



Self, World, Environment: Ecocritical Affordances in Yves Bonnefoy and Michel Henry

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Michel Henry (1922–2002) and Yves Bonnefoy (1923–2016) both theorise a split between the world of everyday experience and that of an underlying ontology (Henry 1963; Bonnefoy 1990). Their projects explore this substratum and orient our attention towards it, troubling the division between it and the quotidian world. However, their enquiries lead them to radically different models of the self's relation to the world. While Henry proposes a state of 'auto-affective' subjecthood – *la vie* – which precedes any subject-object relation (Jean 2011), Bonnefoy offers *présence*, a relational ontology in which no essential selfhood precedes its interaction with the external world (Inizan 2013; McLaughlin 2020). These models of the self have important consequences for the self's relation to embodiment, to others and the external world and, from there, to forms of ecological thinking. For Henry, individual human lives each participate in transcendental life, *la Vie*, implying a form of plural human selfhood (Rohde 2011) that some readings extend to include nonhuman life and the material world. Bonnefoy's conception implies that all living things and the material world become co-producers of a distributed form of relational selfhood, but this is related through an explicit or implied lyric subject that creates tension between the self's constitution and dissolution. The article ends by situating Bonnefoy and Henry's thought in relation to Andreas Malm's more activist strand of ecocriticism to think through the ecocritical affordances of their self-world concepts, suggesting that each allows, while also foreclosing, modes of environmentally attuned subjecthood.

RÉSUMÉ

Michel Henry (1922–2002) et Yves Bonnefoy (1923–2016) théorisent tous deux une scission entre le monde de l'expérience quotidienne et celui d'une ontologie sous-jacente (Henry 1963 ; Bonnefoy 1990). Leurs projets explorent ce substrat et orientent notre attention vers lui, en troublant la division entre celui-ci et le monde ordinaire. Toutefois, leurs démarches les conduisent à des modèles radicalement différents de la relation du soi au monde.

Alors que Henry propose un état de subjectivité « auto-affective » – *la vie* – qui précède toute relation sujet-objet (Jean 2011), Bonnefoy avance la notion de présence, une ontologie relationnelle dans laquelle aucune ipséité essentielle ne précède son interaction avec le monde extérieur (Inizan 2013 ; McLaughlin 2020). Ces modèles du soi ont des conséquences importantes pour la relation du sujet à l'incarnation, aux autres et au monde extérieur, et, à partir de là, pour certaines formes de pensée écologique.

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Pour Henry, les vies humaines individuelles participent chacune à la vie transcendante, la Vie, ce qui implique une forme de pluralité des subjectivités humaines (Rohde 2011) que certaines lectures étendent jusqu'à inclure la vie non humaine et le monde matériel. La conception de Bonnefoy implique que tous les êtres vivants et le monde matériel deviennent des coproducteurs d'une forme distribuée de subjectivité relationnelle, mais celle-ci est médiatisée par un sujet lyrique explicite ou implicite, ce qui crée une tension entre la constitution et la dissolution du soi.

L'article se conclut en situant la pensée de Bonnefoy et de Henry par rapport au courant plus activiste de l'écocritique représenté par Andreas Malm, afin d'examiner les potentialités écocritiques de leurs conceptions du rapport soi-monde. Il suggère que chacune permet, tout en les limitant également, certaines formes de subjectivité sensibles aux enjeux environnementaux.

Virginie Caruana: 'Est-ce que la vie a besoin du monde ?'

Michel Henry : 'Non, et d'ailleurs je ne comprends pas pourquoi il y a un monde.'

(Caruana & Henry, 2000)

'Que ce monde demeure !' (Bonnefoy, 2001: 25)

As I write in early 2025, firefighters are battling to contain wildfires in and around Los Angeles. The most destructive the region has ever seen, these fires, driven by hot dry desert winds, have destroyed homes and businesses, displaced whole communities, and have so far left thirty people dead. Rolling coverage on the *New York Times* website reports that 'thick columns of smoke, eerie orange skies and beloved landmarks in ashes have instilled a new sense of vulnerability in residents, many of whom are used to fires, but not to so many, so near, burning at the same time' (Karlman et al., 2025). The authors stress that these fires transform both the physical terrain and the psychic life of those that inhabit it, suggesting that it is proximate, first-hand experience that has brought locals to an anxious awareness of how a changing climate will materially and psychologically reshape our lives. This article begins by addressing the relationship between inner and outer life from a different perspective, namely, that of how two 20th-Century French writers – Yves Bonnefoy and Michel Henry – have described the relationship between self, world, and environment. Both Bonnefoy and Henry conceive of a seam separating the world of everyday experience from that of an underlying ontology. They seek to describe, reach towards, and intensify ways of being which are concealed by our usual habits and modes of perception. Henry's ontology stems from *la vie* [life],¹ a mode of appearing that precedes the 'ek-static', or outward-oriented, world of perception. For Bonnefoy, the ontological ground is *présence* [presence], a state of reverberating plenitude in which we are one with the world prior to any conceptualisation of it. In what follows, I analyse their concepts of presence and life, then move progressively outwards, thinking through how these affect selfhood, embodiment, and the self's interaction with the not-I, before turning to how these models might promote or inhibit forms of environmental consciousness. The challenges for Bonnefoy's and Henry's thought resulting in action come into sharper focus when juxtaposed with the more explicitly activist position of Andreas Malm, to whom I turn in the later stages of the essay. I end by considering how the tension in both models of subjecthood between a cohesive, singular self and a plural, or distributed, one has important consequences for the ecocritical affordances of their thought.

