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Géographicité, material agency and the thickness of the Earth : rediscovering Eric Dardel beyond 'nature/culture' dualisms

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Abstract

This paper reassesses and rediscovers the intellectual legacy of French geographer Eric Dardel (1899–1967). First discovered by geographers in the 1970s and 1980s, Dardel's book *L'Homme et la Terre* was considered as a work predating alternatively humanistic approaches and postmodern critiques of positivism, which justifies why it passed substantially unperceived when it was first published in 1952. Yet, most of these authors have manifestly only read that book despite Dardel's production was much larger, labelling Dardel as a 'phenomenologist' in a quite reductive way. Drawing upon recent literature on material agency and on phenomenology/post-phenomenology in geography, and based on the analysis of Dardel's complete body of work, I argue that the contribution of the French geographer cannot be reduced to matters of phenomenology and subjective perception. To this end, I especially focus on Dardel's references to the 19th-century tradition of *Naturphilosophie* that argued for a consubstantiality of 'humankind' and 'nature'. Hence, I show how Dardel's willingness to take seriously the materiality and agency of 'the Earth' through his notion of *géographicité* [geographicity or geographicalness] can give new and original insights to current geographies dealing with materiality, affect, human-nature hybridity and relational ontologies. Questioning dualisms such as humankind/nature, subject/object and nature/culture, early geographical understandings of the planet as a complex living being can foster the relevance of geography for both the 'material turn' advocating for plural agencies and for critical debates denying the principle of human supremacy over the planet.

Keywords

affect, materiality, myth, *Naturphilosophie*, (post)phenomenology

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Géographicité, material agency and the thickness of the Earth: rediscovering Eric Dardel beyond ‘nature/culture’ dualisms

Abstract: This paper reassesses and rediscovers the intellectual legacy of French geographer Eric Dardel (1899-1967). First discovered by geographers in the 1970s and 1980s, Dardel’s book L’Homme et la Terre was considered as a work predating alternatively humanistic approaches and postmodern critiques of positivism, which justifies why it passed substantially unperceived when it was first published in 1952. Yet, most of these authors have manifestly only read that book despite Dardel’s production was much larger, labelling Dardel as a ‘phenomenologist’ in a quite reductive way. Drawing upon recent literature on material agency and on phenomenology/post-phenomenology in geography, and based on the analysis of Dardel’s complete body of work, I argue that the contribution of the French geographer cannot be reduced to matters of phenomenology and subjective perception. To this end, I especially focus on Dardel’s references to the nineteenth-century tradition of Naturphilosophie that argued for a consubstantiality of ‘humankind’ and ‘nature’. Hence, I show how Dardel’s willingness to take seriously the materiality and agency of ‘the Earth’ through his notion of géographicité [geographicity or geographicalness] can give new and original insights to current geographies dealing with materiality, affect, human-nature hybridity and relational ontologies. Questioning dualisms such as humankind/nature, subject/object and nature/culture, early geographical understandings of the planet as a complex living being can foster the relevance of geography for both the ‘material turn’ advocating for plural agencies and for critical debates denying the principle of human supremacy over the planet.

Keywords: *Naturphilosophie*; (Post)Phenomenology; Affect; Myth; Materiality

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This paper critically addresses and substantially rethinks the contribution of a neglected scholar, French geographer Eric Dardel (1899-1967). Never translated into English,¹ his 1952 book *L'Homme et la Terre* (hereafter HT) was rediscovered for a while by humanistic geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and Anne Buttimer, and by poststructuralist geographers such as Claude Raffestin and Jean-Marc Besse in French-speaking scholarship. After that, it was quickly forgotten again. Indeed, between the 1970s and the 1980s, the earliest 'discovery' of Dardel was based on assumptions that his ideas variously predated phenomenological geographies, and later postmodern and post-structuralist approaches, challenging positivism. When these 'fashions' began to fade, and phenomenology was overtaken by post-phenomenological and post-humanistic geographies,² it seemed that there was no longer the need to interrogate Dardel's works. Additionally, the lack of English translations has arguably contributed to their neglecting in a scholarly world that tends to exclude products that do not fit linguistic and academic dominant canons, hindering the circulation of alternative theories as discussed by authors such as Benedikt Korf.³ Thus, rediscovering Dardel is also a contribution to what Martin Müller has recently defined the decolonial need of 'worlding' geography beyond such barriers.⁴

Born in Geneva to a Protestant Minister with French passport and Swiss origins and to the daughter of Alsatian refugees in France, Dardel was familiar with both French and German cultures and with Protestantism.⁵ His biography was relatively uneventful in relation to other French geographers of his generation who took variously part to the traumas of the two world wars and related political clashes.⁶ To be meticulous, the very definition of Dardel as a 'geographer' could be contested, as he was a secondary teacher (*agrégé*) in history and geography and spent most of his career as the director of a high-school, without ever occupying

¹ A partial translation recently appeared in the *Academia.edu* page of Edward Relph, but there is still no formal publication of this text https://www.academia.edu/78337342/Eric_Dardel_Man_and_the_Earth_the_nature_of_geographical_reality

² J.Ash, and P.Simpson, 'Geography and Post-phenomenology', *Progress in Human Geography*, 40, 2016, 48-66; N. Williams, M. Patchett, A. Lapworth, T. Roberts and T. Keating, 'Practising post-humanism in geographical research'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44, 2019, 637-643.

³ B. Korf, 'German Theory'. *EPD: Society and Space* 39(5) 2021, 925-944.

⁴ M. Müller, 'Worlding geography: From linguistic privilege to decolonial anywhere'. *Progress in Human Geography* 45(6) 2021, 1440-1466.

⁵ J. Dardel, 'Eric Dardel, biographie', in E.Dardel, *Ecrits d'un monde entier* (Geneva:Héros-limite, 2014), 28-32.

⁶ N. Ginsburger, M.C.Robic and J.L.Tissier (eds.), *Géographes français en Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Paris:Editions de la Sorbonne, 2021).

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any academic post. Yet, in 1941, he discussed a PhD thesis on the herring fisheries in Western France that Philippe Pinchemel considered to ‘belong both to history and geography’,⁷ as this work revealed an early attention to materiality and a transdisciplinary posture across historical and geographical approaches.⁸

According to Pinchemel, Dardel considered the descriptive and positivistic frameworks of French geography as too narrow for his intellectual curiosity as ‘a philosopher, and humanist,’⁹ attracted by a wide spectrum of themes from geography, history, anthropology and religious studies. A praiseworthy anthology edited by Alexandre Chollier and Eric Waddell¹⁰ reports an impressive bibliography showing the breadth of Dardel’s interests, which exposes the need to address his full contribution and its historical, biographical and cultural contexts rather than only focusing on HT as a sort of isolated masterpiece as most commentators did.

It is worth noting that Dardel’s most important professional experience as Principal of the Montmorency High-School from 1945 to 1965 took place within an ‘experimental school’.¹¹ An example of alternative education, this ‘pilot Lyceum’ was managed according to principles of ‘freedom’ and ‘self-discipline’ following Dardel’s principle that ‘education should prevail over instruction’.¹² Dardel co-founded that institute with Gustave Monod, a pedagogue who took part in French Resistance and co-signed the ‘Manifesto of the 121’ to assert the right of conscientious objection during the Algeria War (1954-1962). Therefore, these contexts allow for locating the Montmorency Lycée in the field of political progressivism.

Based on a detailed analysis of Dardel’s production and of its contexts and places, I contend that reading Dardel as merely and unproblematically ‘a phenomenologist’ was a limitation to be remediated through renewed engagement with his work. By going ‘beyond dualisms’, I refer to the broad consensus currently existing in scholarly debates on the need to overtake dichotomies between ‘humankind’ and ‘Earth’, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘subject’ and ‘object’.

⁷ P. Pinchemel, ‘Biographie d’Eric Dardel’, in E. Dardel, *L’Homme et la terre* (Paris:CTHS, 1990), 178.

⁸ E.Dardel, *Les pêches maritimes* (Paris:PUF, 1941).

⁹ Pinchemel, ‘Biographie’, 179.

¹⁰ E. Dardel, *Ecrits d’un monde entier* (Geneva:Héros-limite, 2014).

¹¹ Pinchemel, ‘Biographie’, 177.

¹² J. Dardel, ‘Eric Dardel’, 31.

