

Wherever: The Ecstasies of Michel Serres

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Turning Points

Where should one begin?

Michel Serres is found of quoting Heraclitus's maxim that one cannot step into the same river twice. But reading Serres's work gives precisely the opposite impression. Indeed, the very fact that references to figures like Heraclitus are to be found distributed through that work is the mark of its highly distinctive capacity to bend back on itself, recycling, recoiling the better to spring forward, deriving new impetus from backward looks. One of Serres's favourite figures is that of the vortex, which both turns on itself and yet also has a forward trajectory. This means that there are no secure reference- or resting- points in Michel Serres's work, no *topoi*, no *loci classici*, no initial conditions, orientations or absolute Norths, no states of exception or islands apart. Every point is a turning point, in a motion that, as in John Donne's poem 'The Good Morrow' 'makes one little room an everywhere'.

This makes for a certain difficulty in attempting, as I nevertheless mean to, a reading of a particular stage or passage in Serres long and prolific career, namely the work of the last ten or fifteen years, and in particular the arguments contained in his books *Hominescence* (2001) and *L'Incandescent* (2003). In trying to persuade you that there is something like a climate change to be detected in this work I am faced with the same problem as contemporary climatologists in making a determinate argument for a change in the climate. For there are no, or at least vanishingly few, unique weather events that can decisively demonstrate that we now have a different climate. What is meant by a climate is a set of prevailing conditions, and the probabilities of their occurrence. Where historians of culture like to take their bearings from epochal breaks or faultlines – punctuating events like revolutions, or revelations, or catastrophes, seismic shifts or decisive lurches from one state of things to another, after which nothing can be the same ever again – climatologists rarely or never have the luxury of such unique events at their disposal. There has never been a time when it has never rained, or only ever rained, or in which fog or sunshine were entirely unknown, nor has there ever been a time in which a particular meteorological phenomenon was rigorously and in principle impossible of

occurrence in any particular part of the world. Climate is a large-scale, stochastic phenomenon, based on the distribution of effects over time. As you increase the time-scale, periods of spikily irregular patterns give way to regular recurrence, jagged edges smooth into curves. Change the scale, and you change the object and the judgement. So once again I ask, though it is already now getting on for too late, where to begin measuring?

I mean yet to try to discern and define a new phase in Serres's writing. The very word 'phase' is instructive here. The primary meaning of the word 'phase' is astronomical, as in the expression the 'phases of the moon'. *Phase* is from Greek *phasis*; it is not impossible that Latin *facies*, face is related to it, through the root *fa-* to appear or to shine. A phase is the face or appearance of an object at a particular stage in its evolution. There is passage in this manifestation, and a phase is as much the manifestation of a passage as of a state (indeed, *phase* is also a late Latin word for the feast of Passover). But a phase is also the name for the state of a stable and uniform form of matter under given conditions of temperature and pressure, whether gas, liquid, solid or plasma, this last the most unfamiliar to us and the most recently discovered, though it is in fact the most common state of matter in the universe. Serres has sometimes allowed himself to speak in terms of epochal diagram, one that offers a sort of chronophysics, reading history in terms of the phases or states of matter, moving from form, through transformation, to information:

History, then, or drama of works and acts in three acts: carrying, heating, transmitting; three families of figures or actors: Atlas and Hercules, Prometheus or Maxwell's Demon, Hermes and the angels; three states of matter: solid, liquid, volatile; three words that form one: form, transformation, information; three times; reversible, entropic and negentropic... a history, then, of humans and their technologies, but also of the sciences, because the theory of information follows upon thermodynamics and thermodynamics upon the complete development of mechanics: static, cinematic, dynamic ... histories intimately interlaced with those of religions, myths and monotheism. (Serres 1994, 127)

This is, of course, a thoroughly traditional way of grasping time, by putting it in a line. But Serres has often preferred another kind of spatialisation of time, seeing it as a landscape, or other kind of complex surface, which is capable of being folded or crumpled together in such a way that previously separated points can be brought close together, and stretched in such a way that previously proximal points end up being far distant from each other, like the remains of the sea-creatures that are found arked in the high and dry Himalayas. Serres is fond of the medieval term 'mappamundi', and surely means us to recall the origin of the word *map* in Latin *mappa*, a cloth or

napkin. For a complete picture, one would have to imagine Serres's tripartite temporal scheme being subject to this kind of topological transformation, such that the different states might actually form striated compounds or 'mixed bodies'. What is true of Serres's own work, that it is capable of turning or touching on itself at almost any point, creasing, short-circuiting, is also true of the historical geography he constructs through it.