Before turning to Bonnefoy and Henry, it is worth pausing on this word, 'affordances'. The term, coined by psychologist James J. Gibson, means the possibilities for action offered by an environment (Gibson, 1979). For example, a large stone affords sitting, or a cave affords sheltering from the wind. In Gibson's model, an affordance is not something that inheres in objects so much as something that comes about through the interaction between subject and object. In his words, an affordance is 'neither an objective property nor a subjective property', but rather 'cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective [...] It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behaviour. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither' (Gibson, 1979: 129). Fundamental relationality is key here, but importantly, Gibsonian affordances are not inflected by phenomenological states. In his words, 'The affordances of the environment

are permanent (...) [whereas] the positive and negative valences of things that change when the internal state of the observer changes are temporary' (Gibson, 1982: 410). Some of Gibson's interpreters have, by contrast, explored exactly this experiential component of affordances. Roy Dings suggests that an affordance is a '*possibility for action which solicits action* (i.e. calls me to act) only when I am *responsive* to act (i.e. concerned)' (Dings, 2018: 687). That is, a rock affords sitting but only incites doing so when I need to rest. Dings explores the modalities of this solicitation through three aspects, which he calls 'valence' (positive/negative), 'force' (urgency), and 'mineness' (self-identification or commitment) (Dings, 2018: 682). It is in this expanded sense that I use the term affordances, in order to explore what Bonnefoy and Henry's life and presence imply for worldly action as well as for ecocritical reflection.

Bonnefoy and Henry both describe our way of being in the world as cleaved, with a fundamental ontology underlying a surface stratum. Bonnefoy distinguishes between the world of daily experience and that of presence, a term he uses to describe '[une] impression de participer à une réalité soudain plus immédiate et pourtant aussi plus une et plus intérieure à notre être' (Bonnefoy, 1992a: 310). Presence, we should note, is not perceived through the sense organs, but rather 'échappe à la perception, quitte à lui conférer en retour son intensité, son sérieux', and does not simply refer to the physical world, but is rather constituted relationally as we meet the physical world with an immediacy and fullness that habitually escapes us (Bonnefoy, 1990: 58). One means of reaching towards presence is through immersion in nature, when we suddenly feel ourselves to be in unison with all things. In Bonnefoy's luminous description, presence is 'cette intimité du moi et de l'autre qui recrée l'horizon de la présence du tout, arbres, pierres, montagnes – cette immanence où veut et peut dissoudre l'oeuvre qui fut personnelle' (Bonnefoy, 1990: 58). The idea that we could access a plane of experience that is at once more interior to our being and more unified with the outside world offers us a deeply imbricated relationship, or even undifferentiated oneness, spanning humans, non-humans, and the material world. This results in a state of unity which Bonnefoy calls 'l'Un' [the One] (Bonnefoy, 1993: 94–95), in which we and nature form a singular site of immanence.² In this sense, the ecocritical dimension of Bonnefoy's thought first emerges by allowing for an epiphanic experience of our oneness with the world. In Dings's terms, we would be solicited to protect the world through positive valence and a sense of mineness. Already, though, a tension arises between the 'immanence' of the self's dissolution into the not-I and the 'oeuvre qui fut personnelle'. The 'work', which for a poet such as Bonnefoy flickers ontologically between poetic output and the lived life, may 'want to' and 'be able to' dissolve with the other into the surrounding world, but has not yet done so.³

Nature, then, offers one route towards an experience of presence, and another is found in poetry. This is a paradox in the context of Bonnefoy's thought, as the conceptual snares laid by language are part of what exiles us from presence. Bonnefoy does not suggest that his poems guarantee an experience of presence, but he hopes they can orient readers towards it through acts of language, using the very system of signs that damns us to living in a world of concepts, forever estranged from the *vrai lieu* where the essential nature of things is revealed, or rather *is*, for it is no longer a question of appearing, but of being. We hear such a bid for presence in Bonnefoy's 'La lumière, changée' from his collection *Pierre Écrite*, when the speaker cries out to a 'Dieu qui n'es pas' to 'Achève de mêler à nos âmes ces astres/Ces bois, ces cris d'oiseaux, ces ombres et ces jours' (Bonnefoy, 2023a: 141). These lines, in which souls become blended with the extensional world, not only describe presence, but invoke it in short words – "âmes", "astres", "bois", "cris", "ombres" etc. – words which, for Bonnefoy, have accreted an immediacy and materiality through their fundamentality in human experience.⁴ The criteria for determining which words have this power are unclear – this aspect of Bonnefoy's poetics is axiomatic – but poetry can also invoke presence because the language it uses both signifies and is constituted of pre-conceptual sound that, particularly when read aloud, becomes materially present. As in Paul Valéry's description of the poem – 'cette hesitation prolongée entre son et sens' (1977: 637) – Bonnefoy's poetic imagination figures the poem as suspended between the signifying and sonorous aspects of language. We see this at work in the last stanza of the same poem:

Renonce-toi en nous comme un fruit se déchire,
 Efface-nous en toi. Découvre-nous
 Le sens mystérieux de ce qui n'est que simple
 Et fût tombé sans feu dans des mots sans amour.

The speaker uses imperative forms to call for a dissolution of the boundaries between subjects and objects, with a subtle shift from '[r]enonce toi en nous' to '[e]fface-nous en toi' to '[d]écouvre-nous/le sens', in which the positions of 'toi' and 'nous' are reversed in an almost chiasmic structure, before the third opens outwards through an indirect object to a state of presence, a sense of being that 'n'est que simple', here hovering in meaning between simplicity and the singularity of the One. In parallel, a dense sonic patterning pulls us away from conceptual interpretation and towards presence. Incantatory repeated words (toi...nous...nous...toi...nous), lulling sibilants (renonce...déchire...Efface...sens...mystérieux), the metrical surprise of the second line that has only ten syllables and is enjambed, and the final darkening alexandrine (fût...feu...mots...sans...amour) that shifts between oral and nasal vowels, all create a sonic mesh that reinforces and exceeds the propositional content of the lines. In Emily McLaughlin's words, the poem becomes 'a space of resonance, a place where linguistic, sensual, and material all reverberate together. [...] We're asked to feel the finite dynamics of worldly existence at work within us, to feel them opening us up and actively bringing us into existence' (2020: 4). In its preference for material plenitude, Bonnefoy's poetry distinguishes itself from the Mallarméan strand of French poetry which reads the disjunction between 'real life' and language's corruption of it in terms of absence. This fundamental absence pushes poets towards seeking ideal forms and so finding reprieve from the world's aleatoric disarray. Bonnefoy, by contrast, sees poetry as serving the opposite function, namely, to point the reader towards presence rather than absence, to meaning rather than chance, and to the warm stone of the finite material world rather than the cold tomb of ideal form.⁵ It is, then, a poetry which reflects on its own exile from the world, while remaining firmly turned towards it. The sonic worldliness of Bonnefoy's poetry provides the precondition for its ecocritical affordances as every poetic act, read, spoken or heard, binds the speaker and listener/reader to the material world.