First inspired by actor-network theory (ANT), hybridity and more-than-human approaches¹³ and later by wider debates on the Anthropocene, the ‘material turn’ and relational ontologies,¹⁴ geographers are variously questioning what Kathryn Yusoff calls the ‘division of matter into nonlife and life’.¹⁵

My argument is twofold. First, anticipating some features of the debates mentioned above, Dardel’s work can contribute to question and problematize the aforementioned dualisms by exposing the urgent need to historicize the elementality of geographical thinking, for enhancing geography’s relevance in these conversations. While most geographers would subscribe what Kevin Grove defines ‘the materialist affirmation that the human and nonhuman share ... a common “flesh” rooted in the Earth’,¹⁶ authors such as Sue Ruddick stress the difficulties of thinking accordingly ‘our ethical engagements in planetary terms’.¹⁷ They problematize irenic views of human/nonhuman relationalities and affects, in the light of the numerous conflicts and negative interactions between human and non-human actions, including violence embedded in class, gender and race oppression.¹⁸

Dardel’s work can speak to current scholarship that discusses genealogies of ‘geosocial formations’ underlining Anthropocene anxieties. According to Clark and Yosuff: ‘For at least two centuries most social thought has taken the Earth to be the stable platform upon which dynamic social processes play out. Both climate change and the Anthropocene thesis ... are now provoking social thinkers into closer engagement with earth science’.¹⁹ Yet, several of these points were addressed in the tradition of nineteenth-century *Naturphilosophie*, the same from which Dardel took explicitly inspiration. For instance, recent literature discusses

¹³ B. Latour, *Science in action. How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. (Milton Keynes:Open University Press, 1987); S.Whatmore, ‘Materialist returns: practicing cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world’, *cultural geographies* 13, 2006, 600-609.

¹⁴ D. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham:Duke University Press, 2016); S. Ruddick. ‘Rethinking the subject, reimagining worlds’ *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7, 2017, 119–139.

¹⁵ K. Yusoff, *A Billion black Anthropocenes or none* (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁶ K. Grove, ‘Islands of (in)security in the Anthropocene’, *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2021, 435.

¹⁷ Ruddick, ‘Rethinking’, 121.

¹⁸ N. Clark and L. Rickards, ‘An Anthropocene species of trouble? Negative synergies between Earth system change and geological de-stratification’, *The Anthropocene Review* 9, 2022, 425-442.

¹⁹ N. Clark and K. Yusoff, ‘Geosocial formations and the Anthropocene’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34, 2017, 3.

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Spinoza's concepts such as 'vital forces'²⁰ and the Earth as a 'composite individual'²¹ to make sense of dynamic becomings. All these notions can be easily traced in works of nineteenth-century geographers inspired by *Naturphilosophie* such as Ritter and Reclus.²² As Dardel's work exemplifies, in geographical traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were lines of non-dualistic thought that should not be neglected if we wish to understand the current potentialities of geography.

Second, Dardel's intellectual legacy reinforces constructive dialogues between phenomenological and post-phenomenological/post-humanistic views,²³ through Dardel's notion of *géographicité* (geographicalness, or geographicity)²⁴ of human beings, expressing their complex, affective and not unidirectional relationality with 'earthly forces'. This includes considering the active qualities of the Earth itself including its 'thickness', that is the chthonic dimensions later popularised by Donna Haraway's works on the Chthulucene. In Dardel's work, terrestrial materialities exert relationally their agency, which relativises and destabilises human roles in original and potentially unexpected ways.

In the first part, I discuss current scholarly trends variously overtaking 'dualisms', as well as renewed conversations between phenomenology and post-phenomenology, to stress the relevance of Dardel's work in these discussions. In the second part, I address Dardel's notions of 'geographical space' and *géographicité* in the light of their rediscovery and late abandonment in international (Anglophone, Lusophone, Francophone and Italoophone) geographical scholarship. In the third part, I discuss Dardel's ideas on the relations between history, geography and myth, highlighting their potential for nourishing current debates.

²⁰ Ruddick, 'Rethinking', 121.

²¹ Ruddick, 'Rethinking', 128.

²² F. Ferretti, 'Anarchism, Geo-History and the origins of the *Annales*: rethinking Elisée Reclus's influence on Lucien Febvre', *Environment and Planning D - Society and Space* 33, 2015, 347-365; G. Nicolas-Obadia, 'Introduction, in C. Ritter, *Introduction à la Géographie Générale Comparée* (Paris:Les Belles Lettres, 1974); C. Tang, *The geographic imagination of modernity: geography, literature, and philosophy in German romanticism* (Stanford:Stanford University Press, 2008).

²³ K. Simonsen, 'In quest of a new humanism: Embodiment, experience and phenomenology as critical geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 37, 2013, 10-26.

²⁴ Given the impossibility of finding an English translation which fully expresses the idea of *géographicité*, this notion is mentioned through the original French word all along this paper. Textual citations from works in French have been translated by the author. The term that Dardel used to identify humankind, 'homme', has been translated as 'man' in textual citations and should be evidently contextualized in a historical period in which notions of inclusive language as we conceive them today did not yet exist.

1. Between materiality and (post)phenomenology

From Naturphilosophie to the 'material turn'

Thanks to his familiarity with both French and German philosophical traditions, Dardel assimilated ideas of human-nature consubstantiality from German *Naturphilosophie* that had been quite common among nineteenth century's geographers as an alternative to Kantianism.²⁵ This tradition was later overtaken by modernistic and positivistic ideas of human supremacy and primacy of 'culture' over 'nature', implying what David Livingstone defines a 'chasm between world and mind'.²⁶ According to Chenxi Tang, *Naturphilosophie* strongly impacted geography when 'the followers of [Friedrich] Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, Humboldt and Ritter [launched] modern human geography addressing the complex ways in which a human being is shaped by terrestrial nature'.²⁷ Applying Spinoza's notion of 'system of forces' to human-nature relations, *Naturphilosophie* thinkers concluded to 'an unbroken continuity between terrestrial nature and human culture'²⁸ and consequently 'the unity of subject and object'.²⁹ These concepts exerted a strong influence on French-speaking geography³⁰ and were famously relaunched by Elisée Reclus.³¹

Now, some geographers claim for the rediscovery of authors such as Humboldt, Reclus and Kropotkin as inspirers of critical Anthropocene debates questioning human supremacy, by arguing that these debates: 'Build on insights posed by geographers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: unity of nature, humans as nature made conscious, humans as nature's conscience'.³² This means exactly that current questionings of human-nature dualisms and claims for material agency were variously predated by these critical geographical traditions.

²⁵ Tang, *The geographic imagination*.

²⁶ D.N. Livingstone, *The geographical tradition* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1993), 116.

²⁷ Tang, *The geographic imagination*, 100.

²⁸ Tang, *The geographic imagination*, 109.

²⁹ Tang, *The geographic imagination*, 112.

³⁰ Y. Le Scanff, L'origine littéraire d'un concept géographique: l'image de la France duelle. *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines*, 5, 2001, 61-93.

³¹ F. Ferretti, and P. Pelletier, 'L'Homme et la Terre, l'aboutissement d'une trilogie', in E. Reclus, *L'Homme et la Terre*, 2015, <https://books.openedition.org/enseditions/5166>

³² T.B. Larsen, and J. Harrington, 'Geographic thought and the Anthropocene: What geographers have said and have to say', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111, 2020, 729.

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As for Dardel, the title of his most famous book was an explicit tribute to Reclus's *L'Homme et la Terre* (1905), where ideas on consubstantiality of 'humankind' and 'nature' were developed since the famous exergue in which Reclus stated that humankind is: 'Nature becoming conscious of itself'.³³ Dardel's idea of knowledge included both the emotional and rational spheres, starting from 'enchantment',³⁴ eventually a component of what Claudio Minca calls the 'bargain' of Humboldt's idea of landscape, providing a liminal space between modernistic rationality and epistemologies in which the subject is immersed in the world.³⁵ Thus, intellectual tools for questioning dualisms were already available in Dardel's intellectual genealogies, including theories such as *Naturphilosophie* that need to be rediscovered.