There now, I have gone and started in the middle, something I have tried to want not to do. How much better to have begun by clearing the ground and setting up a straightforward, foursquare proposition about what Michel Serres has to say regarding the nature of our contemporary space, especially as it is being transformed by technologies of communication. But I have needed to set out in advance the impossibility with a writer like Serres of any such prolegomenon. One of Serres's favourite words is 'plonger'; abruptly, regularly, with regular abruptness, one finds oneself plunged, immersed, whelmed, overtaken by events, in the middle of something – in the middle of the way, amidships, in midair or midocean – that has arisen elsewhere and elsewhen. Not only is it difficult to zoom in on just one portion of the landscape in Michel Serres's writing, it is difficult even to snip out the topic of space from the topic of time. Here I am, trying to work my way to writing about Serres's writing of space and place, but am unable it seems to speak of anything but time-space manifolds.

But enough of this devilish circumstance. Let me bring things to the sticking point, by saying this. Since the middle 1990s, and in particular since the book *Atlas*, there has been a discernible shift in emphasis in Serres's work. For almost thirty years, Serres had written and been read under the self-elected tutelary sign of Hermes, the god of passages, crossings, interceptions, impostures, purloinings and ruses. Serres's project, maintained most systematically through the five volumes of the sequence *Hermes* that appeared from 1968 to 1980, is to make possible communications and connections between intellectual areas that have been ignorantly or defensively partitioned off from one another – culture and science, the sensible and the intelligible. His recent book in celebration of the architecture of bridges identifies the long-standing transpontine ambitions of his own work: 'I have so hoped to build passages and bridges: between knowledge and narrative, philosophy and art, hard and soft sciences, reason and religion' (Serres 2006, 20). This work may be read as favouring the irregular over the regular, exception over exactitude, fluctuation over fixation and the molecular over the molar. It is this which has on occasion seen Serres read alongside Deleuze, one of the few contemporary philosophers of whom he has expressed admiration, as an antitotalist, deterritorialising thinker, whose work resists or attempts to liquefy the sedimentations of power, asserting the powers of metamorphosis and

multiplicity over the claims of unity and identity. However, in the work of the last two decades in which I am interested here, Serres is driven by a highly distinctive and highly audacious project of integration, an effort not only to grasp what he sees as the integral of all the multiplicities that have hitherto focussed his attention, but also to forge from it a philosophy of optimism. This involves a rethinking of time and space and in particular an overcoming of the condition of finitude that has characterised thinking about it.

Global Positioning

Serres's engagement with the space-time of the contemporary world begins in *Atlas*, published in 1994. The ambition of this book, as hinted in his title, is to develop a new mode of cartography, more adapted to the emerging spatial conditions of the contemporary world.

It is a characteristic of all the forms of organisation that we name as living that they are privative and proprietary, that they inhabit a particular space, and indeed can live nowhere but in that space. Just as all living creatures are made up of aggregations of cells, so each creature functions as a kind of hyper-cell, a machinery for disposing internal and external. In the metaphorical idea of the niche, ecological theory enlarges on this necessity for the organism of having and knowing its place. Indeed, one may say that an organism is nothing more than the places it occupies in various scales and milieux – a certain span of tolerable temperatures, a certain subset of the foodchain, a certain habitat. Every organism carves out a space for itself, and, as a result, can live nowhere but in this habitat. 'Life resides, inhabits, remains, dwells, cannot pass beyond place' (Serres 1994, 42). Life must be at home – 'chez soi', to use a preposition that has no clear equivalent in English, just as it has no parallel in the world of the inorganic: 'Surrounded by a membrane, the cell lives not so much in itself or for itself as 'at-itself' [chez soi]' (Serres 1994, 43). This suggests a somewhat surprising dichotomy between inorganic and organic matter; where the tendency of matter is to propagate, to expand indifferently and universally, life dwells in particularity, the speciality of life is to dwell specifically. The inert and the organic therefore occupy entirely different scales, since 'one submits to laws, holomorphic or universal through analytic extrapolation, the other to codes, specific and local, proper to an interior' (Serres 1994, 56).