While Bonnefoy's concern is for how the conceptualization of language estranges us from presence, Henry argues that phenomenology's prioritization of the outward-facing, intentional subject overlooks a more foundational mode of subjecthood. He reacts against what he calls the 'ontological monism' of Husserlian phenomenology, by proposing a unique material phenomenology grounded in a self-experiencing subject (Henry, 1963: 59). The phenomenological tradition, in Henry's account, has prioritised intentionality, that is, the outward-facing, or *ek-static* aspect of appearing, which for Henry has obscured a primordial and transcendental mode of appearing which he calls 'life', a state of transcendental *auto-affectivité* [auto-affection], as subjectivity experiences itself in a dialectic of suffering and joy called *pathos*. His thought distinguishes between manifestation and self-manifestation, and moreover, posits that manifestation presupposes self-manifestation, and in so doing questions Husserl's (and much of classical phenomenology's) focus on intentionality (Henry, 1963: 47, 584). Intentionality, for Henry, clouds our awareness of 'l'élément ontologique pur' which is anterior to 'tout acte de compréhension, implicite ou explicite, philosophique ou non' (1963: 185). This pure ontological element is not a biological state, nor is it self-awareness – which he calls 'conscience de soi' – but is rather an 'épreuve de soi', a pre-intentional state of self-experience (Caruana & Henry, 2000; Henry, 1963: 142, 1990: 55). This leads to two modes of appearing: one in which appearing is an immanent state of auto-affection, and which is the most fundamental level of life; and a second, *le monde* [the world], in which one's intentional intuition of an object reveals only 'l'essence de l'expérience sensible', but not the essence of being itself (Henry, 1963: 826). To understand how this inward-facing and self-referential ontology might accommodate exteriority, we should remember that Henry's phenomenology does not argue that intentionality is of no consequence. Rather, his phenomenology 'repose sur le dualisme de la phénoménalité ek-statique du monde qui est celle de Heidegger et d'une phénoménalité totalement différente qui est celle de la vie' (Caruana & Henry, 2000). As Frédéric Seyler describes, each is only 'one of two modes of appearing', but intentional consciousness must nevertheless be 'founded in a more fundamental mode of appearing that is precisely *non*-and even *pre*-intentional and therefore essentially differs from intentionality' (2022).⁶ Intentionality is then grounded in the immanent affectivity of life, and for Henry, 'l'auto-manifestation est l'essence de la manifestation' (1963: 173). For Henry, prioritising *ek-stasis* turns people into intentional machines for intuiting the world, rather than fully realised beings attuned to their fundamental subjecthood. If we err in this, putting intentionality first, we become users of the world, reducing it to a mere resource for the projection of the ego. If we attend only to our role as perceivers of the world, and our actions as intentional agents in it, we neglect the core of our subjectivity, and so are diminished.

Bonnefoy's and Henry's concepts have important consequences for how a relationship with the external world is conceived, and both figure embodiment as a privileged site of mediation between the world on one hand and presence and life on the other. In Bonnefoy's case, self and world can be experienced as one through poetry's sound and rhythm, particularly when they are embodied in the physicality of speech, and so materialised in sound. In his essay 'Poésie et liberté', Bonnefoy argues for what the sound and rhythm of poetry can accomplish:

Des mots, certes, mais actifs dans la phrase d'une façon dont je n'ai rien dit encore, n'ayant considéré jusqu'à maintenant que les liens qui se créent de notion à notion dans l'espace de signifiés. Des mots, oui, et avec eux de la signification, mais, cette fois, des sons aussi, et des rythmes, qui forment d'un vocable à d'autres dans cette parole d'un autre type un plan nouveau d'association, de recherche, on croirait même d'attente, en avant de toute pensée. (1992a: 320–321)

If the sonic and rhythmic qualities of poetry can give access to a new horizon 'avant de toute pensée', this is intensified when it is spoken aloud. Crucially, words become palpable in the breath which produces them, in the air that carries them, and on the drum of the ear which discerns them. Here, language is no longer merely a system of empty signifiers, but 'une matière [...] un son qui amorce au plan de la phrase une forme de même nature sonore, et en cela même il est rythme, et d'ailleurs, d'emblée il a été souffle, qui emploie notre souffle, qui le fait vivre hors de nous' (Bonnefoy, 1992b: 262). Language is materialised through breath, and the sound waves it produces cause both body and world to vibrate, and in doing so bind the speaker to the world and to others in it. Through its incorporation, language becomes both signifiatory and material, allowing it to participate in an extensional world and to orient us towards presence as we attain a state '[où] on éprouve même que l'on est présent à cette présence d'une façon que par l'intellect on ne saurait aborder, mais que l'on sent pourtant...' (Bonnefoy, 1992a: 310). Not only is an awareness of presence important, but so also is a sensation of being present to it, a state of receptivity or openness that precedes conscious perception. As the self unfolds towards the environment it inhabits, the first step is through poetry's sonic properties, particularly when embodied as sonorous, rhythmical, speech.