Recent scholarship investigating the geographies of material worlds seems to be not so far from *Naturphilosophie* concerns. Among others, Engelmann and McCormack discuss the interdisciplinary interest for the 'elements', including (material and metaphorical) 'atmospheres' as notions that question traditional Western philosophies by highlighting 'the transformative agency of anthropogenic activity in relation to the composition of the Earth' as well as 'the limits of this agency'³⁶. These authors argue that: 'Worlds are formed from multiple associations between and attachments across humans and non-humans [which] allows us to avoid privileging either of the latter two terms'.³⁷ Thus, elements plurally interact with (human and non-human) living beings within milieus that are 'layered with culture, society and politics in ways that make those milieus "intra-active, naturalcultural" phenomena'³⁸ in terms of relational ontologies.

Furthermore, Dardel's ideas of living geology and human-nature consubstantiality can foster dialogues with current notions of affect that include non-human agency.³⁹ In Dardel's work, living earthly forces exert multiple effects on humans, who are often described as: 'Taken by

³³ E. Reclus, *L'Homme et la Terre*, vol. 1 (Paris:Librairie universelle, 1905), 1.

³⁴ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 108.

³⁵ C. Minca, 'Humboldt's compromise, or the forgotten geographies of landscape' *Progress in Human Geography*, 31, 2007, 179-193.

³⁶ S. Engelmann and D. McCormack, 'Elemental worlds: Specificities, exposures, alchemies', *Progress in Human Geography* 45, 2021, 1420.

³⁷ Engelmann and McCormack, 'Elemental worlds', 1421.

³⁸ Engelmann and McCormack, 'Elemental worlds', 1426.

³⁹ D. McCormack, 'Is ANT capable of tracing spaces of affect?', in A.Blok, I.Farias and C.Roberts (eds.), *The Routledge companion to Actor-Network Theory* (Abingdon:Routledge, 2020).

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the world ... expressing their terror and astonishment [as] it is the world which ... has the initiative'.⁴⁰ Humans can exert voluntary agency but can also be 'disoriented'⁴¹ and overwhelmed by these forces. While this recalls elements of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy as recently discussed by Brazilian scholarship,⁴² notions of more-than-emotional effects of material conditions plurally speak to ideas of affect that are discussed in post-phenomenological and NRT (non-representational-theory) scholarship.

According to Nigel Thrift, affect does not have a stable definition as 'it can mean a lot of different things',⁴³ being open for a plurality of potential connections. Yet: 'In a Spinozan interpretation [affect] refers to complex, self-referential states of being, rather than to their cultural interpretation as emotions'.⁴⁴ Thus, affect is something more than mere relationality, as noted by Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison arguing that: 'The social is affective and it is often through affect that relations are interrupted, changed or solidified'.⁴⁵ This includes both emotional and material conditions.⁴⁶ As Anderson discusses in several papers and in a book dedicated to this concept⁴⁷, affect understood as embodied and relational 'affecting' takes place 'alongside processes of expression and qualification that construct space-times of experience'.⁴⁸ In these spaces, contrasted experiences of hopeful human agency (recalling Dardel's narratives of 'hopeful' humans dealing with earthly forces) interact with spaced and timed feelings that are affected by processes resulting 'in the disclosure of space-time as a sphere of heterogeneities and pluralities'⁴⁹ in the frame of the multiple possibilities that are opened up by unpredictable relational encounters.

⁴⁰ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 265.

⁴¹ E. Dardel, *L'Homme et la terre* (Paris:CTHS, 1990), 17.

⁴² F.C. Nascimento, 'A paisagem como rosto: uma confluência entre Geografia de Dardel e a Filosofia de Lévinas'. *Geosp – Espaço e Tempo* 24(1) 2020, 104-116.

⁴³ N. Thrift, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a spatial politics of affect'. *Geografiska Annaler Series B Human Geography* 86, 2004, 59.

⁴⁴ N. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, politics, affect* (London: Routledge, 2007), 221.

⁴⁵ B. Anderson and P. Harrison, *Taking-place: Non-Representational theories and geography* (London:Routledge 2010), 16-17.

⁴⁶ B. Anderson, 'Becoming and being hopeful: towards a theory of affect', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24, 2006, 733-752 ; P. Harrison, 'Corporeal Remains. Vulnerability, proximity and living-on after the end of the world', *Environment and Planning A* 40, 2008, 423-445.

⁴⁷ B. Anderson, *Encountering affect: Capacities, apparatuses, conditions* (London Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁸ Anderson, 'Becoming', 737.

⁴⁹ Anderson, 'Becoming', 746.

McCormack discusses relations between ANT and affect to address interactions that are not limited to feelings but are expressed by materialities and embodiments. McCormack argues that the issue is not to define how much there is of human or nonhuman in an event, but to think ‘about the human as a fragile achievement sustained by all kinds of circumstantial encounters, relations and forces’.⁵⁰ While the fragility of the individual facing the impressiveness of the world is a notion that was quite familiar to Dardel, McCormack stresses how ANT can contribute to merge different approaches reconsidering human agency. In Dardel’s geography, elements such as air and water are considered as constitutive of ‘geographical space’, being both matter and dynamic agents that plurally affect living beings. Thus, variously applying to both feelings and materialities, affect can contribute to the agenda of connecting phenomenological and post-phenomenological approaches. As I discuss in the next section, this agenda should not neglect precedents such as Dardel.

Reengaging phenomenology and post-phenomenology

Dardel’s ideas of ‘lived history as concrete presence in the world’⁵¹ or ‘lived space’ were generally equated to Heideggerian phenomenological notions of ‘being-in-the-world’. Yet, one can claim that Dardel’s notions such as *géographicité* and *espace géographique* cannot be limited to mere phenomenological concerns with human subjectivity and perception as conceived by most humanistic geographers. First inspired by philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a complex field whose applications to geography are quite contentious,⁵² and it should be noted that even Dardel did not style himself as a phenomenologist. It can be broadly said that geographers first used phenomenology to emphasize the importance of perception and subjectivity in times of positivist hegemony. Then, after the ‘material turn’ inspired by notions such as socionatures and ANT, authors inspired by post-phenomenology and post-humanism lambasted phenomenology for its excessive emphasis on the centrality of the human subject in the construction of knowledge. In association with non-representational theory and notions such as affect and atmospheres, post-

⁵⁰ McCormack, ‘Is ANT capable’, 181.

⁵¹ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 81.

⁵² R. Johnston, and D. Sidaway, *Geography and Geographers* (Abingdon:Routledge, 2016); J. Pickles, *Phenomenology, science and geography* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press), 1985.

phenomenology and post-humanism emphasized material agency, circumstances and the ‘material situatedness’⁵³ of the social sphere, decentring human agency and subjectivity.

Yet, recent scholarship has stressed the continuing links and uncertain frontiers between what is called ‘phenomenology’ and what is called ‘post-phenomenology’, highlighting how the latter still engages with several concepts of the former.⁵⁴ Thus, the idea that there can be plural relations between humans and material worlds, including decentred agencies, is a potential bridge between these contrasted traditions. Respected authors in post-phenomenological geographies such as James Ash and Paul Simpson mention a possible ‘re-engagement with phenomenology through post-phenomenology’,⁵⁵ as post-phenomenology does not mean ‘abandoning the key insights of phenomenology’ but rather ‘refiguring and expanding phenomenology’s analytic and conceptual boundaries’.⁵⁶

Reengagement with phenomenological notions is suggested by recent scholarship addressing empirical cases very close to Dardel’s preoccupations, such as walks and landscapes’ perceptions. Engaging with John Wylie’s works on landscape,⁵⁷ Lynne Pearce wonders on how there can be any provisional fit ‘between self and world’.⁵⁸ In my paper, I extend this literature by showing how Dardel’s works contribute to these dialogues by going beyond phenomenology through *Naturphilosophie*’s relational ideas of ‘humankind’ and ‘nature’, in which the Earth is considered as the only necessary term of any relation as it pre-exists humans. Additionally, Dardel’s ideas of human relations with places should not be confused with conservative notions of dwelling as simple attachment to the native land, because he explicitly defined these relations as ‘love of native soil *or* sake for disorientation’,⁵⁹ far from mere statements of centrality and stability of human subjectivity.

⁵³ Williams et al., ‘Practising post-humanism’, 637.

