

INTRODUCTION

TO CONSERVE WHILE LEAVING BEHIND

Michel Deguy's Palinody

We must ensure that the palinody which disenchants in its descant not “purely and simply” lose that which it overthrows. The chant of palinody draws the superstition of chanting incantation along to its very loss. And after having brought about the loss of those beliefs and illusions which the singing of the song entailed, it then accompanies their transfer into. . . . ? Leading opinions on to their loss, drowning them in song, means that one may take them along with oneself; one can make them dance until they drop from exhaustion, overturning them, reversing them . . . into what?

How to retrace that movement?¹

What is finished is only just beginning.²

Michel Deguy's *Un Homme de peu de foi* appeared in 2002 and was his thirtieth published book. As its opening pages make explicit, the volume must be situated, as Deguy's work has always situated itself, in dialogue with “our aporetic times” (*infra* 112). This *palinody*, a complex, quasi-generic term that Deguy (1930–) himself gives to his book and that is examined and clarified throughout this introduction, stands in translation as an exemplary statement for English-speaking readers of that correspondence with our time. It prolongs and extends some of Deguy's essential propositions on poetics, ontology, ethics, religion, and cultural theory while opening up new angles and forms of reflection that we see confirmed in the work that has followed.

A Man of Little Faith is the first and principal part of an unintended diptych. Unintended because the second volume, 2004's *Sans Retour* [With No Return], was produced from the circumstantial energy of polemic, after

a ferocious and indeed *ad hominem* attack was leveled at Deguy and *A Man of Little Faith* by Benny Lévy. Lévy is a fascinating figure, a clandestine immigrant to France from Egypt and a radical student activist in the sixties, Jean-Paul Sartre's personal secretary in the last years of Sartre's life, a left-wing materialist who underwent a late conversion to Judaism, a return to the faith of the fathers under the influence of Emmanuel Levinas. In the epilogue to his book *Etre juif Etude lévinassienne* [Being Jewish/Levinassian Study], he was virulently critical of some of the propositions of *A Man of Little Faith* (although some of his remarks indicate clearly that he had not read the whole book) and Deguy responded rapidly and with commensurate intensity in his *Sans Retour*; complicating these matters is the fact that Benny Lévy's death was to coincide more or less exactly with the appearance of his book and, consequently, Deguy's response to its "execration" could elicit no further echo.³

Un Homme de peu de foi and *Sans Retour* take part and take a place in what Deguy has identified in some recapitulatory texts as a significant strand of his overall body of work, one that he calls the "combat within the 'exit from religion.'" ⁴ That terminology is closely identified in the French intellectual landscape with Marcel Gauchet, whose work on the "disenchantment of the world" has had a profound effect on the philosophy, history, and sociology of religion in recent years. Deguy has made explicit in various places the connection of his vocabulary of a departure or an exit from religion with Gauchet's work but Deguy uses the term a good deal more allusively and nonsystematically than does the author of *Le religieux après la religion* [The Religious after Religion].⁵

In *Dis-Enclosure. The Deconstruction of Christianity*, Jean-Luc Nancy devotes a chapter, "De-Mythified Prayer," to the poet's sense of the a-religious dimension of prayer.⁶ At the heart of Nancy's group of interconnected studies, he states that Michel Deguy has elaborated "one of the most acute formulations of what is brought into play, in my view at least, by a 'deconstruction of Christianity'" through his reflections on such formulas and concepts as "demythified prayer."⁷ Nancy admires Deguy's tenacious work of poetic reflection on and translation of tradition; he underlines in particular Deguy's "approach to a remnant or *relic*, as [he] likes to put it, freed, dis-enclosed from the religious edifice, impossible to put back, but the bearer or the worker of a requirement that will not be dismissed."⁸ This introduction will begin to show how Deguy's palinody both does and does not participate in an exit from religion, whether in the sense of Gauchet's arguments or understood more broadly, and how what Nancy calls "the more or less tightly knit systematization connecting these themes"⁹ in *A Man of Little Faith* and *With No Return* makes of the "little faith" a more complex matter than an apparently decisive exit from religion. It also begins to

address how Deguy's account of *laïcité*, a term that always resists a reductive translation to *secularity*, might correspond to or with each of those sides, both the exit and the no-exit, while proposing in its poetic orientation and progression something other still.

The direction of a more extensive elaboration along those lines might be suggested with a reference to Charles Taylor's foreword to the English edition of Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World A Political History of Religion*. The Catholic thinker of multiculturalism and secularity there poses the question of a certain irreducible character of faith and an associated tension within Gauchet's thought. Taylor is skeptical that a meaning-centric account of higher religious cultures and their evolution toward an exit from religion, such as that described by Gauchet, could ever be adequate to the richness of religious experience or the human realities to which it points. Faith, for Taylor, is not just about a need for sense-making meaning that can forever be taken to a higher level of theoretical detachment and explanatory coherence for a human world leaving behind its transcendental backdrop; the phenomenon of faith corresponds to something both elusive and irreducible:

. . . can the new departures in faith, of Buddha, of Jesus, or for that matter of St. Francis or St. Teresa, be understood simply in terms of the hunger for meaning? If the basic aim is just to make sense of it all, why is it that *karuna* or *agape* are so central to those traditions? Can the evolution at this level of detail be accounted for simply in terms of the structural tensions of "religion"? If so, then the explanatory primacy of these structures would indeed be vindicated. Faith would be merely a "dependent variable," flotsam on the sea of a postreligious age. But perhaps these mutations can only be explained by supposing [*sic*] that something like what they relate to—God, Nirvana—really exists. In that case, a purely cultural account of religion would be like Hamlet without the Prince.¹⁰