We can better understand Bonnefoy's claim that vocalisation of the 'matière sonore' can orient us towards presence by reading his 'À la voix de Kathleen Ferrier' (1958) and particularly through the audio recording of this poem that Bonnefoy made, around forty years after its composition, in 2001 (Bonnefoy, 2002: 82). Ferrier, an English contralto active in the first half of the twentieth century, is known for the unique timbre of her voice, which is rich and clear but also grainy. Bonnefoy describes it paradoxically as 'mêlée de couleur grise', 'un adieu de cristal et de brume' (Bonnefoy, 1958: 57). Coloured but grey, associated through natural imagery with both transparent crystal and opaque mist, this voice enacts for Bonnefoy the trembling boundary between the timeless world of the ideal and the finite world of presence. The poem's rhyme scheme hesitates between end-rhymes – 'perdu [...] absolu' and 'l'espoir [...] soir' on the second and fourth lines of the second and third stanzas – and subtly patterned clusters of assonance across the ends of lines in a stanza: 'se rassemblaient [...] s'était voilée' on the first and fourth lines of the first stanza, and 'ô larmes [...] eau sombre' on the first and third lines of the third. By hovering between a regular rhyme scheme and a more diffuse sonic patterning, Bonnefoy enacts in verse the tension between the eternal ideal of form and the time-bound work of sonic, vocalised presence that is the poem's concern.⁷ Added to this, Bonnefoy's reading of the poem, recorded when he was nearly eighty years old, mediates the description of Ferrier's vocal timbre with the texture of his own voice, establishing an implied temporal distance between this early poem and the older poet reading it. Vocal cracks and laboured breaths make us aware of time's action on the finite life of the poet in the line 'pour un adieu de cristal et de brume', in which he takes a breath after 'cristal' despite the punctuation and sense suggesting no pause. This pause increases the poignancy of the line, which is itself poised between crystalline permanence and the swirling transience of mist. The last sound of 'brume' becomes almost a wheeze as he runs out of breath before snatching another (Bonnefoy, 2011). Perhaps this interpretation is intentional, perhaps not, but the effect is the same: we are drawn to the voice as a site of presence, and that voice attests to finitude as presence's necessary condition.⁸ Bonnefoy's poetry, in short, both literally and figuratively embodies the ontological concepts his essays describe, and do so by thinking in verse.⁹

Henry does not advocate the vocal means put forward by Bonnefoy but rather, particularly in his earlier writings, relates auto-affection to a 'praxis du corps' [bodily praxis], or 'technè originelle' [original technè] (1987: 89). The difficulty of aligning auto-affection with the physical body is rooted in a distinction Henry makes between 'la chair' [the flesh], which refers to the immaterial, transcendental site of auto-affection, and 'le corps' [the body], which refers to the material body that is capable of interaction with the exterior world.¹⁰ In much of Henry's writing, and particularly in his later work, the division between these two is stark.¹¹ In his 1987 text *La Barbarie*, however, we discover a means through which flesh can sometimes be mediated through bodily praxis, or *corpsappropriation* [bodily ownness] in which the body's physicality is exploited through movement as an instancing of auto-affection.¹² An immanent bodily praxis allows Henry to associate the physical body with the phenomenological flesh: '[e]n tant que praxis s'auto-affectant elle-même...cette praxis déterminée, singulière et individuelle, c'est notre corps' (1987: 98). There is a distinction between this kind of praxis, present in actions such as walking or swimming which allow an immanent contact with the world, and a kind mediated through intentionality, which happens, in Andreas Gonçalves Lind's words, 'on the basis of the domination and control that technology makes possible', and so distances us from life (2022: 7).

Much like Bonnefoy's belief that certain words can slip the snares of conceptual language, Henry sees certain kinds of movement as avoiding the intentional character of other kinds of praxis. When Henry describes our ability to influence the world, he is torn between lamenting our contemporary ability to do so and celebrating some past instances of it:

Nous transformons le monde, l'histoire de l'humanité n'est que l'histoire de cette transformation, au point qu'il est impossible de contempler un paysage sans voir en lui l'effet d'une certaine praxis. Mais cette transformation n'avait été dans le passé de l'humanité que la mise en œuvre de la Corps-propritation qui fait de nous les habitants de la Terre en tant que propriétaires, en un sens ontologique. (2004b: 37–38)

Henry suggests that human acts can and do influence the world, and even that some are fundamentally those of an incorporated manifestation of auto-affectivity. The question, however, remains, of how we tell such interventions in the world apart from the intentional forms of worldly action he seems to lament. As with Bonnefoy's claims about certain words avoiding conceptuality, it is not always clear how we are to distinguish with confidence between these two kinds of praxis, or how the essentially self-referential auto-affective self of Henry's thought in other texts than *La Barbarie* might instantiate itself through embodied movement. In any case, in both Bonnefoy's notion of sounded language and in Henry's bodily praxis, presence and life can be expressed through embodied means. It is at this point that Bonnefoy's and Henry's articulations of selfhood allow a more immediate connection to the material world, but in order to reach the fullest realisation of their ecocritical potential, their concepts of embodied selfhood must extend both to the not-I of the material world and to the other selves, human and non-human, that populate it.

The main difficulty Henry's theory of subjecthood encounters in its relation to the not-I stems from the often-unbridgeable gap between an auto-affective self and an extensional world. The Gnosticism or hermeticism of Henry's philosophy has been alleged by several critics, including Dominique Janicaud, who suggests that his writing shows 'complete scorn for all of life's actual determinations' and Renaud Barbaras, who argues that if life is fundamentally auto-affective, indeed defined by the fact it relates to itself alone, it risks becoming a life 'étrangère au monde, [...] une vie extenuée, une vie désertée par le vivant' (Barbaras, 2008: 9–10; Janicaud, 2000: 78). Notably in the context of the possible ecocritical dimensions of Henry's thought, Barbaras insists that 'si la transcendance révèle quelque chose de la vie, il n'en reste pas moins qu'une détermination de la vie doit intégrer les traits descriptifs de ce qui se donne empiriquement à nous comme vivant et doit, notamment, faire sens aussi pour l'animal' (2008: 10).¹³ Barbaras, while recognising the insight that Henry's hyletic approach might offer, is unwilling to accept an axiomatic principle that does not allow for the empirical experience of recognising life where we see or otherwise experience it.¹⁴ For Janicaud and Barbaras, Henry's description of auto-affection as non-conceptual, non-intentional, and self-referential, disallows fully encountering both the world and its others. As a result, the forms of ecological consciousness that arise from sharing a common world have no reason to be realised.