And yet, life also in its own way prolongs or ramifies, approaching or attempting to enter into the scale and duration of the global. The seeds on the head of the sunflower are arranged in arcs formed by a proportional spacing that approximates to the golden ratio of approximately 1.61803, derived from a line bisected in such a way that the ratio of the shorter

segment to the longer is the same as that of the longer segment to the complete line. Leaves will often grow around a stem at intervals governed by the same ratio. The reason for this is not that nature is subject to Platonic or Pythagorean programming, but that this has turned out so far, in the blind-man's-buff of evolutionary wait-and-see, to be the most efficient way to pack the most seeds into a given space, or for a plant to expose the largest area of leaf to the sun. Everything occurs as though every organism wanted to make all space its home, expanding its space of exception or recession until it coincides with the entirety of space as such. *Atlas* attempts to imagine, conceive and indeed in its own fashion to map the process whereby the local propagates itself on the scale of the global:

Life expands and prolongs itself, in space and time, by means of little black boxes. What remains to be thought, then, is this propagation, *pagus* by *pagus*, plot or niche by area or site, page by page, individual by individual of diverse species, this invasion through distinct places; in other words, to meditate on the globality of localities, a summation which reveals the same paradox which sometimes supposes the universal of life is to be found in the singularity of place. (Serres 1994, 58)

Singularity and sequestration of the kind that Serres believes is intrinsic to life depends upon relations and interactions. The animal is what it is, coincides with its being-there, is entirely coextensive with the place that it occupies, because it has no possibility of relations outside that demarcated space. One may put this another way and say that the animal only has relations with what enters its space, and only the kind of relations that that space allows.

This no longer seems true of human beings, who have multiplied almost beyond measure the relations that it is possible to have that exceed or go beyond their literal space of occupations. In recent years, Serres has developed the concept of the 'objet-monde', or 'world-object', defined as an object that operates in or on the world as such, rather than on one portion of it. Examples of world-objects include the atomic bomb (the first such object, according to Serres) air-pollution, radioactivity and mobile telephones, all of which make the whole world accessible from any single point within it: 'Who is my neighbour, my next-door? Virtually, the entire human population. In numbers, space, time and speed, these world-objects draw us to live and think outside and beyond place, towards the Universe which, veritably, has no address' (Serres 2001, 243-4). Living creatures are subject to global positioning in one sense, that everything has a specific position on the global; human beings have global positioning, because everything has its position via or vis-à-vis the world.

We are accustomed to thinking of this through metaphors of networks and networking, because of our habit of thinking of the network as the most efficient way of maximising the coverage of a space while also optimising navigation through and positioning in it – hence the parcelling out of the space of the world in grids or cells, as recalled in the American word ‘cellphone’ that made mobile telephony possible. But Serres insists that understanding the space into which we have already entered requires us to move beyond network thinking. For networks maintain, even require the distinction between here and there, the node and the vector, the local and the global. Indeed, the metaphor of the net or web may even be seen as a kind of conservative defence against the real explosion of relations that characterises contemporary communications. In order to map the space of contemporary communications and information exchange, we would need a conception higher-dimensional space in which there are no longer discrete points and fixed intervals, and no longer any difference between nodes and passages, between concentration and distribution: ‘There is nothing any more that distinguishes where I am, where I have come from, where I am going and whatever the space is through which I am displaced. At the very moment when the whole world speaks only of networks, they are melting in a general short-circuit. We will live henceforth in a space without measurable distance’ (Serres 2001, 260). In a traditional network, what matters most are still the points that are connected by the network, points where goods, meaning, information, can be concentrated. But in the new spatial relations that Serres asks us to conceive, there are increasingly no nodes, but rather only relations, passages, intersections. ‘Instead of imagining our modern messaging as networks formed from solid routes or electric wires, images that are just as false as those of spider’s-webs, it would be better to think them in terms of aqueous or airy volubility’ (Serres 2003, 379).