This concern with what to do with the "flotsam" of faith affords a useful perspective on Deguy's deep unease, expressed in these pages and elsewhere, with the culturalization of religion and his clear statements about the risks of an insipid carrying-on or replacement of religion within or by literature: "And let not the religion of literature replace the literature of religion! We want no lethargic ersatz" (*infra* 73).¹¹

Deguy's diptych is decidedly not about a return to faith, that much should be beyond debate or misreading, and his painstaking and technically demanding work on quasi-transcendence understood within a regime

of impossibility makes the postulation of “something like what [faith and religion] relate to,” in Taylor’s expression, an even more complex object to locate and to think. But in situating Deguy’s perspective on the possible character of the “little faith” or of the paradoxes of “religion without religion,” or “the sacred without the sacred,” it must also be understood that the culturalization of religion and the relay of religion by some sort of sacralization of literature are, for him, very likely just the other side of today’s shrill, intensifying orthodox fundamentalisms.¹² Neither of those widespread perspectives or attitudes would be adequate to the most radical implications of the evidence and experience of an exit from religion. Neither would be sufficient to capture the remainder of the truths of religion and faith at the moment when they are being left behind with difficulty—preciously or desperately conserved as identitary cultural manifestations or violently reaffirmed in theologico-political reactions.

The poet-thinker’s ongoing work on revelation and profanation, on ineffacement, on theologemes, on the Fable, on the Great Code, on relics, stakes out a different perspective, neither the “cultural account” of a Gauchet, nor the reasonable, conservative yet resolutely secular objections of a Taylor, offered from within faith. Deguy’s poetics of demythologization, making revelation anew out of profanation, refiguring, and revivifying the relics of tradition, do not constitute a simple refusal of faith, and are most certainly not a rationally over confident refutation of its reality either. The essentially poetic acts of Michel Deguy are proposed with urgency as a program of paradoxical artistic and cultural duty. They take up from another angle the challenge posed by the object(s) of faith, one repressed by Gauchet, we might say, following the concerns of Taylor and of some of those writing on Deguy and religion in the essential critical collection *L’Allégresse pensive*,¹³ and they do so in the light of Nancy’s already cited and very perceptive evocation of what is moving in Deguy’s writings, of all that may be considered there “as the bearer or the worker of a requirement that will not be dismissed.” Deguy’s response to this requirement of the relics of religion and faith, a requirement that will not and cannot be easily dismissed, is framed within a space of rational and empirical skepticism and historically alert late cultural anxiety. But “making revelation out of profanation after having first made profanation out of revelation”¹⁴ does not simply set aside the experiences of religion and faith as imperfect moments or secondary effects of a humanizing, empowering, or progressive evolution. Deguy sees all of the counterfinalities of such developments, of such an “exit,” too, and he takes them on himself in his “willing suspension of belief,” in the anxious singing of his palinody, his ode against the grain. All of Michel Deguy’s exits are “exits without exit.”¹⁵

A POETIC VIGILANCE

The selective and distorted reading of *A Man of Little Faith* by Benny Lévy notwithstanding, Deguy's corpus has attracted keen and illuminating literary-critical and philosophical attention, as Nancy's essay in *Dis-Enclosure* and those gathered in the appendix here attest. Despite such serious and substantial reception, one would not be exaggerating much to say that we are just beginning to take properly the measure of Deguy's work, its effect, its sources, and its connections, just now situating him adequately within the currents and relationships of the French poetic and philosophical scenes of the past fifty years. He has been in a hurry, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out in his affectionate and penetrating essay, "Deguy, the New Year!" and international scholarship, as well as his French peers, is catching up, still, perhaps inevitably, a step or a half step behind.

At the heart of the difficulty of an adequate critical and intellectual-historical appreciation of Michel Deguy lies the multiple, mixed, or hybrid character of the thought, the works, and the engagements of this protean figure. "One must always be doing two things at once. At least!" he joyfully and playfully proclaimed on the jacket cover of *Jumelages/Made in U.S.A.* [Twinnings/Made in U.S.A.].¹⁶

Deguy is well aware of the demands of his plural project, of its ambitions and its challenges both for himself and for readers and scholars; he has written of the "insurmountable difficulty of the situation he confronts,"¹⁷ although he was characteristically not speaking there of himself but of a generically impossible-to-pin-down kind of writer very much *like* himself: "the thinking poet who tries to make poetry and poetics interpenetrate and to sanction that poetic thought as a mode of thinking not unequal to philosophical thought."¹⁸ We necessarily return frequently here to the fundamental poetry–philosophy relation as it cuts so powerfully and so variously through the work of Michel Deguy, who, for none other than Jacques Derrida, is an utterly singular instance of a new and far from stable type, indeed one not yet invented, but which Derrida marks out in a deep exercise of interpretation and naming through a playful and provisional trilingual syntagma: the *french* [sic] *Dichter-Denker*. In the context of his reflection on how to name and how to name Deguy, he takes up and considers with friendly admiration

the name of a poet thinker given over to the vocation of so many languages, wanderer, guest, inventor, geo-grapher and teller of new continents and, we will come to this too, the poet of promised lands, configuring them through many transports and

translations such that he bears the name of *french Dichter-Denker* well, it is comely on him, it fits him so well but so as to make it migrate right away, like a word that is given, embarked in advance for other places, other maps and charts, flying toward the destination of future genealogies and given over to idioms to come.¹⁹

The *french Dichter-Denker* is a name that suits Deguy well and that locates him within a tradition of poet-thinkers and within the tradition of their meditation by Heidegger, but also in a future, in an unnamed and unnameable futuricity. *The poet that I am seeking to be . . .* And the thinker, just as well. Deguy's reading of the contemporary condition disallows any stability or self-satisfaction—figural, conceptual, politico-ethical—pushing the thinker-poet to renewed invention at every turn, in every turn of thought and of language.