The problem of the auto-affective self's relation to others is, however, one that in Grégori Jean's words, 'n'a cessé, du début à la fin de son itinéraire philosophique, de hanter Michel Henry' (2011: 18). And yet, in his published work before the late 'christological trilogy' (Henry, 1996, 2000, 2002), Henry barely addresses the topic of intersubjectivity in his writing, save briefly in his earlier works and in notes that remained unpublished until after his death.¹⁵ Jean, who offers a perceptive analysis of the encounter with the other as described in Henry's notes and later works, proposes that the problem of the other might be rendered moot as, ontologically, there is for Henry no distinction between self and other in our fundamental experience of ipseity. In his words,

'Ontologiquement' en effet, il n'y a pas à proprement parler d'expérience d'autrui, car il n'y a pas plus autrui que moi-même en tant que j'en serais distinct, mais le fait même d'être soi, comme forme pure de la phénoménalité et condition de tout moi concevable, en vertu de laquelle nous sommes tous deux ce que nous sommes, quel que soit le 'contenu' de cette 'forme' ou les 'modalités existentielles' de ce 'fond': il y a plusieurs soi, mais une seule ipséité, une seule manière, un seul mode phénoménologique d'être donné à soi comme soi. Or si 'l'expérience métaphysique d'autrui' par laquelle les ego transcendants 'se touchent' n'est finalement rien d'autre que l'expérience de cette même ipséité — c'est-à-dire, phénoménologiquement, du 'fait d'être soi' caractéristique de tout 'vivre' — alors je n'ai pas besoin de rencontrer autrui pour savoir ce qu'il est en son 'Fond'. (Jean, 2013: 57)¹⁶

Jean suggests that speaking in terms of an 'other' for Henry is a misnomer, as our shared experience of fundamental phenomenality means that we already share the same ontology, which is that of Life (which by this later stage of his thought is explicitly equated with God¹⁷) as expressed through auto-affective life. Knowledge of the other, in the deepest sense, takes place before any encounter with them in the extensional world. Subjecthood, in this model, is then both homogeneous and heterogeneous, allowing auto-affection to constitute part of a parallel, unified singularity with all other humans. We know the 'fond' of others through our shared auto-affective experience of ipseity that is Life.

While we might recognise that, within the framework of Henry's thought, this is an ingenious solution to the problem of the other, and might further note the vitalist overlap between this model and the concept of the individual self dissolving into a shared vibrant materiality we find in Bonnefoy, we might also allow that the practical and political consequences of this position might not be entirely satisfying. Whatever our common ontological ground, the experience of otherness in the extensional world is ethically fraught, and it is precisely the non-equivalence between self and other that allows for, indeed requires, that other ways of being in the world which differ from my own should not be absorbed into my own.¹⁸ And further, the equation of Life with a Christian God struggles to account for those others whose religious faith or belief systems are radically different from Henry's, unless by asserting that their beliefs were misplaced.¹⁹ The avowedly secular character of Bonnefoy's presence, for example, would be incompatible with Henry's Life, both in that they differ on the existence of God, and in that Henry's model of selfhood does not, in most interpretations, extend to non-human life and the material world.²⁰ This being said, in carving out his conception of selfhood, Henry, rather than denying an exterior world peopled by embodied others, suggests that our access to that world does not occur on the same ontological plane that constitutes the subject. In much the same way that he does not deny Husserlian intentionality, but rather questions its primacy, Henry's thought allows for a system that is adjunct to auto-affection and which permits the experience of others in the extensional world. The two processes perhaps need not be achieved in one movement, and so we might allow that these two perspectives on encountering otherness occur on two levels of appearing, albeit while the nature of the transfer from one level to another remains opaque.

In foregrounding the difference between Henry's and Bonnefoy's philosophies, I have so far underplayed that there are more similarities between Henryian life and Bonnefoyian presence that might at first be apparent. The essence of intersubjective encounters is for both thinkers premised on a tension between an individuated subject's sometimes troubled assimilation into a unified state of oneness. Bonnefoy has described the ambition in his poetry to reunite the 'I' of spoken language with 'la véritable substance, laquelle n'est pas la matière, infiniment divisible,

mais l'Un, mais l'expérience de l'Un' (Bonnefoy, 1993: 94–95).²¹ This goal, in McLaughlin's words, is striven towards relationally, as all subjects 'exist alongside other beings', with whom we make sense of the world through 'acts of touching, speaking, listening, or writing, through the continual reverberations that occur between linguistic, embodied, and material forces' (2020: 9). In order for his poetry to open out towards others, and through that to the oneness of presence, Bonnefoy develops a poetics that aspires to a shared state of being between reader/listener and writer, having participated 'dans cet instant et par sympathie, de l'existence de l'autre' (1990: 139). Henry, for his part, also thinks that art might mediate between self and other in similar terms. For Henry, 'celui qui regarde une forme éprouve le même pathos que celui qui l'a conçue [...] dans une sorte de symbiose pathétique', and so the gap between self and other might be effaced (2004a: 307). As in his model of self-other relations through a shared experience of Life, here an artwork's form provides an ontological hinge between the auto-affective subject and the lives of others. Both thinkers believe that the foundation of intersubjective experience, which in my understanding would be a precondition of an ecopolitics based on a mutual ethical responsibility to sustain the world, will always evince a tension between the 'I' – whether that of spoken language or of auto-affectivité – and a wider collective. Before turning to an engagement with existing ecocritical readings of their work, it is important to bear this tense relationship between subject and world in mind.

