

Individual Session
Between Words and Images –
Words and Images Crossing Literary and Critical bBorders

The Changing Forms of Discourse

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Abstract:

This essay examines how the contemporary poet Michel Deguy (1930-2022) engages with multiple media. Whether he collaborates with painters, filmmakers, or comments on political events, his discourse changes with the object of his attention. Deguy is exemplary in his choice of multiple subjects which inspire his poems and essays. His consistent effort to create a dialogue in which he considers the discourse of those whose work inspires him to respond is exemplary as the wide-range of the topics he addresses and the comparative perspective he adopts. Poetry and poetics are pertinent to chronicling the events and debates of the contemporary era.

Keywords: Michel Deguy, Althusser, Bertrand Dorny, Lanzmann *Shoah*, Poetry and the Event

“Michel Deguy and the Changing Forms of Discourse: Painting; Philosophy; Film”

Contemporary poets engage with multiple media. Whether they collaborate with painters, filmmakers, or comment on political events, their discourse changes with the object of their attention. The French poet Michel Deguy (1930-2022) is exemplary in his choice of multiple subjects which inspire his poems and essays. Deguy, who was a member of the editorial boards of some of the most important literary reviews of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, – *Critique*, *Les Temps Modernes*, *Le Temps de la Réflexion*, – founded two journals, *La Revue de poésie*, (1964-1971), and in 1977, *Po&sie*, a journal which had published its latest double issue in July 2022, number 179-180, the first published since Deguy’s death, but one whose content he enthusiastically endorsed. The journal currently has published 183 issues. In terms of our topic, “Words and Images Crossing Literary and Critical Borders,” an analysis of *Po&sie* would have sufficed to demonstrate how Deguy addresses what he calls, in his 1987 essay, *La Poésie n’est pas seule: Court traité de poétique*, as the “ronde des Muses,” “la ronde des arts,” terms used to describe the interaction and co-dependence of all the arts, and all disciplines, their capacity to engage each other and establish a meaningful dialogue based on their mutual ability to cross borders, to cross the limits of their own discourses. The very title of the journal graphically represents the nature of this exchange. The ampersand, the logogram which indicates the conjunction “and,” placed in the middle of the word *poésie*, transforms his title literally into “poetry & company,” underlining the importance of poetry’s relationship with the other arts and other discourses, and, in his case personally, especially philosophy. In his 2016 exchange with Bénédicte Gorrillot, *Noir, impair et manque*, Deguy describes the objective of his journal as follows:

L’ «action de *Po&sie* », c’est faire entrer la poésie par l’intermédiaire de la poétique dans le *débat*. Qu’est-ce que j’appelle «débat»? C’est le rapport entre anthropologie/poétique, sciences humaines/littérature, et le fait de se demander comment tout cela peut fonctionner ensemble pour un cheminement politique de l’humanité. Est-ce que la poésie, avec ses moyens, avec son type de pensée que j’appelle «rapprochante», «comparante», «ontologique de l’être-comme»,

peut jouer un rôle ? [...] Est-ce que la poésie peut encore jouer un rôle fondamentale, en termes de réflexion et de théorie ?¹

