ecopoetic movement slow to galvanise within France. Yet these profound divergences are also indicative of the philosophical rigour with which writers such as Deguy and Jaccottet approach questions of linguistic mediation, subjectivity, and agency. Laurence Buell recently suggested in his article “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends” that ecocriticism is inherently diverse, thriving in “the intercommunication between critical vocabularies”. It seems possible that a specifically French ecopoetics, animated by such rigorous forms of dissent, will be all the more productive for the divergences of opinion that enliven it.

30 As writers such as Deguy and Jaccottet try to come to terms with the reality of our coexistence with various forms of life (animal, vegetable, bacterial, mineral), questions about linguistic mediation and linguistic agency become all the more pressing. Is language the capacity that sets us apart from the rest of the world, granting us an imaginatively rich and superior experience of being? Or is it only when we resist language’s exuberant inventive and figurative processes, critiquing our own linguistic fervour, that we begin to attune ourselves to the intimate reality of the innumerable, non-human presences that surround (or even inhabit) us? The attraction of Deguy’s approach is undoubtedly the agency that it grants us as subjects and language-users. A sense of human empowerment is necessary if we are to confront impending ecological problems with resolve and enthusiasm. And yet, Jaccottet’s writings subtly suggest that the very notion of human agency is precisely what needs to be critiqued. Enamoured with our own capabilities, humanity can become immersed in processes of invention that preclude more patient forms of attention. These processes of invention tend to domest-
icate the presences that surround us, causing us to lose sight of their capacity to scandalise, to deconstruct dearly held notions about human uniqueness and sovereignty, and to expose the relative and shared nature of being. More patient forms of attention, he suggests, promise to effect a very different form of transformation: one that results not so much in the reinvention of existence as the rediscovery of what was there all along.

A passage by Deguy in Écologiques illuminates the difference between these two conceptions of language’s relationship to the physical world. “Les dieux sont passés dans la langue, les pouvoirs de la langue”, he writes. “Les choses entrent en échange, grâce à la langue […] De sorte que montrer pour faire voir […] consisterait à montrer […] cette transformation en cours” (E 55). For Deguy, the gods have retreated into language. For Jaccottet, undoubtedly, the gods have also retreated but they have retreated into the physical world. Both writers seek to enter into relation with this force that evades us, an inchoate force, a metamorphosis, an endless dissipation and renewal. One poet does so by demonstrating the transformative capabilities of language and one by demonstrating its necessary limitations.

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NOTES
1 Philippe Jaccottet, La semaison, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 103; henceforth marked as S.
2 Michel Deguy, La fin dans le monde, Paris, Hermann Editeurs, 2009; henceforth marked as FM.
3 Michel Deguy, Écologiques, Paris, Hermann Editeurs, 2012; henceforth marked as E.
7 Ibid., p. 58.
8 Ibid., p. 59.
10 Ibid., p. 3.
11 Ibid., p. 12.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 7.
21 Sheringham, Everyday Life, p. 2.
22 Ibid.
24 Bate, The Song of the Earth, p. 75.