There are at present relatively few studies bringing either Bonnefoy or Henry into dialogue with ecocritical concerns, but this framing both illuminates their work and reveals points of discord between strands of contemporary ecocriticism.²² Henry has received more ecocritical attention than Bonnefoy, although attempts to do so often require pushing the consequences of his thought beyond, or even away from, what is most often found in his writings. Henry often strongly distinguishes between, and indeed prioritises, human life over both other lifeforms and the inanimate world. As he puts it, '... an abyss separates forever the material bodies that fill the universe, on the one hand, and the body of an "incarnate" being such as man [a man!], on the other' (Henry, 2015: 3). Although Henry does not address the question of animal life except in passing, as Christina M. Gschwandtner observes, animals are, when not excluded, ignored: 'Honeybees, apparently, are not truly "alive". Sentient animals [...] do not appear on Henry's radar screen' and so "'Living beings" for Henry, are humans, not animals or plants or ecosystems' (2012: 126, 125). While other entities might have worldly bodies, only humans are of divine flesh. This anthropocentrism seems to diminish the ecocritical purchase of Henry's thought, but as Gschwandtner observes, Henry's concept of auto-affectivity could be extended to non-human animals if we are prepared to grant them a shared experience of pathos. If we allow that animals, too, experience themselves in a dialectic of suffering and joy, this gesture could foster an environmental ethics based on our shared participation in Life (Gschwandtner, 2012: 126). The political advantage gained by this way of thinking is that while some accounts of our enmeshment with the world rest on a 'reduction of humans to biology or ecology' – we are lowered, as it were, to the status of other lifeforms – an extension of Henry's thought allows for nonhuman others to be elevated, and so to 'participate from the first in [L]ife' (Gschwandtner, 2012: 129). The possibility of extending Life to non-human beings is also discussed by François-David Sebbah, whose 'bonne nouvelle henryenne pour les animaux', is that, albeit implicitly, Henry's thought might not foreclose animals from participation in Life (2013: 310).²³ However, as Sebbah further notes, this comes with some important caveats. If 'vivre c'est souffrir et jouir, pouvoir et agir, alors sans doute les animaux sont-ils bien des individus vivants dans le texte henryen', however, if 'vivre devient expérimenter l'auto-engendrement de la Vie absolue comme moi-même, selon la possibilité archétypale « inaugurée » par le premier vivant, le Christ', then man alone participates in Life (2013: 310). Henry's writings are, then, at best indifferent to the question of non-human life, and at times positively dismissive of it and of the material world. Analysis in these terms demands extending Henry's thought in directions he did not pursue, but if we allow this extension, it brings with it the possibility of more ethical human-animal relations.

The ecocritical affordances of Bonnefoy's poetry have mainly been explored through their overlap with New Materialist thought, and Bonnefoy's poetics offer a useful counterpoint to New Materialism's often celebratory account of subjective undoing.²⁴ As described by McLaughlin, New Materialist critics such as Timothy Morton and Karen Barad have theorized the relationship between human and nonhuman agents as fundamentally reciprocal and

distributed (McLaughlin, 2017). Take, for example, Morton's proposal that the 'ecological thought' is a 'vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise', or Barad's, which goes further in challenging even the 'presumed inherent separability of subject and object, nature and culture, [...] human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic [...]' (Barad, 2007: 381; Morton, 2010: 8). Morton's 'radical intimacy' implies the not-I's closeness with, but nevertheless separation from, the subject, while Barad proposes a more radically synthetic, relational otology of simultaneous becoming. What emerges in Bonnefoy's poetry is a position pulled between Baradian subsumption and the Mortonian mesh. Bonnefoy's poetry longs for a world in which the relationships between things, in Yvon Inizan's words, do not emerge as 'comme surajoutées, mais comme comprises dans l'être de l'objet lui-même' (2013: 83), but that desire is constantly suspended through acts of language which attest to, albeit while trying to undo, the lyric subject's separateness from that totality. Barad's radical idea – that relationship is constitutive of being rather than supplementary to it or imposed upon it by intentional acts of consciousness – leads McLaughlin to suggest that for Bonnefoy, 'sense is not the structure of relation disclosed by human consciousness but [it is rather] the structure of relation that allows for human consciousness to be disclosed' (2020: 20). In other words, the ontological ground is not made of things, between which there are relations, but rather relation itself constitutes the primary ontological stratum. However, this state is less often achieved than dangled before us as a productively unrealisable object of desire. While Morton and Barad seem to celebrate the subject's dissolution or enmeshment with the natural world, Bonnefoy offers a more frictional relationship with the self's undoing. The broadly lyric poetry Bonnefoy writes shows that subject torn between crisis and bliss at its own undoing. This tension between the making and unmaking of lyric subjecthood calls out for the subject's oneness with nature while sustaining a rhetorical distance from it.

Both models – the troubled dissolution of the human into an intra-active nature for Bonnefoy, and the strained distinction between essential human subjecthood and the extensional world they inhabit for Henry – bring into focus a political fracture within ecocriticism which can usefully inform my reading of these two writers' ecocritical affordances. This can most clearly be seen by contrasting the positions of Morton and Barad outlined above with a more activist strain of ecocriticism. Andreas Malm, unlike his New Materialist interlocutors, insists that the distinction between humans and nature must be upheld, as without it the basis for attributing agency and so responsibility for climate change will be undermined. In Malm's analysis, while some ecocritics have depicted nature as a human construct,²⁵ and others have proposed the hybridisation of humans and nature – as is the case for Morton and Barad in the passages I cite above – he insists that '[n]ature is real; nature and society form a unity of opposites; [...] agency cannot be found in inanimate matter [...] these are some of the necessary premises for an activist theory' (2018: 156). For Malm, this distinction is fundamentally 'about recovering the theoretical basis for ecological militancy', and while we might allow that the means and goals of the activist are not necessarily those of the poet and philosopher, the value of his distinction is clear (2018: 19). To this extent, Henry's bracketing of human life as distinct and unique might better allow this distinction to be upheld. However, the distinction Henry makes between the flesh of auto-affectation and the body of worldly action might come at the cost of his concept of selfhood's applicability to a practical ecological politics. Henry's foundational concept of the auto-affective self strains against a theory of intention and indeed puts into question the very need for an extensional world. Bonnefoy's poetry, by contrast, strives towards oneness with nature and so opens itself to Malm's criticism that insufficient discrimination between human and non-human forms of agency may obscure our uniquely agential role as climatic actors. This is mitigated to some extent by the tension in his verse between the implied 'I' of the lyric subject and the desire for that subject's undoing, but the desire for subjective dissolution erodes the agential clarity of Malm's model. This precision is essential in the context of human-induced global heating, which increases the incidence of droughts and wildfires such as those with which I began this article. In other words, while Henry's and Bonnefoy's models might – if we are prepared to accept their axiomatic aspects – be descriptively persuasive, they may foreclose more immediate forms of direct eco-agency and responsibility.