⁵⁴ F. Ferretti, ‘Travelling in scholarly lifeworlds: new perspectives on (post)humanism, situated subjectivities and agency from a travel diary’. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110, 2020, 1653-1669; M.G. Hepach, ‘Entangled phenomenologies: Reassessing (post-)phenomenology’s promise for human geography’, *Progress in Human Geography* 45, 2021, 1278–1294; L. Pearce, ‘Finding one place in another: post/phenomenology, memory and *déjàvu*’, *Social & Cultural Geography* 24(2), 2023, 195-211.

⁵⁵ Ash, and Simpson, ‘Geography and Post-phenomenology’, 49.

⁵⁶ Ash and Simpson, ‘Geography and Post-phenomenology’, 63.

⁵⁷ J. Wylie, ‘A landscape cannot be a Homeland’, *Landscape Research* 41, 201, 408–416.

⁵⁸ L. Pearce, ‘Finding one place in another: post/phenomenology, memory and *déjàvu*’. *Social & Cultural Geography* 24, 2023, 195.

⁵⁹ E. Dardel, *L’Homme et la terre* (Paris:CTHS, 1990), 1.

Engelmann and McCormack explicitly contend that concepts such as ‘elemental worlds’ originate from ‘phenomenological traditions of thinking’ that were used by geographers before being criticised for their: ‘Inadequacy for dealing with contemporary ecological problems whose scale vastly exceeds human worlds’.⁶⁰ While these authors use the notion of ‘world’ in post-phenomenological sense, this does not exclude ‘particular modes of anthropocentric affective attachment’.⁶¹ This entails complex assemblages and entanglements of human and non-human lifeworlds, a concept that belongs in itself to humanistic geographical traditions.⁶² It can be argued that these debates implicitly recall Dardel’s use of elements such as air, water and land to define ‘geographical spaces’, a category that included ‘material spaces’, ‘telluric space’, ‘aquatic space’, and ‘aerial space’, as I discuss in the next section.

2. Dardel, *Géographicité* and geographers

A still neglected book

Opening HT, Dardel famously stated that: ‘Geographical anxiety precedes and brings about objective science. Either love for the native soil or sake for disorientation, quest for sensation of foreign places, a concrete relation is established between man and land, a *géographicité* as a mode of human existence’.⁶³ While most commentators emphasized the subjective, intimate and perceptive aspects of *géographicité*, I would instead highlight the material (and historical) aspects of this relation, that are substantiated by the categories through which Dardel understood the idea of geographical space, strictly associated with that of *géographicité*. Dardel discussed disorientation (*dépaysement*) in the context of the historical events that he experienced: ‘In the dark days of 1940, the roads of France saw masses of refugees, who were indifferent to direction, demanding only one thing to the road-flight’.⁶⁴ More broadly, for

⁶⁰ Engelmann and McCormack, ‘Elemental worlds’, 1433.

⁶¹ Engelmann and McCormack, ‘Elemental worlds’, 1433.

⁶² A. Buttimer, ‘Geography, humanism, and global concern’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80, 1990, 1-33.

⁶³ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 1-2.

⁶⁴ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 17.

Dardel, human perceptions spring from the ‘acknowledgement of the terrestrial reality in its materiality’ marked by feelings of fear or marvel constituting an ‘affective vocabulary’.⁶⁵

This included ‘influence of climate and relief’,⁶⁶ although Dardel was far from considering himself as a ‘determinist’. However, Dardel understood geographical space as something more material than metaphysical. *Espace géographique* did not mean ‘geometrical space ... which is unique, and has a proper noun’⁶⁷ being ‘the abstract space of the geometer’ rather than the space of the geographer. For Dardel, space is: ‘The blue of the sky ... the emptiness of the desert, space for death; the frozen space of the ice floe ... even silence or desolation are still a reality of geographical space’.⁶⁸ Thus, geographical space includes materiality and concreteness before perception, consistently with works in the history of French geography stressing the heterogeneous uses of the definition *espace géographique* before its positivistic naturalisation in the 1970s.⁶⁹

Dardel materially classified this space through definitions such as ‘material space’, ‘telluric space’, ‘aquatic space’, ‘aerial space’, ‘constructed space’ and ‘landscape’. While material space defines constraints associated with distance and concrete obstacles to human activity, telluric space crucially defines the ‘thickness’ of the Earth, which is not limited to its ‘surface’: ‘Being matter, it implies a depth, a thickness, a solidity and a plasticity that are not immediately given by the intellect’.⁷⁰ This ‘intimate materiality’⁷¹ of the world is expressed in human terms by the emotion of experiences such as climbing and speleology. There, the solidity of the earth acts, like in the case of mountains which, for Dardel: ‘Favoured freedom’.⁷²

Likewise, water spaces were defined by Dardel through terms indicating water’s agency. For instance, flowing water are: ‘Movement and life, that derides [geometric] space’ also by

⁶⁵ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 7.

⁶⁶ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 12.

⁶⁷ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 2.

⁶⁸ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 10.

⁶⁹ M.C. Robic, ‘Sur la naissance de l’« espace géographique »’, *Espace géographique*, 21, 1992, 140-142.

⁷⁰ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 19.

⁷¹ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 20.

⁷² Dardel, *L’Homme*, 23.

‘singing’.⁷³ Moreover, the ‘mobile space of the sea’ was defined by Dardel as a protagonist of history that: ‘Brought’ the British and the Dutch overseas; ‘Refused the Empire to Napoleon I’; becomes ‘accomplice of human destinies’; ‘Links peoples and continents’.⁷⁴ Basically, the materiality and variety of spaces matters a lot to human histories and geographies, while the realm of subjective experience, limited to seize ‘the phenomenon’,⁷⁵ did not suffice to explain the world. Additionally, the aerial dimension of space made Dardel claim that ‘geographical space is atmosphere’,⁷⁶ which was both a metaphor, in the sense of the ‘magic atmosphere’⁷⁷ and a statement of acting matter, given that: ‘Aerial space is a carrying space where clouds run, from which the rain falls’,⁷⁸ matching McCormack’s definition of atmosphere as metaphor and materiality.

Moreover, one of the geographical notions that are most directly associated to subjective perception, that is landscape, was deemed by Dardel as something that ‘is not made to be watched, being man’s insertion in the world ... the place of a struggle’.⁷⁹ In this struggle, the Earth acts as a factor that awakens and shatters human consciousness. Coming ‘before all objectivation, it meddles with all kind of [human] awareness’.⁸⁰ It creates the ‘circumstances’⁸¹ in which human life unfolds, and yet resists all human attempts to dominate it, metaphorically and materially. For Dardel: ‘It is from the Earth understood as chthonian depth that we grab stones. But the terrestrial element of stones resists our efforts to penetrate its nature ... Whenever we want to reduce geography to pure, objective knowledge, the properly terrestrial elements of earth disappear’.⁸² It is therefore in the mutual permeation of the subject and the object that we should understand Dardel’s *géographicité*.

In the second part of HT, dedicated to the history of geography, Dardel criticised positivism and linear progress. ‘Mythical geography’ was the first case addressed, not as the first step in

⁷³ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 27.

⁷⁴ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 29.

⁷⁵ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 31.

⁷⁶ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 32.

⁷⁷ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 32.

⁷⁸ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 35.

⁷⁹ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 44.

⁸⁰ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 57.

⁸¹ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 59.

⁸² Dardel, *L’Homme*, 59.

chronological sense, but as a qualitative attribute of geographical reflection. As I further detail below, mythical geography accounts first for the chthonian aspects of the Earth: ‘Grounding the cults of chthonian divinities, there is the feeling that the Earth is living and vivifying’ and exerts a ‘universal maternal function’.⁸³ While ideas of Mother Earth are variously rediscovered by decolonial scholarship in association with notions such as the Pachamama,⁸⁴ it was based on the etymologic kinship of *humus* and *humanus* that Dardel discussed the: ‘Mutual and ceaseless exchange between man and Earth’.⁸⁵

The further historical steps highlighted by Dardel were *Géographie de plein-vent*, roughly translatable as ‘fieldwork-based geography’, and ‘scientific geography’, which Dardel criticized by arguing for the need of considering ‘life’ beyond a ‘short-sighted positivism’.⁸⁶ Dardel carefully avoided discarding French geographical traditions, presenting his ideas as standing in continuity, rather than in opposition, with heterogeneous ‘noble ancestors’ such as Reclus and Vidal de la Blache. Yet, he proposed clear theoretical challenges to the traditional disregard for theory of the post-Vidalians,⁸⁷ innovatively contending that ‘objectivity is not a guarantee of truth’⁸⁸ and that one cannot ‘eliminate the standpoint’⁸⁹ of the observer.