Sometimes in Serres’s work the mercurial figure of Hermes undergoes metempsychotic translation into a much more humble form, as in the fable of the fly that he offers us in *Atlas*. Unlike certain butterflies, which are capable of undertaking epic migrations across oceans, most true flies, or diptera, are very restricted in their range, even though, probably because of their synanthropic relations to human beings, certain species of fly are distributed almost ubiquitously over the surface of the earth. Serres helps us grasp this paradox, by asking us to imagine the flight of a fly.

It passes in hurried zigzags, choppy, discontinuous, changes course unpredictably, suddenly traverses the whole of the room, from one extreme point to its most distant opposite, in intervals of flight that are brief, medium-sized or long, as though generated by the throw of a dice, halts, rotates for a

long period in a tight circle, comes up against close or contiguous obstacles, glass, mirror, lamp, table, buzzes imprisoned, swerves into a tiny island, sets off again ... and now, look, it flies out through an open window, and enters a car or a plane, so that suddenly it is on the other side of the earth, where it resumes this dance that looks so crazy, but which reveals, miraculously, the reason and wisdom of the world. Yes, it really defines a locality, a here and now, marking out in its flight its frontiers, weaving an island of singularity, and seeming to abide in its chosen niche. But then, suddenly, it carries news of this particular there to distant and unexpected horizons, where it resumes weaving, threading, nesting a new place ... only to be off again. It localises, of course, but also, indubitably, delocalises. What invisible web does it weave, what network, what map does it mark out?

The atlas itself. (Serres 1994, 102-3)

A map, especially one based on a grid or network, assumes an invariant space, across which it may be draped, like the map on a scale of one-to-one imagined in Borges's 'On Exactitude in Science' (Borges 1998, 325). But the territory across which Serres's emblematic fly travels is no such static and invariant space, since it includes vectors, relays and trajectories of its own, which can anamorphically stretch and compress the graph of its flight, much as topological transformations vehiculate a given volume in different ways. In Serres's perception, events, actions and relations never simply reside in a given space; they make room for themselves, inciting the space they inhabit. Serres's space has no background; there is no space within or across which the traversals and passages of information take place, since the space is itself formed from them. There is no *darin*, or *dedans*, no space-within-which, because there is no invariant outside, no outside that remains at a distance; the outside is always in the process of being folded into the inside, like the kneaded dough of the baker.

Atlas asks, how does one map, model, landscape or atlas such a state of fluctuation? One of the recurring points in the repertoire of Serres's arguments is his delight at the felicitous fact that *le temps* in French means both time and weather. Reading Michel Serres is like reading an animated weather map. Weather is notoriously difficult to predict in the medium term (say, over a month or so), precisely because it is an effect of so many intersecting variables in so many dimensions. To take only one example, there is the Coriolis effect, that causes currents of air travelling in a straight line from point *a* to point *b* to be bent, as a result of the rotation of the earth, at different speeds on the earth's surface; the degree of the variation is

itself variable, depending on one's degree of latitude, since the earth is rotating just over a thousand miles an hour at the equator, and at a few centimetres a year at the poles). Strictly speaking, the rotation of the earth is not an extra dimension of space, but it is one of the parameters of a space that is dynamically transforming and transformed. A weather map is, of course, a simplification, not least because it cannot easily represent the movements of air and moisture upwards and downwards, but, as a mapping of flows and movements, especially in its animated forms, it provides a model for a richer and subtler method of mapping relations. Such a map is at once a more accurate rendering of the movements of information in the physical space of the world, and a 'more powerful model of thought or of a light, supple, tragic, formidable intelligence' (Serres 1994, 114). Serres even permits himself the dream that the weather map might constitute a kind of tremulous electro-encephalogram of the world itself (Serres 1994, 115).