Near the beginning of his comprehensive and ambitious study, *Différence et Identité: Michel Deguy Situation d'un poète lyrique à l'apogée du capitalisme culturel* [Difference and Identity: Michel Deguy Situation of a lyric poet at the apogee of cultural capitalism], University of Geneva Professor Martin Rueff makes a strong judgment about the importance of Deguy's oeuvre and situates it in terms of the double character of his abundant corpus, declaring it the most significant body of work to have emerged in French poetry in the past fifty years. His reasons for that judgment have to do with the universality of the oeuvre's ambitions and with the very refined and sustained critical reflection that it proposes on what is quite likely the fundamental theoretical problem of our era, the thinking of identity and difference:

. . . if there are, among the poets of his generation, some poets who are more immediately lyrical or more traditionally poets, if there are, beyond a doubt, more avant-gardist poets than Michel Deguy, there is not one who is more important, more decisive. If Michel Deguy's poetry counts more than any other within the French poetic creation of the post-war years, it is not only because of its own lyrical power to which nothing is foreign (*poeta sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* [poet am I and nothing human can be alien to me]), from the destiny of one man right up to the adventures of thought and of forms; nothing is alien to it because of its incandescence and its magnificent inventions, this is also the case because Deguy's poetry and the poetics which doubles it make of identity and of difference their object, their stake, their terrain and their question. No

one before Deguy had so unanimously, so poetically questioned identity and difference.²⁰

American writers and scholars, too, have noted the strikingly comprehensive character of Deguy's oeuvre in analogous terms. Kenneth Koch puts it in terms of an "adventurous disjunctiveness," whereas Paul Auster notes Deguy's "determination to carry poetry into uncharted territory."²¹ Koch further remarks:

rather than choosing one strand, or line, of poetic subject matter and style, as have some of his talented contemporaries (Du Bouchet and Bonnefoy, for example), Deguy seems to me to stay in the center, as if he were unwilling to miss anything, didn't want to give anything up, not any way of life or any of the "old privileges" of the poet: being able to rhyme, to tell stories, to write long poems, to mix poetry and prose, to be precise and intellectual, to be ecstatic and lyrical, to write about anything he wants.²²

Nothing human, nothing from the poetic tradition and nothing from its beyond, can remain foreign to the contemporary poet of difference.

In his preface to the anthologization of Deguy's *Gisants* in the Galimard *Poésie* collection, Andrea Zanzotto, the late great Italian poet, wrote of Deguy's overcoming of sterile generic oppositions, of his participation in the post-structuralist and textualist experimentations of his time while sacrificing nothing to mere passing fashions and, most tellingly, of Deguy's poetic approach to a reinvention of "philosophicity."

All of the apparatuses and the little textual machines that characterized a period of French culture are present. . . . But they are nevertheless constructed with a sense of form—measure and tension—which remains eminently and viscerally literary.

Another contradiction with respect to Derrida, for whom the persistence of a "genre" gap between poetry and prose seems to remain central: the unformalness [*l'informel*] of Deguy's writing, conscious of the impossibility of passing over the limit, even if it were in an unstable balance open to the "poetic," a chancy circumstance that today constrains the identification of a different "philosophicity."²³

Leaving aside the possible "contradiction" with respect to Derrida on these matters, Zanzotto puts his finger on the formal and generic demands of Deguy's project and on the very slight room for maneuver that he has,

notwithstanding the quantity and range of his writings. He respectfully acknowledges Deguy's capacities for operating on and beyond the limits of genres and modes of thought and writing. The translator into English of the 1985 volume *Gisants*, Wilson Baldrige, writes in very much the same vein of Deguy "keeping vigil over the medium of difference through poetical invention beyond conventional distinctions between philosophy and literature."²⁴

At some inevitable risk for oversimplification, one might advance the following impossible summary of the unity of Deguy's stance and its varied productions: There is no more significant poetic and theoretical writer of vigilance today than Michel Deguy. His productive energy and broad engagement with our contemporary moment come from a sense of the intellectual and artist's uniquely acute responsibility, a responsibility drawing on two sources, two inspirations, philosophical and poetic, ever relating them in the questioning of responsibility itself, ever seeking their already-relatedness through that motif and others, constantly reinventing those sources in a complex interweaving of innumerable theoretical and poetical propositions and acts.

Deguy's work indeed began under the sign of watchfulness more than fifty years ago. The opening poem of his first Gallimard collection, *Fragment du Cadastre* [Fragment of the Cadaster] in 1960 was entitled "La Vigie" ["The Look-Out" or "The Watch-Keeper"]. Thirty-odd years later, in an interview for the France-Culture radio program, *Le Bon Plaisir*, writer and filmmaker Claude Lanzmann spoke with a palpable gratitude of waking early and knowing that Deguy was already at his desk, keeping a poetic watch that ends the night, a thinker in the posture of a look-out, gazing out over the contemporary. "In the morning I go out with bouquet gestures/ To gather/ . . . Disjointed essences in the spectacle,/In order that the fire of relation burn more alive," says the poetic voice of "La Vigie." Vigilance with respect to the relations in being, a poetic gathering that permits a stronger articulation of identity and difference within a vocabulary borrowed from philosophy but clearly not constrained by any priority of that mode of thinking; we have in germ here in this early text clear indicators of the main directions Deguy's prolific poetics has taken ever since, and of his conviction of the rightness or necessity of this orientation: "None a more obstinate haunter . . ."²⁵