Trained as a philosopher, Deguy has sustained dialogues with philosophical thought in general from Antiquity to that of his contemporaries, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Deguy and Nancy have both addressed the enduring vestiges of Christianity and how these symbols have mutated at a time when Christianity has lost its ethical force. They both pose the question of how can a just society exist without shared ethical principles. The two volumes which are key to understand their respective thoughts on Christianity's relationship to ethical behavior are Deguy's 2002 volume, *Un Homme de peu de foi*, and Jean-Luc Nancy's 2005 essay *La Déclosion: La Deconstruction du Christianisme I*. In fact, Nancy replaced Heidegger whose work Deguy translated in his early years, becoming Deguy's major interlocutor, a thinker whom he often evoked as a point of reference. In the 1960's Deguy contributed effectively in disseminating Heidegger's thought to a French-speaking readership, through his translation with Henri Corbin, François Fédiér, and Jean Launay of Heidegger's *Approche de Hölderlin*. Translation is one of the principle objectives of the journal *Po&sie*. The journal has disseminated the works of poets from Africa, the Americas, Asia and every corner of Europe to a French-speaking public, including the work of the Ukrainian-born Soviet refugee Vadim Kozovoï, one of the most significant translators of French poetry into Russian. Thanks to Kozovoï, Russian readers had access to the works of twentieth century poets such as Henri Michaux, René Char, and Paul Valéry, as well as Rimbaud and Lautréamont. Thanks to *Po&sie*, and the efforts of translators Jacques Dupin, Michel Deguy, and interviewer-translator Jean-Claude Marcadé, French readers discovered Kozovoï's poetic works. Ever attentive to the political realities of our time in the summer of 2022, two weeks before the presentation of this essay as a conference, the double issue 179-180 of *Po&sie* contained translations of several Ukrainian poets, Vasyl Stus, Kateryna Kalytoko, Lubov Yakymtchouk, and Serhiy Jadan. In the same issue, Claude Mouchard, co-editor-in-chief since the journals inception in 1977, reminds the readers, as a precautionary tale, of the 2015 issue of the journal (number

¹ Michel Deguy, *Noir, impair et manque : Dialogue avec Bénédicte Gorrillot*. Éditions Argol, 2016, p. 251.

151) which contains translations of the prolific Ukrainian poet, Mikhaïl Sémenko, who, accused of Nazi terrorism, was victim of the Stalinian purges in 1937. Mouchard gives voice to the fears of millions in the independent countries which were part of the former Soviet Union, that history might repeat itself, and reminds us that the ever-vigilant team around *Po&sie* had not forgotten.

In 1990, Michel Deguy edited a collective volume, *Au Sujet de Shoah* devoted to Claude Lanzmann's 1985 documentary film, *Shoah*. Deguy underlines the salient features of this film. Instead of focusing on the events of this crime against humanity, Lanzmann focuses on its vestiges, its indelible presence in memory. Deguy considers Lanzmann's achievement, its ability to render present to those who have not experienced the event, all its terrible ramifications:

L'œuvre *Shoah* fait de la vielle, de la vigilance, au *bord* du présent, se penche sur notre présence, et ainsi se contribue à le faire être, à refaire du présent avec l'événement. La quête insistante de Lanzmann est pareille à celle d'un éveillé qui arrache au Léthé – ce fleuve d'oubli que nous voyons couler dès les premières séquences – un témoin emporté... «Mais par où l'enfui, l'enfoui, vient-il de disparaître?!» L'insistance ressuscite l'incrédulité du tiers (la nôtre, peut-être), aussitôt changé en intelligence qui réalise... «Mais ce n'est pas possible ! Que se passe-t-il ? Il vient de disparaître...»¹

For Deguy, Lanzmann has answered Adorno to prove that a great work of art is indeed possible after Auschwitz, because, for Deguy, art entails that ability to communicate an event to others. This documentary film achieves what all works of art should achieve according to Deguy – it renders the invisible visible, it makes the unimaginable, more than perceptible, understandable. Lanzmann's film accomplishes what Deguy wants to accomplish himself in his recent works on the notion of ecology, which is not a simple matter of respect for the environment, but entails the ethical relationship of individuals living in community, a global holistic vision of man in his world, as the commentaries in his 2012 volume *Écologiques* demonstrate. In all his writings, Deguy is aware of the power of language

¹ *Au Sujet de Shoah*, sous la direction de Michel Deguy, Paris, Belin, coll. «L'Extrême contemporain», préface, p. 7.

play to produce thought. Ecology for Deguy is a *vision*, a means of seeing the whole, projected from an example, a discrete circumstance. Rimbaud's conception of the poet in «La lettre du Voyant», as the one who experiences all and expresses the “quintessence” of what he has seen resonates in Deguy's passage:

Pour la pensée philosophique et poétique, et pour les arts, il y a la vision. La voyance de la vision est attentive aux *voyants*. Un «voyant» n'est pas *celui* qui voit (le «visionne»), mais ce qui est vu. Le poème, le texte, la «lettre», est la lettre du voyant: le voyant «lumineux» donne l'alerte, pour peu que ce qu'il donne à voir ne soit pas seulement «perçu», mais imaginé, c'est-à-dire trans-figurant le tout. La poésie (écrivais-je) risque tout sur des signes.¹

Deguy alerts his readers to the eminent dangers whether their sources are the injustice of totalitarian governments or human negligence when it comes to respecting the planet and all beings with whom man shares his world. Deguy is equally attentive to sounding the alarm when it comes to the dissemination of misinformation. He becomes polemical when he wants to refute thought which he considers unacceptable.

The next example directly addresses the need to correct misinformation. It dates from 1970 in the form of a short article, in fact a *note de lecture*, in the Georges Lamrichs's review, *Les Cahiers du Chemin* (1967-1977), another journal to which Deguy contributed regularly during the period of its publication. Deguy strongly criticizes Louis Althusser's essay, *Lénine et la philosophie*, published by Maspero in 1969. Deguy is clearly unconvinced by Althusser's premise that the times are propitious to understand Lenin's thought, in spite of the fact that the Marxist revolution is already fifty years in the making. Deguy refuses categorically Althusser's suggestion that Lenin's thought eliminates the need to consider philosophy as a means of gaining knowledge. Deguy uses a 1932 quotation from Sigmund Freud as an epigraph in which Freud compares Bolshevism's promises in the face of suffering and deprivation to those of religion, «[...] la promesse d'un au-delà

¹ Michel Deguy, *Écologiques*, Hermann Éditeurs, coll. «Le Bel Aujourd'hui », 2012, pp. 9-10.

meilleur où nul besoin ne restera insatisfait»¹ Marxism's unfulfilled promise is the basis of Deguy's critique of Althusser's demonstration. While characterizing Althusser's kaki book as a lampoon – «libelle» – brandished by dissatisfied philosophy students in the same way they displayed Mao's red book of quotations during the May student uprisings as a tool for harassment without thinking of challenging its premises. Deguy avows that his intention is also polemical, mirroring Althusser's own gesture. As Althusser explains himself in his opening paragraphs, his exercise was initially a lecture presented to the *Société française de philosophie*. Althusser starts his diatribe by telling these philosophers that Lenin would be laughing at their debates (Althusser's essay, *Lénine et la philosophie*, must be situated in its historical context of post-1968 France and the mutations of the Communist party in that country in their attempt to draw closer to the Socialists' program). Deguy presents his commentary as a series of annotations scribbled in the margins of Althusser's book, and carries through this convention by indicating the page numbers to which he is responding. This structure belies the consistency of his argument. Deguy insists on Althusser's political militancy and his objective to provoke the philosophers who listened and now are reading his pamphlet. Deguy recognizes how Althusser tries to use contemporary key words and concepts borrowed from the prominent thinkers of the day: «[...] emprunt ça et là à Derrida : travail d'un régime de *différance* entre la science et la philosophie ; usage de «Distance ; Trace ; Retard» ; emprunt à Freud et à Lacan: «Dénégation» ; «discours silencieux de leur désir» ; «vide d'une distance prise...» ; »² Deguy also repeatedly returns to the fact that Althusser's argument is based on an unfulfilled promise, and concludes with this assertion: «Althusser a rempli sa fonction à lui : faire patienter les intellectuels en donnant le retard pour la chance même. Mais peut-être croyons-nous entendre ici un autre rire que celui de Lénine...»³. Deguy has turned Althusser's own argument against him, using the same type of provocation, basing his polemic on a rational philosophical critique of Althusser's argument. He who laughs last laughs longest.