A point that was overlooked by most commentators is Dardel’s insistence on the social and ecological evils that human action can entail in ‘completely disfiguring the natural aspect of a region for interested aims’.⁹⁰ In this vein, Dardel blamed humankind’s attitudes to ‘dispose of the Earth as an absolute master’.⁹¹ Importantly, Dardel attributed these social and environmental evils to a main responsible: the colonial ‘West’, which ‘busies itself in submitting all the Earth to its power through science and industry’.⁹² Finally, what Dardel’s geography challenged was the ‘indifference and distance of scholarly geography’.⁹³ As there

⁸³ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 65.

⁸⁴ M. de la Cadena and M. Blaser, (eds). *A world of many worlds* (Durham:Duke University Press, 2018).

⁸⁵ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 66.

⁸⁶ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 133.

⁸⁷ Orain, *De plain-pied*.

⁸⁸ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 126.

⁸⁹ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 121.

⁹⁰ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 123.

⁹¹ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 127.

⁹² Dardel, *L’Homme*, 127.

⁹³ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 128.

is an ‘intimacy’ between humankind and earth, one must be aware that geographers are not external to studied realities and should interact with these, as I discuss below.

A too ephemeral rediscovery

HT was published in 1952 without leaving any visible trace in French-speaking geographical debates of the following three decades. As Labaste and Pinchemel note, HT: ‘Did not attract the attention of the French geographical community at all; no book review of it was published – sad example of blindness’.⁹⁴ Amazingly, it was in Anglo-American circuits that Dardel’s work was literally discovered by geographers in the 1970s. This discovery occurred in the intellectual context of ‘humanistic geographies’, which are generally known for having challenged positivism and the ‘quantitative’ hegemony over Anglo-American geography. Indeed, the theoretical and methodological innovations that authors like Buttimer, Tuan, Relph, Seamon and others provided to later developments in cultural geographies and plural critiques of positivistic modernities are still valued.⁹⁵

One of the most representative ‘humanistic geographers’, Buttimer, recollected how: ‘It was from the rediscovery of writers such as Marsh, Vidal de la Blache, Braudel, Wright, and Dardel ... that much of the enthusiasm for a “humanistic” movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s’.⁹⁶ While Buttimer’s (mostly) phenomenological and existentialistic inspiration is undeniable, it is intriguing to note how she paid substantial tribute to figures such as George Perkins-Marsh and Paul Vidal de la Blache, whose approaches to geography were clearly more naturalistic than phenomenological. For the Irish geographer, the research lines that Dardel and the French School inspired were: ‘Sense of place, regional personality, landscape morphogenesis, and bioecology’.⁹⁷ As noted above, Dardel did not discard completely Vidalian legacies, recognizing for instance Vidal’s notions of *genre de vie* as a basis for engaging with geographical materialities. Thus, Buttimer’s references were far from being limited to

⁹⁴ A. Labaste and P. Pinchemel ‘Eric Dardel 1899-1967’, in M.C. Robic, J.L. Tissier and P. Pinchemel (eds.), *Deux siècles de géographie française* (Paris:CTHS, 2011), 233.

⁹⁵ F. Ferretti, ‘Between radical geography and humanism: Anne Buttimer and the International Dialogue Project’, *Antipode* 51, 2019, 1123-1145; D. Seamon, *Life takes place: Phenomenology, lifeworlds and place making* (Routledge:London, 2018).

⁹⁶ Buttimer, ‘Geography’, 7.

⁹⁷ Buttimer, ‘Geography’, 18.

subjectivity and Heideggerian being-in-the-world, which confirms the attempts to bridge humanistic and neo/post-humanistic approaches mentioned above,⁹⁸ as well as philosophical scholarship stressing how Heidegger did not neglect spatial materialities.⁹⁹

Unlike Buttner, another important inspirer of the ‘humanistic’ movement, Tuan, seemed to consider Dardel’s work as mainly inserted in the line of ‘the study of people’s spatial feeling and ideas in the stream of experience ... through sensation (feeling) perception’.¹⁰⁰ Yet, the Anglophone geographer who most engaged with Dardel’s work was Relph. Explicitly adopting a phenomenological conceptual framework, Relph defined HT as: ‘The most complete investigation of the direct experiences of the world that underlie geography’ based on the assumption that ‘geographical reality is first of all the place where someone is’.¹⁰¹ Relph’s emphasis was undeniably placed on human subjects, given that he considered geographical space as ‘man’s awareness of the world, his experiences and intentional links with the environment, [that is] full of significance for people’.¹⁰²

Some years later, John Pickles ‘trenchantly criticized’¹⁰³ what he deemed a too superficial approach to phenomenology by most ‘humanistic’ geographers. For Pickles, Dardel did not provide any pre-given framework of human geographical experience and did not exclusively focus on subjectivity: ‘Geographical science presupposes not a geographical world, but a world that can be understood or constituted geographically’.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, Pickles suggests to go further in considering the complexity of Dardel’s approaches. In this paper, I advance in this direction by arguing that Dardel’s concept of human ‘geographical experience’ should not be understood as an (almost Kantian) apriorism, but rather as a relational notion, where the human subject is always confronted with a world that constantly acts and affects humans.

⁹⁸ Ferretti, ‘Travelling’; Simonsen, ‘In quest’.

⁹⁹ H.L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world: a commentary on Heidegger's Being and time* (Cambridge:MIT Press, 1991).

¹⁰⁰ Y.F. Tuan, ‘Space and place humanistic perspective’, in S.Gale and G.Olsson (eds.), *Philosophy in geography* (Dordrecht:Reidel, 1979), 388.

¹⁰¹ E. Relph, *Place and placelessness* (London:Pion, 1976), 5.

¹⁰² Relph, *Place*, 16-17.

¹⁰³ Johnston and Sidaway, *Geography and Geographers*, 97.

¹⁰⁴ Pickles, *Phenomenology*, 44.

Moving to the French-speaking reception of Dardel's work, it is noteworthy that its earliest and most famous protagonist, Claude Raffestin, was the inspirer of a deep renovation in the narrow (regional, descriptive and positivistic) theoretical frameworks of Francophone geography by introducing critical stances from the set of theories that is broadly known as poststructuralism.¹⁰⁵ In 1987, Raffestin published a provocative paper titled 'Why didn't we read Dardel?', which sounded like a self-criticism on behalf of the community of French-speaking geographers, who did not notice at all the potentialities of Dardel's work until the 1980s. According to Raffestin, this was due first to the fact that 'Dardel was a paradigm ahead of his contemporaries',¹⁰⁶ being a forerunner of the 'tendencies that, right or wrong, are defined as humanistic and phenomenological'.¹⁰⁷ Second, the incipient quantitative tendencies that came to France from North-America and Germany since the 1960s-1970s,¹⁰⁸ 'started to fascinate [Raffestin's] generation, even more as that new geography allowed us making revolution against our elders, among whom we would have classified Dardel without any hesitation'.¹⁰⁹

Thus, for Raffestin, the early (critical) practitioners of quantitative approaches in geography were 'sunk in a too rigid and heavy functionalism' to can see the core of Dardel's message that: 'The object of geography is a relation rather than the Earth'.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Raffestin noted that Dardel's ideas were nourished 'by the conceptions of the *Naturphilosophen*, which the positivists of the nineteenth century strongly disliked',¹¹¹ in his understanding geographical phenomena in relational ways. This relationality was inspired by (Schellingian) Carl Ritter's ideas that geographical thought is built around terms that are not opposed to each other, but mutually constitutive such as history and geography, humankind and nature, horizontal [cartographic] dimension and vertical [geologic/geo-gnostic] dimension.¹¹² Raffestin

¹⁰⁵ J. Fall, 'Reading Claude Raffestin: Pathways for a critical biography', *Environment and Planning D - Society and Space*, 30, 2012, 173-189; O. Orain, *De plain-pied dans le monde: écriture et réalisme dans la géographie française au xxe siècle* (Paris:L'Harmattan, 2009).

¹⁰⁶ C. Raffestin, 'Pourquoi n'avons-nous pas lu Eric Dardel?' *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec*, 31, 1987, 471.

¹⁰⁷ Raffestin, 'Pourquoi', 472.