Deguy's poetics of responsibility, which he has called with greater or lesser insistence a *poethics* since the late 1970s, is rooted in large part in his reading of Baudelaire. As *A Man of Little Faith* shows, Deguy's relation to the whole of poetic modernity is a powerfully lucid and engaged one. He addresses himself to this tradition, citing Apollinaire, Rimbaud, the surrealists, Mallarmé, Char, Ponge, Bonnefoy, and others in these pages, but the most constant spur to his poetic reflection is the author of *Les Fleurs du mal*:

I receive poetic responsibility from Baudelaire. I get it from a *flower of evil*, and not from a hymn to a great river in Germania. It is a clausula, that of the distych which completes the hundredth *flower*; that flower whose admirable incipit intones:

*The great-hearted servant of whom you were jealous:
What could I reply to that pious soul
Seeing from her hollow lids the tears fall?*²⁶

Men are pious. Poetry, whose pronoun *I* Charles Baudelaire takes on here, is the pious impiety which *must* speak to the pious souls of readers.²⁷

Coming as they do right after a retranslation of the famous Hölderlinian formula from *Andenken*, “*Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter*” (which Deguy translates as “What remains, the artists give it again”), so crucial to his conception of poetry and his theorization of tradition, these lines from 2005 emphasize both Michel Deguy’s awareness of the vitality of the Heideggerian–Hölderlinian paradigm and a precautious privileging of other currents of modernity.

Pious impiety, the palinody within and *after* Baudelaire—“after” both in the sense of an historical anteriority and in the sense of an art-historical tradition, a figuring within a line of inspiration and imitation—can provide the conditions for the translation, the reinterpretation of relics, and for some sort of faithful infidelity to them. Turning his own new translation of Hölderlin away from the general emphasis in most existing versions upon endurance, upon dwelling, and foundations, reorienting it instead toward the gift of the unpredictable usage of the remainder says much about Deguy’s ontology of *comme*, the ontology of like, and much about the distinctive note that poetic piety can strike.

This poetic piety, which plays out as an omnivorous and responsible reflection on identity and difference and, we shall see, as an impassioned defense of earthly habitability and attachment, has been profoundly nourished in Deguy through his long familiarity with Martin Heidegger’s philosophical corpus. Notwithstanding a certain precautious distancing in the movement that *From Hölderlin to Baudelaire* evoked in 2005, there is no question that the poetic responsibility evoked relative to Baudelaire also plunges its roots deeply into Heideggerian themes and texts, including most especially those texts that Deguy translated as a young writer and with respect to which he has continued a dialogue of speculative differentiation.²⁸ The Heideggerian *Seinsfrage* haunts the pages of *A Man of Little Faith*, one can point to the amusingly grave pages devoted to reading Heidegger while

on vacation in Fiji (*infra* 44 seq), among others. Fundamental to the enduring Heideggerian influence in Deguy is the question of a responsibility, both a care for and an ability to respond to Being's call, a call and a response that are prior to any of the subsequent and more or less crucial theoretical differentiations on metaphor or ontological difference, for example, which Jacques Derrida, Jacques Taminiaux, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe Verstraten, and other patient, insightful readers have outlined as constitutive of the Deguy–Heidegger difference.²⁹

The responsibility Heidegger's thought demands us to take—through which it obliges us and exercises a compelling attraction on our thoughts—is the responsibility in regard to being, of which our languages maintain the understanding and the expectation—and maybe they maintain themselves only through this countless extension. By dint of hearing “being,” being re-observed, re-examined, plumbed, mentioned, capitalized, put between quotation marks, we become responsible (able to respond), we have to respond, that is, to say how it sounds in our understanding, “how we hear it.”

Experience consists in the understanding—gracious in that it could have left it understood—of being accorded its given, its “there-is.” Having become recipients of the given, *données*, we respond by interrogating the giving. Language speaks to itself about being; it speaks of being by speaking of itself, and vice versa, the antedosis, the original chiasma, i.e., before all beginning. Each one, being and language, has been changed into the other; can exchange with the other. “The exchange of a reciprocity of proofs”: this beautiful Mallarmean formula expresses the given's way of being as a general relation: and could, for example, translate the *mimēitai* which according to Aristotle is the word describing the relation of reciprocity between *phusis* and *techné*.³⁰

Deguy has more recently spoken of a “Heideggerian disposition upstream of the post-Heideggerian (or an-Heideggerian) system.”³¹ Jacques Derrida devoted some of his important essay on Deguy, “How to Name,” to working out that an-Heideggerianism relative precisely to this and related passages of *La Poésie n'est pas seule* (some of which were translated into English for the Cambridge Press volume, *Contemporary French Philosophy*, as “Motifs Towards a Poetics”). According to Derrida, Deguy achieves a unique relation to Heidegger through another variation on faithful infidelity:

out of a concern for rigorously assuming the responsibility to which Heidegger calls us, and which is ours before him, and that

which engages us in relation to languages, facing the work of thought and of poetic writing, the legatee's attestation contests and protests in the very movement of reaffirmation.³²

The proximity of poetry and philosophy, the whole "metaphorics" of proximity progressively and cumulatively explored by Deguy and Derrida, occasionally in very explicit reference to one another, were also presented as a lifelong subject of reflection to students of Deguy in the *classes préparatoires*. Some learned this lesson very well.