¹ Michel Deguy, «Lénine et la philosophie », in *Les Cahiers du Chemin*, 15 octobre 1970, p. 159 [pp.159-170].

² Ibid., p. 165.

³ Ibid., p.169.

Our next examples come from Michel Deguy's long collaboration with his friend the engraver and mixed-media specialist, Bertrand Dorny (1931-2015). Deguy produced over thirty artists' books in collaboration with Bertrand Dorny. He was far from alone in working with this genial artist, whose work has been the object of exhibits at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Brussels' Bibliotheca Wittrockiana, and the Galerie Thessa Herold, to name a few. The names of Dorny's collaborators coincide with a list of some of the most important French writers of the second half of the twentieth: Michel Butor; Yves Bonnefoy; Guillevic; Bernard Noël; and others still with us, not as well-known, with whom Dorny enjoyed collaborating: Zeno Bianu, and Yves Peyré, poet and former Curator and Director of the Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève. In addition, he collaborated with New York poet Ron Padgett, and his friend of long ago, the architect Paul Chemetov. Dorny often worked in series. He would prepare his books of collages and distribute them to more than one writer, for example his series on libraries, which provides one of the best introductions to Dorny's work. In the catalogue for his 2008 exhibit at Virgile Legrand's gallery, in addition to his collaborations with poets Michel Deguy, Bernard Noël and Zéno Bianu, architect Paul Chemetov, novelist Michel Butor, the reader will discover works produced with Yves Peyré, George Fletcher, Director of New York Public Library, art critic Gilbert Lascault, and Bernard Gheerbrant, founder of the bookstore "La Hune".¹

One of Deguy's 2004 artist books *Chirurgie esthétique* provided the catalogue text for a major exhibit of Dorny's work at the Galerie Thessa Herold. One could say that Deguy practiced his own type of plastic surgery in his reuse of texts which were written to accompany Dorny's collages. In his 1993 volume, *Aux heures d'affluence*, Deguy dedicates an entire section, «Travaux sur un rectangle» to reproducing texts which were originally included in Dorny's artists books.

In 1997 Deguy and Dorny collaborated on a book entitled, *À Peu près* which was limited to five copies. My observations are based on the fifth copy found in the Fonds Deguy of the Institut Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporain. This manuscript copy, written in a hand which resembles Deguy's, contains a meditation on life. By superposing textual extracts written

¹ Bertrand Dorny, *Bibliothèques*, Editions Virigile Legrand, coll. «Ulysses: Fin de Siècle», 2008.

on transparent pages Deguy/Dorny are able to complicate the interpretation of the text. The first page does not demonstrate this additional challenge to interpretation. It begins in the following manner:

*Le voyage c'est comme une rasade
qui n'étanche pas. Ai-je rêvé ?
S'ils demandent un preuve, dis:
La mort prouve le monde à l'extérieur.
A peu*

Près

The end of the text does have a superimposed transparent page and as a result can be read two ways:

à Peu-	
	près
Poèmes en poésie	
	<i>Tendresse du non sens</i>
proses en prose	
	<i>mensonge à un vivant</i>
	<i>et qui le sait</i>
À ce titre près	

The disposition of these final lines without the addition of the superposed lines on the transparent page struck me when rereading Deguy's 1998 text, *L'énergie du désespoir: ou d'une poésie continuée par tous les moyens*. These words without those on the superposed transparency are reproduced exactly.