¹⁰⁸ S. Cuyala, *Analyse spatio-temporelle d'un mouvement scientifique: l'exemple de la géographie théorique et quantitative européenne francophone*. (Paris:Université Paris 1, 2014).

¹⁰⁹ Raffestin, 'Pourquoi', 472.

¹¹⁰ Raffestin, 'Pourquoi', 477.

¹¹¹ Raffestin, 'Pourquoi', 477.

¹¹² Nicolas-Obadia, 'Introduction'.

especially highlighted Dardel's idea of the Earth's 'depth' that, in Ritter-like terms, 'allows Dardel introducing his telluric space, which grounds the "thickness" and "solidity" of geographical space ... Could we expect a more ... effective definition of an ecological conception of our relation to the Earth?'.¹¹³ For Raffestin, it was already clear that Dardel was far from neglecting the importance of the world's materialities and their implications.

However, the most important notion that Raffestin took and popularised from HT was *géographicité*, as a response to geography's 'lack of ontology'.¹¹⁴ Interestingly, for Raffestin, the idea of *géographicité* allowed challenging the 'tyranny of the visual',¹¹⁵ that is the pre-eminence of mappings and visual representations in geography, recalling the critique of flat maps by Ritter and Reclus.¹¹⁶ Raffestin understood that this was the occasion to build 'a theory of the real, in geography ... rooted in an intellectual model that is historicity'.¹¹⁷ To Raffestin, diverse authors such as: 'Ritter, Ratzel and Reclus had a very clear idea of this *géographicité* that fills their works'.¹¹⁸ While this genealogy speaks clear in terms of *Naturphilosophie*, the key point in the relational nature of *géographicité*, for Raffestin, was exactly that it questioned the traditional hierarchy of subject and object. According to Raffestin, Dardel's idea of human-Earth relation should not be expressed in terms of 'Me and That', but in terms of 'Me and You': 'The original expression "Me-You" grounds a relational world where *géographicité* ... is a reciprocal relation. This implies a change in the paradigm [to] fully embrace the connivance between man [sic] and Earth'.¹¹⁹ While Raffestin, in the 1980s, could not be aware of the aforementioned debates on decentring human subjectivity, for sure his arguments anticipate current reassessments of human agency.

In French-speaking milieus, Dardel's work has exerted a notable influence over cultural geography in Québec since the 1990s as discussed by Mario Bédard.¹²⁰ In France, a key

¹¹³ Raffestin, 'Pourquoi', 480.

¹¹⁴ C. Raffestin, 'Théorie du réel et géographicité', *Espaces-Temps*, 40-41, 1989, 26.

¹¹⁵ Raffestin, 'Théorie', 27.

¹¹⁶ Ferretti and Pelletier, 'L'Homme et la Terre'.

¹¹⁷ Raffestin, 'Théorie', 29.

¹¹⁸ Raffestin, 'Théorie', 29.

¹¹⁹ Raffestin, 'Théorie', 30.

¹²⁰ M. Bédard, 'Résonances à *L'Homme et la Terre* d'Éric Dardel dans la géographie culturelle québécoise', *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 55, 2011, 279–291.

moment in Dardel's (re)discovery was the reprinting of HT in 1990, with accompanying essays by Pinchemel and Besse. In particular, Besse noted how this work still stimulated deep reflections on geographical ontologies and epistemologies, following Raffestin in noting that, with *géographicité*: 'The human and the terrestrial are not geographically thinkable as separated. Subject and object are mutually inclusive'.¹²¹ Besse also highlights the idea of 'geographical space' as a 'material space',¹²² suggesting again that Dardel's work should not be reduced to mere matters of perception. However, neither Raffestin nor Besse fully develop this discussion, while Chollier's and Waddell's introduction to the 2014 anthology does not add substantially to former humanistic readings of Dardel.¹²³

Other French-speaking scholars have mentioned Dardel's *géographicité*, although without engaging directly with Dardel's work. It was the case with Augustin Berque, who mentions Dardel among his possible inspirers as for 'mediance' (associated to Berque's ideas of 'milieu' and 'mesology'). Yet, he admits that, on this notion, he was rather inspired by Japanese Watsuji Tetsurō because, during his first reading of HT, Berque had the feeling that Dardel's work 'was more literature than geography'.¹²⁴ It is also the case with René Blais, who considers Dardel, alongside Berque and Raffestin, as a possible inspirer for the refoundation of geography's 'relational ontology'¹²⁵, without engaging directly with HT.

HT had Italian (1986) and Brazilian (2015) translations. The Brazilian book is based on the French 1990 edition, including translations of Besse's and Pinchemel's essays and further comments by Werther Holzer and Eduardo Marandola Jr that do not add much to the Anglophone and Francophone commentaries mentioned above.¹²⁶ Conversely, the Italian edition had a significant impact on Francophone Dardelian literatures also thanks to the editorial work of Clara Copeta. For instance, Raffestin's paper 'Why didn't we read Dardel'

¹²¹ J.M. Besse, 'Géographie et existence', in E. Dardel, *L'Homme et la Terre* (Paris:CTHS, 1990), 137.

¹²² Besse, 'Géographie', 139.

¹²³ A. Chollier and E. Waddell, 'Vers une pensée du monde'. In Dardel, *Ecrits*, 11-27.

¹²⁴ A. Berque, 'Milieu et identité humaine'. *Annales de Géographie* 113, 2004, 638-639.

¹²⁵ R. Blais, 'Des « milieux vibratoires » pour la géographie: résoudre l'impasse du dualisme occidental'. *Sociétés* 148, 2020, 17-28.

¹²⁶ W. Holzer, 'A geografia fenomenológica de Eric Dardel', in E. Dardel, *O homem e a terra, natureza da realidade geográfica* (São Paulo:Perspectiva, 2015), 141-154; E. Marandola, Prefácio à edição brasileira', in E. Dardel, *O homem e a terra, natureza da realidade geográfica* (São Paulo:Perspectiva, 2015), xi-xiv.

F. Ferretti, 2023 "Géographicité, material agency and the thickness of the Earth: rediscovering Eric Dardel beyond 'nature/culture' dualisms" **cultural geographies** [early view] <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740231215510>

was firstly published in this book and later translated into French for the *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec*. The book edited by Copeta, who considered that she owed her disciplinary positioning as a geographer to her encounter with Dardel, had the function of agglutinating a transnational circuit of geographers from Italy, Switzerland, France and Ireland whose members would have played important roles in fostering cultural, historical and broadly non-positivistic approaches to geography in the respective countries.¹²⁷ In the next section, I extend all these rich insights to understand further openings of Dardel's ideas of intersection between history, geography and myth.

3. Reengaging (decolonially) with history and myth

In 1946, in the aftermath of the Second World War and six years before publishing HT, Dardel published *Histoire science du concret* [HSC]¹²⁸. Like HT, HSC was inserted in the PUF *Nouvelle Encyclopédie Philosophique*, aiming at establishing new theoretical bases for historical sciences, similarly to what Dardel will try with geography six years later. Pinchemel observed that: 'There is something impressive in this double ambition. But ... Dardel considered his reflection on *géographicité* and historicity as inseparable'.¹²⁹ While HT was rediscovered by geographers only some decades later, HSC seems to have been completely ignored by historians. Yet, it remains impossible to understand *géographicité* independently from the historicity discussed in HSC.

In this work, Dardel challenged positivistic approaches to history based on chronology, linear progress and 'naïve realism'.¹³⁰ He eventually refused all historical teleology, arguing that: 'Philosophy always wants to impose to historical reality an intelligibility that it does not have'.¹³¹ This scepticism toward finalistic views was inspired by the terrible experiences of the World Wars and of the Holocaust, that widely questioned the idea of progress based on scientific advances, as science and technology were used for extermination and warfare. For

¹²⁷ C. Copeta, 'Il mio incontro con Dardel, ovvero perché sono geografa', in C. Copeta (ed.), *Eric Dardel: L'Uomo e la Terra. Natura della realtà geografica* (Milan: Unicopli, 1986), 201-223.

¹²⁸ E. Dardel, *L'histoire science du concret* (Paris: PUF, 1946). From now on, this book will be quoted from the 2014 edition (quoted above) *Ecrits d'un monde entier*.

¹²⁹ Pinchemel, 'Biographie', 179.

¹³⁰ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 35.

¹³¹ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 42.