In an eightieth birthday tribute to Michel Deguy, philosopher Barbara Cassin, editor of the extraordinary *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, affirmed that "it is as a poet that [Deguy] is a philosopher," leaning heavily here on the richness of the French *comme*, the *comme* of like-or-as so profoundly meditated for years by Deguy,³³ affirming with or after Deguy that sensitivity and attention to figurativity must in consequence inform all of the modes of truth-saying; she insists on the normalcy and the justness of that proposition:

The metaphor, Michel Deguy taught me/us this right away, is nothing that comes along afterwards, it is *photophore*, normal light; the "*comme*" is a healthy regime, nothing that is compared is being dragged along behind, but we speak, as it were, from comparant to comparant, in an immediate appearing with and before [*comparution*].³⁴

On his side, the distinguished historian and thinker of medieval philosophy, Alain de Libera emphasizes the famous Heideggerian image of the separate peaks and Deguy's deconstruction of it through a rereading of the abyss:

Denken und Dichten. Deguy translation: Thinking and making an oeuvre. Right away he set the bar, and high. It was necessary to work, to make works. Philosophy and poetry, neighbors through the abyss, but indiscernible there where (and because) thinking, speaking, utterance is made. In brief: holding onto epiphany.³⁵

Holding onto epiphany. Deguy taught budding philosophers, writers, translators, and scholars *the figurativity of existence* in the wake of a century of ontology and phenomenology thought and expressed in continental Europe by Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Beaufret, Char, and so many others.³⁶ And he did so in a singularly striking new way, preparing ongoing reflections on the nature of metaphor, on the varieties of reason, on the possible post-phenomenologic relations of poetry and philosophy. This is an unshakeable

legacy for a certain part of a certain generation of French thought, as Cassin's and de Libera's recent hommages to their teacher show.

How to think the poetry-philosophy relation in terms of the nuances of like/as, the *comme* of comparison and the *comme* of *as* and *as-if*, rather than across an abyss of isolated, identitary difference, an unbridgeable chasm of *as-such*, wonders Cassin? "The answer to that question, so badly posed that no one dares to pose it that way (but then how might we pose it?), the answer is clearly: thought has need of both of them, my captain, o my captain. And what of philosophy, if it may be held that it is different from thought, does it need both? And poetry in general, does it need the two?"³⁷

These are quite strikingly the very questions posed in their own way by three fraternal readers of Michel Deguy, namely Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida. Their neighboring essays from the 1996 collection *La Poète que je cherche à être* respond to that colloquium's organizers' request to reflect on the nature of the poetry-philosophy link in Deguy. A brief account of them here will further point up the place of Deguy on these issues within his generation of French thought and will better prepare the reader for the tone and modes of his poetic deconstruction which she or he will find throughout *A Man of Little Faith*.

A reading fully tracing out the multiple angles of approach and interconnection found in these three essays as they situate, read, and think along with Michel Deguy is beyond the scope of this brief introduction.³⁸ Maintaining the focus on faithful impiety, the development of palinody's possibility through the insights of Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Derrida will be emphasized through their interest in a related generic term, the *threnody*. In Deguy's works of grieving (to be distinguished radically from the work of mourning, as Jean-Luc Nancy does so clearly in "To Accompany Michel Deguy" *infra* 189–199) there is a preparation, a prefiguring and a precondition, of the singing-away-from-faith at the heart of palinody.

PALINODY AND THRENODY

Deguy wrote *A ce qui n'en finit pas* [*To That Which is Never-Ending* (or perhaps more strikingly and very aptly *Ever-Ending*)] after his wife Monique's death from cancer in 1994. This unpaginated, unprecedented text sought not to mourn her in some act of psychic reintegration and recovery but rather to carry grief forward into thought, sustaining it, watching over it in order to exceed the personal experience in the name of its truths. The propositions and modes of what Deguy called in a subtitle, *threnody*, touched and fascinated three of the major philosophers associated with the movement of deconstruction, who were also all friends of the writer. It is revealing to connect what they had to say about Deguy's *threnody* in 1996 with the

development of the palinodic mode in Deguy's subsequent oeuvre. In the case of Jean-Luc Nancy, his second essay in our appendix to this volume, written ten years later, takes up the question of the Threnody once again, after the Palinody. There he relates them in their intertwined nature as foundational tonal and generic aspects of Deguy's later oeuvre, showing, in Nancy's deeply personal way, the interdependence of their meanings within and for Deguy's life and work.

There was to be in fact, astonishingly, a second extended song of grief in Deguy's oeuvre, entitled *Desolatio* (2007). In it Deguy writes in the same insistent, fully risked way of his strickenness; this second time following the death of his grandson, Raphaël, the loss of his sister (also named Monique), and the passing of "the friend" who is never named but whose resting place is situated by the texts themselves in Ris-Orangis (it is Jacques Derrida). Under the sign of this triple loss, Deguy extends the never-ending character of the meditation upon grief. The poignancy and courageous self-exposure of the 1995 volume are equaled or surpassed in the second threnody: "How can we (how dare we; how can we manage to) survive those whom we love truly; without whom we are not; with whom we have been among living, lively, convivial company; men; human men?"³⁹

In *A Man of Little Faith*, there are several references to *A ce qui n'en finit pas*, and Deguy situates his a-theism in these pages in terms of the 1994 "encyclical letter" as he ironically terms it (*infra* 38); *splendor veritatis*, *the truth of splendour*, in a reversal of the well-known papal encyclical's title. Derrida had admirably evoked "this threnody whose breath and inspiration one day made a church and its priests tremble while Monique Deguy, who was no longer there, was still there, absent so near to us, infinitely far from us."⁴⁰ The words that Derrida recalls, in "How to Name," are the following ones, spoken by Deguy during his eulogy for his late wife and later reproduced in the threnody:

For a long time now, I must say it, I have not believed in all of this, which is so magnificent, *splendor veritatis* and my soul is afflicted, at the moment of saying with you adieu to Monique; and so, many here will say ADIEU to her better than I.⁴¹

This singular, agnostic eulogy anticipated the multiple tension found in *A Man of Little Faith*, one that might be condensed in four terms: 1) a real and heartrending regret at faith's passing; 2) an exercise of thought consisting of keeping belief suspended so as to draw everything possible from its loss ("a willing suspension of belief" is the simple statement of this far from simple attitude); 3) a lighter, at times even flippant, autobiographical account of withdrawal from religious practice and the Roman Catholic

sacraments; and 4) an occasional broad and scathing anti-religious outburst, taking on any and all believers, and especially any public acknowledgment or manifestation of religious faith, expressed in a sometimes strikingly vehement fashion:

I want to be able to detest the Orthodox of Jerusalem as much as the Taliban, the kippa outside of the synagogue as much as the head-scarf in school, without passing for an anti-Semite; want to be able to respect just as much the secular atheist of Tel-Aviv as the agnostic intellectual from Cairo. (*infra* 139)

If the dimensions of this introduction allowed, it would be important to explore what kind of *laïcité* Deguy is aiming to define through his exposition and analysis of a faithful unfaithfulness and its compatibility with what sometimes surfaces, as above, of a complete refusal of the religious, one drawing on a radical republican refusal of the manifestations of any particularities of faith and community. In *A Man of Little Faith*, this is expressed in terms of a refusal of communitarianism. It would also be important in this light to make even more explicit the risks of the exit from religion, a departure that might in fact be integral to the exit from the *logos* that Deguy fears as a destiny of this culture. This destiny is one that he seeks to avoid or transform in and through his work and particularly its appeal for a *translatio studiorum* for our times.

Two quotations will serve for now to present these related dimensions of a hesitation that runs as a fine but real thread in the weave of Deguy's a-theological thought. First, the consequences for thought of the loss of faith:

But it may be that it is impossible for a pensive, reasonable humanity to think decidedly without "God." God was in the sentences of humanity's thought, of thought. It is made of a mixture (a bit like knowledge in Kant is a mixture made of concept and intuition "mixed together" by the imagination). Just as etymologies passed through fine analyses, through high-precision philological detectors, are always found to be full of the religious. They can be neither integrally integrated nor disintegrated. Operating upon justice, pardon or the guest, without writing God; without thinking of God. In such a way that what is coming—a humanity, a discourse, entirely without God, well, that would be something other than humanity. The end of God would be the end of the world, and in this sense, God will have truly created the world and finished off the world through his last Judgment.⁴²

Such a possible destiny of atheism is a determining aspect of a totalizing, annihilating risk to humanity. This is one of the *End(s) in the World* of which Deguy's recent book by that title worriedly speaks.

Second, there are consequences in lived terms of the dissolution of the link or the linking (*ligio*) functions of the *religio*, a dissolution that implies, for Deguy, the loss of important and enriching ways of human being-together, ways formed and conditioned over centuries by the interplay of theology, sacred texts and figures, liturgy, and social relations:

There was someone; there was a person; no one else; which means "himself"; yourself and no one other. You were no one else; my dear being, my being.

Thinking is thinking of you. Or instead, thinking of you was thinking. And I do want to believe that love and the person, that relation, that existential, will have been Christian, our way of loving. The fashion of loving and the hashed-over theology of the god-person grew up together, educating each other mutually; and our love was courtly and Christian, and "charity" contributed to that, and the injunction with respect to the "neighbour," and all of that.⁴³

Although here the "someone" in the first paragraph is oriented referentially by the lost grandchild, how can we not hear in it also a version of the anxiety about God, God as integral to thought, to social possibility or good sociability, and to culture? This writer is a thinker haunted by the loss of belief at the very same time that he resolutely affirms such a loss as being *with no return*; a thinker-writer gambling all on the effects of the palinody in a work determined to combat both the culturalization of religion and the irreversible exit from religion, with the nihilistic potentialities of the "death" of God.⁴⁴

Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Derrida all remark with seriousness and sensitivity on the immense challenge of reading and attempting to respond to Deguy's writings on grief and grieving: "Reading—with difficulty, I admit it, with pain—reading the "threnody" and knowing, as I advance in my reading, because I am left voiceless, that we can really never paraphrase Deguy again, nor even, perhaps, make phrases after what he has done . . ." (Lacoue-Labarthe)⁴⁵; "I haven't got the heart to go too far in recalling without decency (but silence also would be bound up with indecency) . . ." (Derrida)⁴⁶; "How not to cry and yet why cry—inasmuch as along with death there also enters into life—there has always already entered—the very simple revelation of that insouciance, that exemption from sense that also makes for the taste for life?" (Nancy, *infra* 194). But the threnody, or

in Nancy's case the two books of grieving and the religious diptych, are compelling, irresistible pretexts for reflection and writing within the nexus of the four friends' mutually aware thinking.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe takes up a number of dimensions of *To That Which is Never-Ending* that underlie both the threnody and the later palinody. First of all, the atheistic character of Deguy's song of grief is underlined by the author of *Heidegger, Art and Politics*; importantly, this is not phrased by him in modern-contemporary terms but in ancient Greek terms: "the threnody is also a declaration of a-theism, in the Greek, Sophoclean sense."⁴⁷ Deguy's atheism is anachronic; it cuts across the traditions of thought with which he associates himself. We get a sense of what Lacoue-Labarthe means by a "Sophoclean" atheism when we read Deguy on Simone Weil and ponder his meditations on what it is to be pre-Christian (cf. *infra* 6, 99).