Further, while Bonnefoy's model allows for an epiphanic and fundamentally syncretic experience of the natural world, in so doing it may also underplay the already politicised dimension of

actually existing nature. One aspect of this depoliticization, as Sylvie Gazagne notes, is that ‘[l]a terre du simple et la radieuse agapé ont bien du mal à ne pas se confondre avec un retrait du monde, avec un non-engagement social’, asking pointedly: ‘comment concilier combat politique pour les valeurs et absences “d’affairesments”?’ (2003: 296). The idea of a ‘terre du simple’ inhibits the realisation that nature is not a neutral forum for human epiphany so much as a space that, while allowing such experiences, is also riven by historical change and political interest. Moreover, while nature can be the site of an ‘intimité’ between the self and nature’s ‘arbres, pierres, montagnes’, this downplays the aspect of nature that is indifferent to, even hostile to, human presence (Bonnefoy, 1990: 58). An example of the political risks presence entails can be seen by considering the reception of Bonnefoy’s poem ‘Hopkins Forest’, and by reframing that reception in somewhat different terms. The poem, written when Bonnefoy was living in New England, and published in *Début et fin de la neige* (1991), unfurls across five stanzas, in which the speaker recounts memories and experiences, each of which contains the flare of a small epiphany, leading to the final stanza in which we are offered a possible experience of presence, as the speaker’s selfhood seems to dissolve: ‘Je m’arrête, je crois que ce sol s’ouvre/À l’infini [...] j’entre pour un instant dans la grande neige’ (Bonnefoy, 1991: 135). In McLaughlin’s virtuosic reading of this poem, she observes that ‘the immersive gaze that Bonnefoy dramatizes here can be seen to foster an ecological practice of thinking’ (2017: 360). Certainly this is the case, with that practice taking the form of a destabilizing and de-centring dissolution of selfhood, which melts into a reverberating state of oneness with the extensional world. We should bear in mind, however, Malm’s warning that this practice of thinking, while clearly desirable in the sense of attachment with the world it fosters, entails consequences for understanding humans as unique actors. Bonnefoy’s poem, I might add, seems to foresee this difficulty in its repetition of ‘je’, even as that speaking position unravels.

Additionally, New Materialism perhaps occludes more pointedly historical materialist lines of ecocritical enquiry. Bonnefoy wrote ‘Hopkins Forest’ after spending time in the Hopkins Memorial Forest, a site which, according to its page on the Williams College website, is a ‘2600 acre (1040 ha) reserve in Massachusetts, New York and Vermont’ (*Hopkins Memorial Forest*, n.d.). It houses the Williams College Zilkha Center for the Environment (ZCE), which monitors the forest and facilitates research and sustainable leisure activities. At the bottom of the Hopkins Forest webpage is a ‘Land Acknowledgment’:

We respectfully acknowledge that Hopkins Forest stands on the ancestral homelands of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans, who are the indigenous peoples of this region. Following tremendous hardship after being forced from their valued homelands, they continued as a sovereign Tribal Nation in Wisconsin, where they reside today. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present, as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all. (*Hopkins Memorial Forest*, n.d.)

This dimension of the forest’s history, strangely absent from the ‘History’ section of the site, can orient us towards the risks of perceiving nature in either the scientific terms of the ZCE – ones that Henry, at least, would likely resist – or as a site for the kind of epiphanic aesthetic experience that characterises Bonnefoy’s poetry. I say this not to diminish the importance of the centre’s worthy work, nor to question the sincerity of their acknowledgment, nor even to diminish Bonnefoy’s poetic project, which is in no way obliged to be answerable to questions of this kind. Rather, I hope that it might introduce a dialectical counterpoint to experiences of presence in which they might be juxtaposed with the political valency of the actual landscape being experienced. This model would allow for an interrogation of the radical dissolution of the self, but without placing under erasure an awareness of land as its own site of symbolic and material struggle.

Both Bonnefoy’s presence and Henry’s life create pathways, side roads, and even dead ends for ecocritical thought. Bonnefoy’s conception results in humans, non-humans, and the material world becoming sometimes frictional co-producers of a relational ontology; Henry’s portrays individual human lives as transcended by an absolute form of Life, and our shared participation in it might imply a form of pre-political ontological community. Both models afford, in Dings’s terms, a strong positive valence and sense of mineness, but offer less force, or urgency, to act. If we understand Bonnefoy’s ontology as relational, it permits us to conceive of ourselves as fundamentally *of* the world and so would foster a love for it and a desire to protect it. However,

this may be read as resting on a depoliticised idea of ‘nature’, and further, the dissolution of the human into a reverberating nature risks de-emphasising the unique role of humans as environmental agents. If there is no ‘I’ that precedes a relation to the world, the disproportionate harm that humans *in particular* cause is obscured. This problem is implicitly mitigated in his poetics by the generic tradition in which he writes: a lyric poetry that offers a site of struggle between an indissoluble ‘I’ and the self’s undoing. In Henry’s thought, auto-affective selfhood precedes the exterior world, implying a form of subjectivity in which humans are separate from other forms of life and from the nonhuman world. This distinction might overcome some of the problems raised by Bonnefoy’s soluble selfhood but leaves unanswered why humans should be concerned with the non-human at all. While humans experience a vital, auto-affective selfhood, ‘[l]a pierre, par exemple, ne s’éprouve pas soi-même, on dit que c’est une chose. La terre, la mer, les étoiles sont des choses. Les plantes, les arbres, les végétaux en général sont également des choses [...]’ (1987: 115). His philosophy’s prioritisation of the human and foundational self-referentiality relegate the exterior world to a position of near irrelevance, and unless his thought is extended, it risks anthropocentrism at best, and a radical hermeticism of the individual subject at worst. Henry’s model then requires considerable extension to be read in ecocritical terms, but if we do so it allows a distance between humans and their environment that could foreground our unique role in causing ecological harm. Henry’s foundational model of selfhood provides the distance between self and world that avoids effacing the subject as a (pre-)political actor, but risks rendering the world an adjunct to auto-affective selfhood, posing problems for intersubjective relations, and, in its own ‘retrait du monde’, for the need for an extensional world *tout court*.