Dardel, among their ‘ruins progress lies’.¹³² Thus: ‘History should remain unaccomplished ... historians shall refuse the misleading promises of a philosophy of history, because all philosophy of history tends to bring the historical account to an end’.¹³³ Furthermore, Dardel lambasted history understood as ‘chronology’ and mere ‘erudition’, which led scholars to an idea of ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’, that is ‘the annihilation of historians’¹³⁴ who become unable to express their own views. In this polemic, Dardel quoted Italian antifascist historian Gaetano Salvemini who argued that: ‘The one who believes to be impartial is in most cases a dumb ... impartiality is an illusion, probity is a duty’.¹³⁵

While it is difficult to identify exactly the target of Dardel’s polemic in French historiography, already dominated by the *Annales* at that time, what is significant is that not only he took on positivism and chronology, but on the very idea of linear progress and civilisational superiority that informed Euro-centric histories. This was done specifically by taking seriously and giving value to histories and geographies of myth as an alternative to Western rationality. Today, scholarship on decoloniality and the pluriverse is calling for remediating epistemicide¹³⁶ by rediscovering different epistemes, such as indigenous worldviews and ethics, questioning Western linear time and disembodied theories.¹³⁷ While it would be anachronistic to ‘enrol’ Dardel in this mood, Dardel’s idea of giving up pretensions of civilisational superiority, recalling eminent precedents such as Reclus, further confirms the existence of other geographical traditions based on empathy and on the assumption that there are no absolute or superior standpoints.

Furthermore, myth as a geographical object has recently been the focus of studies calling for further engagement with mythical geographies. While Maximilian Hepach claims for rediscovering the dimension of myth in historical geography addressing notions of climate

¹³² Dardel, *Ecrits*, 41.

¹³³ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 144.

¹³⁴ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 59.

¹³⁵ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 61.

¹³⁶ B. Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the south: Justice against epistemicide* (London:Routledge, 2016).

¹³⁷ A. Kothari, *et al.* (eds.). *Pluriverse. A post-development dictionary* (New Delhi:Tulika Books, 2019). De la Cadena and Blaser, *A world*.

from ancient Greek myths,¹³⁸ Maja Essebo argues for ‘a deepened and mutually beneficial relationship between geography and myth’.¹³⁹ To this end, for Essebo, we should: ‘Revise our very idea of myth, going beyond seeing it as belonging to more primitive times or peoples’.¹⁴⁰ Essebo reviews definitions of myth from ideas that myths precede written history to their current mobilisation for concrete political purposes such as the Greek myth of Europe grounding EU public communication strategies. Dardel made something similar, discussing myths from both ancient and contemporary extra-European peoples and concluding by deconstructing the political myths that had grounded wars and totalitarianisms in his day.

Against classical positivist readings of history deeming myth as an archaic, non-scientific and irrational concept, Dardel considered the ‘nightly time of myth’¹⁴¹ as a sort of reciprocal and co-constitutive term of ‘concrete’ history, that he considered to lie ‘half-way between the mythical word and the logical word’ and to express knowledge that encompasses ‘the intellective and the affective’.¹⁴² Key was the understanding that this ceaseless mutual relationship can imply the inversion of the traditional roles of subject and object, as in mythical conceptions it happens that: ‘What we call subjectivity is transferred to geographical realities, and it is man that feels himself as an object, product or toy of [external] forces’.¹⁴³ Importantly, perception cannot be considered as the centre of knowledge processes given that land is ‘no longer limited to the visible surface of things’.¹⁴⁴ For instance: ‘A ship which exits [visible] space is only unreal in our geography. For a Melanesian, it still conserves its potential reality’.¹⁴⁵ Anticipating French cultural geographers such as Joël Bonnemaïson,¹⁴⁶ Dardel gave full geographical citizenship to worldviews that were then considered only matters for anthropologists studying ‘primitive customs’.

¹³⁸ G.M. Hepach, ‘Ephemeral climates: Plato’s geographic myths and the phenomenological nature of climate and its changes’. *Journal of Historical Geography* 78, 2022, 139-148.

¹³⁹ M. Essebo, ‘Mythical place: A conversation on the earthly aspects of myth’. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(3) 2019, 515–530 515.

¹⁴⁰ Essebo, ‘Mythical place’, 515.

¹⁴¹ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 106.

¹⁴² Dardel, *Ecrits*, 107.

¹⁴³ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 68.

¹⁴⁴ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 70.

¹⁴⁵ Dardel, *L’Homme*, 71.

¹⁴⁶ J. Bonnemaïson, *Géographie culturelle* (Paris:PUF, 1981).

Also in Dardel's mythical geography the Earth should not be understood as something that is merely perceived, but as immanence and materiality. That is: 'The concrete support of the ... essence of living beings'.¹⁴⁷ Thus, 'mythical geography is a relation'¹⁴⁸ of a clearly 'qualitative'¹⁴⁹ kind that, historically, started to be questioned by what Dardel called 'prophetic geography', which dethroned the Earth from its role as creator of humankind, as both the Earth and its living (human and non-human) beings became the creation of a God. For Dardel, it was in this phase of the history of geography that the idea of the 'spatialization of space'¹⁵⁰ began. There, Dardel acknowledged the epistemic violence of monotheistic religions, which pronounced a 'death sentence'¹⁵¹ against mythical thought and polytheism. Importantly, myth should not be confused with mythology, which Dardel associated with another notion, namely 'heroic geography', first represented by the Homeric tales and later by so-called 'geographical discoveries', that is European expansion, modernity and colonialism.

From a historiographical point of view, it can be said that Dardel anticipated ideas of taking myths seriously that were expressed by *Annalistes* such as Jean-Pierre Vernant¹⁵² and historians of science such as Hertha von Dechend and Giorgio de Santillana, who contested positivistic pretensions to create hierarchies between different historical civilizations on the ground of their economic structures. In their famous *Hamlet's Mill*, they analysed 'the mammoth clock which constitutes the archaic cosmos',¹⁵³ demonstrating the astronomic competences of people who lived before the invention of writing for historical records. Thus, mythical dimensions can make sense to current investigations on plural phenomena, including the rescuing of non-Western epistemes.¹⁵⁴

Dardel especially investigated 'mythic' assumptions within so-called 'primitive' peoples (whom he always mentioned in the most respectful terms) following Melanesia fieldwork of

¹⁴⁷ Dardel, *L'Homme*, 77.

¹⁴⁸ Dardel, *L'Homme*, 90.

¹⁴⁹ Dardel, *L'Homme*, 83.

¹⁵⁰ Dardel, *L'Homme*, 96.

¹⁵¹ Dardel, *L'Homme*, 97.

¹⁵² J.P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les grecs: études de psychologie historique* (Paris:Maspero, 1965).

¹⁵³ G. Santillana and H. Dechend, *Il mulino di Amleto: saggio sul mito e sulla struttura del tempo* (Milan:Adelphi, 2003), 16.

¹⁵⁴ Kothari, *et al.*, *Pluriverse*.

his father-in-law, anthropologist Maurice Leenhardt (1878-1954). Although he was not directly involved in fieldwork, Dardel's reviews of Leenhardt first-hand ethnographic materials contributed to make sense of his own ideas on myth, history and geography. Crucially, for Dardel, the cyclical temporality of mythic conceptions showed that 'there is not one time, but several times'.¹⁵⁵ To grasp this dimension, Dardel argued that one should make an exercise in empathy, that is 'becoming primitive' to see a world where 'everything is power'.¹⁵⁶

This included agency of physical worlds, where one finds a 'fundamental identity of man and nature',¹⁵⁷ which should not be confused with Eurocentric comparisons between the 'savage' and 'nature' in terms of racial hierarchies, being indeed a way of denying the pretention that non-scientific worldviews are 'backward'. Dardel presented historical successions of ideas in terms that denied linear progress, arguing that the myth 'became legend' when people tried to seek explanations, and developed magics as a 'first form of scientific attitude'.¹⁵⁸ Conversely, for Dardel, history starts with the 'appetite for power':¹⁵⁹ the latest declinations of 'myth', such as nationalistic myths, were the responsible of the war's disaster that broke all the hopes in progress, science and rationality on which Western thought was traditionally based.