We also find in "Of Transport" (surely an echo of Derrida's dedication of "The Retrait of Metaphor" to Deguy) a smiling if somewhat frustrated attempt to situate Michel Deguy's use of Heidegger (ever-present as "the other" in Lacoue-Labarthe's essay). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe wonders, early in his essay, "why is the other, precisely, he who while ceaselessly evoking poetry doesn't speak of poetry, or does so so little, why is he accepted and challenged? And why, when he is challenged, is it there where we expect it the least?"⁴⁸ We may recall Derrida's remark on this very heading that "the legatee's attestation contests and protests in the very movement of reaffirmation."⁴⁹ Both Lacoue-Labarthe and Derrida thereby locate the distinctiveness of Deguy's an- or post-Heideggerianism. The question of the acceptance that is also a challenge and of its surprising and perhaps sometimes inconsistent forms and essays opens up a cascading sequence of questions that Lacoue-Labarthe himself deems too "chaotic." He accordingly suspends their generality while focusing on what he calls an "apocope," a loss or breaking of voice in the saying of a few crucial syllables.

The question of the exit from religion is explicitly posed by Lacoue-Labarthe relative to a passage of Deguy's threnody, quite specifically in terms of the loss of the linking functions that religion provides or provided and that have been briefly discussed in terms of the threats run in any putative departure from religion. Lacoue-Labarthe radicalizes those risks, one might say, putting into play and into doubt the very possibility of *figuration* itself in the light of the loss of the *-ligio*. Examining two possible interpretations of a passage in the threnody that gives him pause, he proffers two interconnected interpretations, two translations.

One interpretation is atheological: "there is no justice, there is no 'point outside the world'"; and the other is literary: "poetry does not arrive, there is no other shore, no other side. No transport." No metaphor, no figurativity of existence, we might add. Whether from the side of religion or

that of poetics, there is de-liaison, unlinking, *caesura*, in Lacoue-Labarthe's terms: "In one and the other case, an end is announced: that of the *religio*, literally, that is to say just as well that of the *comme-un*. He [Deguy] says, there where I have come to a halt: that of tragedy. "Tragedy has disappeared."⁵⁰ Deguy's vigilant preservation of grief brings us to confront the failure of forms of representation and of catharsis. This is Lacoue-Labarthe's apocope, the stammer in which all phrasing fails.

Jacques Derrida's "How to Name" is one of his major statements on literature.⁵¹ Despite being almost entirely overlooked by scholars of deconstruction,⁵² it is one of his most important essays on poetry and poetics because it takes up the ambivalences of the French *salut*, so important in the later Derrida, and it does so within the infinitely rich metaphors of proximity provided by his lifelong friendship with a singular poet, the *french Dichter-Denker*, Deguy. Things are said in this essay with a clarity and decisiveness that are of a unique power and distinctive significance within Derrida's enormous and varied corpus. "How to Name" draws upon all of Derrida's cumulative thought of naming, witnessing, the signature, and much else. In our more constrained context here, that of situating the threnody as it pertains to Deguy's twenty-first century palinody, it is important to note just a few elements of Derrida's seemingly inexhaustible essay.

Derrida, like Lacoue-Labarthe, is at pains to offer some clarification of the complex relation binding Deguy to Heidegger. Where Lacoue-Labarthe pulled back from the broader questions in the interests of brevity and of a focus on a certain singularly striking *caesura* in *A ce qui n'en finit pas*, Derrida forges ahead in summarizing a number of the things that separate Deguy from the Heideggerian account of poetry, using both the most recent of Deguy's books (in 1996) and some crucial earlier texts. We have already heard Derrida's assessment based on *Poetry is not Alone* that Deguy seeks to render to the *comme* of comparison its fullest dignity in thought: the "anachrony" or the "dischrony" of the *like-or-as* over which Deguy has kept watch through his many years of writing have opened up a space that is his alone.

Much of what Derrida says about Deguy comes, however, not from a direct reading of the texts where Deguy engages most openly with Heidegger but from rereading an early text about Dante, entitled "Apparition of the Name," which takes as its interrelated starting points the phenomenology of appearing and disappearing, the function of the undecidable saving-greeting (*salut*), and the fittingness or comeliness of proper names in Dante's *La Vita Nuova*.⁵³ The possible connection to palinody may be discerned through the thematics of the sacred and the *salut*.

In the Threnody, as in the Palinody, Deguy speaks up for an anthropomorphosis, calls for a "repatriation" of the divine powers by the human in a coming negative anthropology. Derrida is fascinated by a passage from

the first book of grieving where Deguy calls for a moratorium on attributing any statements or attributes to God.

In the singular time of this moratorium, in the abidance of this abiding, in what once was spelled in French *demourance*, Deguy will immediately draw out the atheologico-political and atheologico-poetical consequences of that which he has just retraced, namely a logical and rhetorical (hypothesis or hypotyposis) genesis of what it would be more proper to call a *functioning* of the name of God as trope.⁵⁴

This suspension has the character of a retrait in Derrida's terms, a withdrawal and a (re)marking, and it opens up new possibilities for thinking the sacred, very much elsewhere, very much nearby. Derrida underlines in this "at least two noticeable departures, if not two ruptures, within the most enigmatic proximity, two separations with regard to this Heideggerian poetics of the unscathed, of the immune, of the *safe*, or of *salvation*."⁵⁵ These matters, so central to the late Derrida, are given a fine condensation here, in a testament of friendship at a time of grief and persistent poetic courage.