In the epigraphs to this article, Henry confesses that ‘je ne comprends pas pourquoi il y a un monde’, while Bonnefoy makes a plea that hovers between a subjunctive hypothetical and an optative wish: ‘Que ce monde demeure !’ (Bonnefoy, 2001: 25; Caruana & Henry, 2000). These statements illustrate the central divergence between their projects, in which Henry bores ever-deeper into the subject’s substrate while occluding the extensional world and Bonnefoy wills the subject to be bound to the world and by the same gesture disambiguates subjecthood from it. The tension in these statements between self, world, and environment allows a better understanding of the ecocritical affordances of their projects, and exemplifies a fracture in contemporary ecocriticism between desiring the subject’s dissolution into nature and demanding that the difference between the two be upheld. The world, for now, abides, but its continuation will depend on a frank interrogation of how we conceive of ourselves as subjects in, and subject to, our environment.

NOTES

1 In his later work, Henry differentiates between ‘la Vie’ and ‘la vie’, with, in Eric Rohde’s words ‘l’une, celle de la Vie absolue génératrice du Soi, l’autre générée par chaque Soi en son sein propre.’ (Rohde, 2011: 200)

2 Bonnefoy’s presence is often read as a mode of Heraclitean constant flux, including that idea’s neo-Platonic adaptation by Plotinus. The difficulty for Bonnefoy, a self-declared atheist, negotiates in sustaining this state as non-metaphysical is evident in the invocation of a ‘Dieu qui n’es pas’ in the following paragraph. For more, see (Aubry, 2007; Gazagne, 2003; Jossua, 1990).

3 For more on the possible internal contradictions of Bonnefoy’s theory of presence, see (Dickow, 2015, pp. 158–160).

4 For more on this aspect of Bonnefoy’s conception on language, see (Madeleine-Pedrillat, 2023, pp. xli–xlii; Née, 2023, p. 148).

5 For more on these strands of French poetics, see (Hochman, 2002: 129; Naughton, 1989).

6 See also Henry: ‘Dans l’immanence il n’y a pas de prise de conscience, mais l’épreuve de soi se modifie, elle s’approfondit, et c’est seulement dans cet approfondissement immanent que le changement se produit, exactement sur le plan de la vie.’ Caruana and Henry, ‘Entretien avec Michel Henry’.

7 We might think here also of his lines from ‘Une Pierre’ (2001) in *Les planches Courbes*: ‘Passant, ce sont des mots. Mais plutôt que lire/Je veux que tu écoutes : cette frêle/Voix comme en ont les lettres qu l’herbe mange.’ (Bonnefoy, 2023b, p. 708)

8 There is an additional complication here which I cannot explore in detail, namely that I have access to a recording rather than a living voice. However, the effect of the voice on the extra-corporal world remains similar, and moreover, the digital legacy of Bonnefoy’s living voice enriches the poem’s concern for the tug between a timeless ideal and the play of transience.

9 The alignment of prose with thought and poetry with feeling is relatively recent; verse has long been associated with conceptual thought. See (Jarvis, 2012; Kertzer, 1988).

10 See (Lavigne, 2007, pp. 27–28).

11 Even as early as the 1965 *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, he proposes an absolute split between them. See (Henry, 2011, pp. 182–185).

12 For an elaboration of this idea, see (Lind, 2022) For an argument against this possibility, see (Rogozinski, 2002).

13 For an extended critique of how Henry's phenomenology may be founded on an act of faith rather than on phenomenological principles, see (Gibert, 2013).

14 I refer here to *hylè* in the Henryian sense of raw data that is not subordinated to intentionality.

15 For a special issue devoted to these unpublished works, see (Leclercq, 2011).

16 Emphasis in original.

17 Cf: 'Dieu est Vie, il est l'essence de la Vie [...] l'essence de la vie est Dieu.' (Henry, 1996: 40)

18 The most famous statement of this argument is probably Ludwig Wittgenstein's aphoristic: 'My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul.' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 178)

19 Gschwandtner offers a more accommodating perspective: '[Henry's] dismissal of other faiths is not central to his argument and may be due more to a narrow view of religion rooted in his specific situation in France than to an active opposition to other religious traditions. Galilean science and secular humanism are the enemies, not Islam or Hinduism or any other religion.' (Gschwandtner, 2014)

20 I address some exceptions to this later in the article.

21 As Michael Brophy notes, Bonnefoy is here discussing drawings by Alexandre Hollan, but is doing so to also reflect on his own poetic practice. See (Bonnefoy, 1993, pp. 94–95; Brophy, 2002).

22 The most pertinent I have found are (Gschwandtner, 2012; Lind, 2022; Mallet, 2022; McLaughlin, 2017; Sebbah, 2013; Van Rogger-Andreucci, 1996).

23 These ideas are elaborated explored further in (Mallet, 2022, pp. 469–476).

24 See (McLaughlin, 2017).

25 In support, he cites among others Donna Haraway's claim that nature is 'a powerful discursive construction [...] a trope. It is figure, construction, artefact, movement, displacement. Nature cannot pre-exist its construction.' (1992, pp. 296–298)

COMPETING INTERESTS

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