Some of Dardel's articles help understanding his idea of myth as a phenomenon that was not located chronologically, as it belonged to a philosophical category of thought—aesthetics. While Dardel's idea that aesthetics allows humans to 'understand the world that surrounds them as a way to locate and understand themselves'¹⁶⁰ might have some similarities with Kant's transcendental aesthetics, Dardel refused Kantian notions of a-priori and applied his ideas to very different cases. 'Standing at the antipodes of our Western civilizations, Oceania offers the spectacle of a universe where our categories loose much of their pertinence and value'.¹⁶¹ For Dardel, this meant deepening and amplifying human understandings of the real world, which is real exactly because its features act and interact at human and non-human levels.

¹⁵⁵ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 109.

¹⁵⁶ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 111.

¹⁵⁷ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 113.

¹⁵⁸ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 120.

¹⁵⁹ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 121.

¹⁶⁰ E. Dardel, 'L'esthétique comme mode d'existence de l'homme archaïque', *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 45, 1965, 352.

¹⁶¹ Dardel, 'L'esthétique', 352.

Dardel considered this coupling of aesthetics and mythical thought as not limited to so-called primitive peoples. For instance, it characterised the most prestigious of ‘European’ ancient civilisations, that is early Greece, like in the cases discussed by Hepach and Essebo. For Dardel: ‘In its powerful aspiration to the One, that is universal harmony, [Hellenic culture] brought together soul and existence, ethics, aesthetics and cosmology in one movement’.¹⁶² This importantly meant that, with the Ancient Greeks as well as with the Oceanian civilisations studied by Leenhardt, there was ‘the feeling of a shared ontological community of all beings’, within a vital circulation ‘nourishing likewise landscapes, animals and plants’ alongside humans, who bring in themselves the ‘affective dispositions of cosmic forces’.¹⁶³ These are again *Naturphilosophie* ideas of human-nature consubstantiality, where humans are actively affected by earthly material forces, which allowed Dardel taking distances from Kantian or Cartesian modernities in which ‘the world was split up’¹⁶⁴ between nature and mind, prefiguring the aforementioned ideas of affect as both feeling and materiality.

Dardel observed that, beyond the ‘relatively recent distinction between nature and super-nature ... conceiving the world means participating in the world’,¹⁶⁵ which further clarifies his idea that heuristic processes are made of reciprocal agencies and mutual affection. Human subjectivity is not the only form of knowledge, as Dardel clarified that, in mythical universes: ‘Unlike the Westerner, who pushes his subjectivity to the extreme limit ... the Primitive is full of enthusiasm and emotion for that world which treats him as a son’.¹⁶⁶ Thus, while the myth served to relativize the idea of human almightiness at Dardel’s time, after the traumatism of the war, one may argue that it can play similar roles today, when human agency is strongly questioned by anxieties for climate change and destruction.¹⁶⁷ According to Dardel, among New Caledonia Kanaks, ‘the very notion of what is human remains ill-defined’. It is worth noting that, for Dardel, Kanaks give human attributes to plants ‘but deny these to the

¹⁶² Dardel, ‘L’esthétique’, 352.

¹⁶³ Dardel, ‘L’esthétique’, 355.

¹⁶⁴ Dardel, ‘L’esthétique’, 357.

¹⁶⁵ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 257.

¹⁶⁶ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 296.

¹⁶⁷ B. Garrett, *Bunker: building for the end times* (London:Penguin Books, 2020).

Whites’,¹⁶⁸ which opens the problem of the colonial condition. While Dardel evoked the feelings of despair ‘at the arrival of the Whites among Oceanian peoples’,¹⁶⁹ he argued that works of anthropologists and philosophers including Leenhardt showed the effectiveness of the principle of a ‘huge human unity through space and time’.¹⁷⁰ This resulted in a ‘human sympathy’¹⁷¹ that should prevent chronological hierarchies that despise ‘primitive’ thought.

Like Essebo and Hepach, Dardel contended that myth does not exclude rationality. Despite widespread commonplaces, so-called primitives do not act following ‘obscure forces’. ‘Conversely, [the Primitive] has clear ideas of the relations between the world and himself’ and does not tell of gods or heroes, as ‘his language is informed by seriousness’,¹⁷² while irrationality rather characterised contemporary myths such as ‘progress’ or war. This disenchantment with positivistic ideas of history and ‘myths’ of progress completes Dardel’s understanding of historical and geographical myths, which further reinforce his idea of consubstantiality between humankind and nature, which refused all ‘naturalisation of man and of history’, declaring the ‘[co]constitution of man within nature [as] its humanity’.¹⁷³ Consistently with *Naturphilosophie*, this implied also the consubstantiality of historical and geographical approaches, as: ‘The historian cannot avoid to be a bit of a geographer’.¹⁷⁴ Thus, the close connections existing between HSC and HT confirm the need of considering Dardel’s work as a whole rather than only focussing on his most cited (yet still neglected) book.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that, after the diverse waves of (re)discovery of Dardel’s thought that occurred since the 1970s and 1980s across linguistic barriers, Dardel’s works remain a powerful contribution to scholarship variously challenging the modernist and positivistic divorce of ‘nature’ and ‘mind’, which I called ‘going beyond dualisms’. I did so by taking into consideration the entirety of Dardel’s texts and contexts, unlike previous scholars who, in most

¹⁶⁸ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 305

¹⁶⁹ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 267.

¹⁷⁰ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 259.

¹⁷¹ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 270.

¹⁷² Dardel, *Ecrits*, 271.

¹⁷³ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 68.

¹⁷⁴ Dardel, *Ecrits*, 104.

cases, limited their analysis to just one book, HT. Then, I demonstrated how Dardel's work can still speak to at least a couple of key scholarly strands.

The first are critical debates on hybridity, the 'material turn' and Anthropocene which likewise question human almightiness over the planet and especially focus on human-nature interdependences, challenging dualisms toward new planetary understandings of relational in-becomings.¹⁷⁵ On this, the key contribution that Dardel's work can give is rediscovering the lessons of *Naturphilosophie* on human-nature consubstantiality to help responding current questioning about 'agency ... sentience and inhuman matter, and how material agency with and without subjectivity is thought'.¹⁷⁶ As discussed above, Anthropocene concerns are giving new force to 'old' ideas periodically resurfacing. Simon Dalby intriguingly refers that today, in geography, the idea of 'the Earth as our home'¹⁷⁷ is commonly attributed to Tuan, while it is a quotation by Ritter, relaunched by Reclus¹⁷⁸ and implicitly reworked by Dardel. Without absolutely diminishing the great importance of authors like Tuan, this should suggest more consideration for alternative geographical traditions. Eventually, *Naturphilosophie* should be further rediscovered by geographers in the current context of anthropo(s)genic anxieties¹⁷⁹ for the future of both humankind and the planet.

The second are conversations on possible reengagements with humanistic and phenomenological traditions which are fully cognizant of the critiques to human subjectivity's centrality that were levelled by scholars inspired by post-phenomenology, post-humanism and NRT. This is further exemplified by Dardel's discussions on the spatial/historical dimension of myth, in which going beyond rationality does not mean only addressing subjectivity, and by Dardel's idea of 'thickness' of the Earth, which challenges cartographic reason and prefigures the chthonian dimensions evoked by Haraway and others. This suggests again that critical and humanistic geographical traditions should not be discarded in making sense of the relations between living and non-living beings. In Dardel's work we find a complex and entangled set of plural relations and affects where non-human agency is highlighted by the personification

¹⁷⁵ Ruddick, 'Rethinking'.

¹⁷⁶ Yusoff, *A Billion*, 9.

¹⁷⁷ S. Dalby, 'Thinking through the Anthropocene', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 12(3), 2022, 482.

¹⁷⁸ Ferretti, 'Anarchism, Geohistory'.

¹⁷⁹ N. Castree, 'Changing the Anthropo(s)cene', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5, 2015, 301–16.

F. Ferretti, 2023 "Géographicité, material agency and the thickness of the Earth: rediscovering Eric Dardel beyond 'nature/culture' dualisms" **cultural geographies** [early view] <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740231215510>

of the Earth as a geographical and historical protagonist, suggesting that it is not only relationality that matters, but also ‘worlds’.

Finally, Dardel’s work contains examples of respectful approaches to non-European peoples and cultures, taking seriously what decolonial scholarship defines as different epistemes, considered as more respectful of the planet in relation to traditional Western ones. Also on this point *Naturphilosophie* matters: contesting human-nature hierarchies is clearly consistent with contesting hierarchies between peoples and cultures.