The two "departures" from Heidegger are, then, a clear refusal of Heideggerian motifs of *Heimkunft*, homecoming, return, nationalism, of any privileging of a German people (or, for Deguy and Derrida, of any particular people), and, along with that firm refusal of *return*, a strikingly un-Heideggerian turn toward a respectful consideration of "Christian onomastics" or more precisely, in Derrida's reading, a pre-Christian, pre-religious relation to naming that nonetheless remains sacrosanct in its poetic source.⁵⁶ With this, Derrida has identified two of the key characteristics of the palinodic modes and texts to come: 1) the little faith is to be *without return* and it can admit no exceptionalism; and 2) the man of little faith shall maintain a relation to the sacred without the sacred, in its withdrawal, and to the apparitions of all the names that figure and favor possibly or potentially renewed relations as relics of former belief, now willingly suspended.

Jean-Luc Nancy's two essays found in this volume are different in character than those of Derrida or Lacoue-Labarthe. Nancy's sequence of three essays on Michel Deguy, if we include, as we must, "Demythified Prayer" from *Dis-Enclosure*, provides the fullest engagement with the two books of grief and with the palinodic diptych. As the last of Deguy's three friends still alive, Nancy's "accompaniment" of Michel Deguy is also, then, an accompaniment of Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, as innumerable traces in these essays show. We see how Nancy's celebratory enthusiasm for Deguy's oeuvre is initially tempered and enhanced by a compassion with respect to the immediacy of grief, then how, over the ensuing years, it becomes heavily

inflected by an intense desire to share grieving more directly, to share its common burden, while thinking in common.

A few of the most relevant and stimulating motifs of Nancy's accompaniment of Deguy are: an understanding of the Deguyan poetics as an ontological poetics characterized by a "caring for presence in passage"; an attentiveness to the prose/poetry difference that is likely almost as central as the poet/thinker relation; "the so-recent and so-ancient" conversation with Jacques Derrida, engaged around a limited number of motifs common to all the friends of deconstruction, most centrally *salut* and consolation; a fascination with the music of grief and with the impossible singing that underlies both threnody and palinody like a sob of sense in discontinuity with itself or like meaning's withdrawal in a stammer.

In 1996, Nancy wrote, in immediate temporal and emotional proximity to Deguy's threnody, of the ever-renewing character of Deguy's corpus: "today threnody and prose, yesterday a great rhetorician, a poet always of circumstance but never established in that state" (*infra* 170). This permanent self-disestablishment of Deguy as *poet* fascinates all serious commentators of the work but few have captured as finely as Nancy does here, and indeed in all three essays, the interplay between poet and poem in their consequential ontic play:

Deguy parasites and dis-assures the poem—that is to say the work and the substance, the thing itself of the poem, the hymn or the epos, the formed and closed song. He chooses instead the poet. The poet is not the subject of the poem. The poet is not substance but displacement, he is not subject, but he is to come, the to-come of the "it" that there is. [*l'à-venir du "il" qu'il y a*]

For a long time poet and not yet, never . . .⁵⁷

Nancy locates the situation of this headlong, displaced lyrical subject in the terms of a proximity, perhaps slightly different from the one that sets poet and thinker in relation. He knows with Deguy that the ontological poet is a poet of no return, of the very much elsewhere *and* the very much near to hand:

poet, the one returned from what is most ancient, which is making no return, but which comes again, ancient as new, the ancient new. Deguy can say then: "What you are seeking, that is near, is here—and is not that."⁵⁸ (*infra* 175)

In the paradox of that proximity/distancing, which has consequences for a relation to the presencing of otherness and for the relation to a past

and a future, Nancy writes, “the poet is the one who finds the words to propose the multiplied turn of being’s *like*” (*infra* 181)

Such a poetic task, taken on by Deguy, is a work, even a steady job, according to Nancy:

There we have our job, the poetic making, the service of aid that we must attempt to provide. Caring for presence in passage. Not at all shielding it from passage, but passing along with it, discreetly, almost furtively. A furtive eternity, that is what we are lacking, that is within our reach. Passing beneath a silence of words, speaking beneath the passage of a silence. Immortals elsewhere, very much elsewhere, right here. (*infra* 176)

What the focus on the grieving, lamenting side of *poetic making* brings into clearer relief is this motif of caring for presence. In recent writings, Deguy attacks the bland and moralizing character of Anglo-Saxon philosophies of care,⁵⁹ but what Nancy has in mind is both more modest and more ambitious. It has to do with the fundamental poetic relation to appearance and disappearance, even with the possibility of a new poetic phenomenology.

Deguy’s threnodies and his palinody allow Jean-Luc Nancy to think

the somber and ineffaceable flash of *having been there* . . . what is not a survivor, not a revenant, not a phantom, not a shade, that is what is not of here and which, in that precisely, *is here*, outside of space and time, it is of this *outside-with* that neither philosophy nor religion speak, even while nothing else concerns them. No word says it, but a chant is being addressed. Without rest, a threnody, a *cantus firmus*, a *cante jondo* rises up, in music or in words—poetry, yes, if you will, but first of all, call and lament, first of all the tone which makes heard *here* the resonance of *there*, of that outside. (*infra* 198)

Not philosophy, not religion, but only poetry brings this relation to something like an *outside-with*.

Much in Nancy’s three essays turns upon the perception of the addressed song or chant, in its emotionally syncopated, hiccoughing inadequacy, its impossible primacy and its resonant advance toward the outside of grieving:

They make us sing, our dearly departed, they make us hum the *lamentate* in which our tears say nothing but the saying nothing, nothing but a speaking which is a crying and a crying which is a sob, if the sob is nothing other than the shaken-up voice, tripping up in the throat and giving up on speaking, the cry-