à Peu-
près
Poèmes en poésie
proses en prose
À ce titre près

In fact, Deguy had integrated a rearranged version of the entire poetic text of his collaboration with Dorny into the essay. The salient words, «La mort prouve le monde à l'extérieur» reappear as «La mort est la preuve de la réalité du monde extérieur».¹ Deguy begins *L'énergie du désespoir* with a very telling statement about Braque who answered a critic's question about the origin of the particular shade of blue that he used in a painting which was exhibited in his studio by using techniques which Deguy describes as a «réponse par l'intratextualité, donc, et l'autocitation»² According to Deguy, Braque is affirming that the work comes from the work and the book comes from books. In conceiving this demonstration, I initially wanted to answer two questions: What are Deguy's common rhetorical and argumentative strategies when addressing diverse topics? Which rhetorical forms and arguments does he favor in each separate medium? My examples were taken selectively from his commentaries on film, on the expression of his concern for an ethical and practical question – ecology –, on a political text with philosophical implications and from his collaboration with a visual artist, as well as his role as the editor of one of the most significant, but insufficiently read journals of our time, *Po&sie*. Deguy demonstrates a versatility which is not marked by the choice of any specific argumentative strategy or any predilection for specific rhetorical figures, but by a capacity to dialogue, to understand attentively and address the question at hand, by going beyond the limits of his own enterprise to expand and enrich it. He uses the varied discourses of those he addresses as points of departure to engage, by affirming, elaborating, or refuting the premises posited by the Other. Michel Deguy's discourse consists of comparative dialogues with other literary, philosophical, artistic, and political figures.

One of his last collaborations with Bertrand Dorny will serve as a conclusion. *Poème philosophique: L'être en trans* was created in 2013. In a handwritten dedication in the fourth copy of the six, Michel Deguy has added the words «en transition perpétuelle». Bertrand Dorny's collages in this volume represent traffic signals. On the cover page, one finds the figure of a walking man in green with a series of white dots which follow the interior outline of the figure to simulate the juxtaposed light sources which

¹ Michel Deguy, *L'énergie du désespoir: ou d'une poétique continuée par tous les moyens*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, p.1.

² Ibid.

are used in traffic lights for pedestrians. Inside the volume there are a series of double and triple traffic lights akin to those used for both vehicle and pedestrian circulation. The first is a round red light to signal vehicles to stop on top of an oval light with another green figure indicating that pedestrians can walk. The third image uses a triple traffic light, but the utilitarian round green and red lights have been replaced by three different images. The first represents the rosette of a stained-glass window, the second the yellow light of a star-burst like chandelier, and the third a photography of curved bare branches above a blue sky. The fourth image is also a triple light, but the three lights are dark as if the lights behind the images have been extinguished. They suggest human or animal eyes. The last image repeats the initial cover image of the abstract walking pedestrian as a green light, placed in a box above what seems to be a window to the room of an apartment with a ceiling light. Deguy's accompanying text is a haunting meditation on mortality, with almost scriptural resonances of the Book of Genesis in a world where man is alone without God. The poem with a very impressive phrase that he will use again in the first poem of his 2016 volume, *La vie subite: Poèmes, Biographèmes, Théroèmes*.

L'homme est paissible
Passible de la peine
Et de l'élévation.

The typographical disposition differs slightly in the printed volume.¹ Deguy's entire poem in the artist's book created in collaboration with Bertrand Dorny seems to express the tension of a paradox, the expression of yearning for transcendence and the knowledge of its impossible attainment. What comes after life is unknown, unknowable. The only certainty in this poem is the certainty of the possibility of poetry:

Au terme de la genèse
millions d'années –
Sortant de la Caverne
Il prit par la colline
«Il vit que c'était bien»:

¹ Michel Deguy, *La Vie Subite*, Éditions Galilée, 2016, p.16.

Le Soleil ou Bien
Première grande chose vocable
et non pas «métaphore».
/ Le transport en méta
viendrait toujours après ?
Non. Mais avant en toute chose/.

Maintenant comment rejouer une
deuxième fois la transcendance ?

Attendre
C'est tout ? – pour être après
Ne rien faire – c'est tout
Pour être encore après.

Locutions nihilistes –

Michel Deguy's contribution lies in his sincere conviction of the pertinence of poetry, its capacity to express all that is crucial to the human condition, its capacity to incarnate the life of those who engage in a dialogue with all those who have left the traces in writing or their own «vie subite».

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