For the principle of the absence of absolute space applies here too. When we map the world, we are one of the variable parameters that constitute it; we have our hands in the dough. Not only this, but we are prolonging and participating in an act of mapping that is already a formative part of the landscape or worldscape. This claim is to be found throughout Serres's work, but it is considerably amplified in *L'Incandescent*:

'Nature' inseminates itself with programmes. Things, dual, manifest both causation and coding. We are in want of a general theory of marks, traces and signals to go with the physics of forces, to teach us to remember the world and remember as it does, to write on it and like it. Things are also symbols. There is more than chemistry in chemistry. Why does this element react or not in the presence of some other element? Why does it choose it in this way? What 'faculty' in it makes election? Large masses write, molecules read. And, even more than inert matter, living matter writes, reads, decides, chooses, reacts – one would have thought it long endowed with intentions. An hour of biochemistry will quickly persuade one of the exquisite astuteness of proteins. (Serres 2003, 73)

At times, this claim approaches a kind of animism, or at least panpsychism:

The wind forms blades in the sea like lines on a page; the current traces its passage along the talweg and the glacier in a valley; the axle projects on the sundial the exact latitude of the place; the stylus scars the wax and the tip of the diamond inscribes its trace on the glass. Let us not pretend that we alone write. Oil and water do not mix; bodies choose their partners

in combination while excluding other elements; crystals characterised by impurities straighten the course of certain flows. It is not just we who are concerned with acts of choosing. Islands, cliffs, radioactive bodies engrave memories. Let us not pretend that only we remember. In short, things themselves, inert as well as organic, exchange elements, energy and information, conserving, diffusing and selecting this last. Let us not pretend that only we are given to acts of exchange. This inscription, these decisions, these mnemotechnics, these codings, along with many other examples, give to objects quasi-cognitive properties. There is an 'it thinks', in the sense of 'it rains' as well as an 'I think' or 'we think' (Serres 2003, 337-8)

As an 'intramaterial software [which] conditions our cognitive performances, like a kind of objective transcendental' (Serres 2003, 74), the world is therefore *acheiropoeticon*, made both with and without the use of human hands, both subject and object of an autcartographic process. When we map the movements of tides, tornadoes and continental drift, we are mimicking and furthering a work of self-modelling in the object of our attentions. Our writing, thinking and mapping make us 'intermediaries between the world and the world, between things and things, a sort of brief parasitic noise' (Serres 2003, 70). We are a pontoon, relay-station or short-cut in the change of phase, the precognitive passage of form into information. Thinking, *cogitare*, is, for Serres, increasingly understood as a *co-agitare*, a co-action.

Serres differs from those thinkers with whom he has sometimes been identified, in that he sees the contemporary world as effecting on its own terms the deterritorialisation that philosophers like Deleuze have called for. From *Atlas* onwards, and in ever more versatile ways, Serres will insist that we have relinquished or exceeded the condition that Heidegger announces as an equiprimordial condition, of *Dasein*, being-there or *être-là*: 'We are not 'beings-there' (*des êtres-là*): not only in that we are not often there, but also in that we are not even beings, because we exit at leisure from ourselves: *I think, I act, I work, I speak, therefore I am outside myself and without-there [hors-là]*' (Serres 1994, 187). Serres sees this, not as an unprecedented novelty in human history, but rather as a return to the fundamentally nomadic or exorbitant condition of the human which preceded the great settling and plantation of the agricultural phase of human civilisation. But now, even though we derive our name from the earth, 'we have quitted the earth for air, water and fire' (Serres 2003, 129).

Serres insists that the condition of occupying a niche does not apply, or no longer applies to humans, who, unique among the creatures of the earth, have no necessary and defining niche. As a species, we have no particular specialities – no piercing eye, impermeable exoskeleton, dorsal fin, or specially-adapted teeth – apart from the talent for borrowing and inventing faculties. We devise clothing and architecture to enable us to live under any climatic conditions anywhere on the earth. Only our fellow-travellers, the dog and the fly, have the same global geographic range as we, partly because of the accommodation we give them. (And, of all creatures, the dog seems most to resemble us in the almost limitless range of physical forms that it can take while still remaining a distinct species, that is being able to capacity to reproduce with its kind.) We are indefinite – a ‘stem-species’ (Serres 2003, 131). Where the Darwinian tree ramifies into more and more branches, each with its distinct niche and set of specialities, human beings seem to be moving forwards and backwards at once, in the direction of despecialisation, even despeciation.

This poverty becomes a totality. Serres goes beyond and frankly against many of his philosophical contemporaries in seeing in the indefinite the infinite:

losing innumerable specificities, values and real powers, the zero-degree, nil-potent human becomes, no doubt without wishing it, virtually omnivalent, totipotent, global and infinite. These impoverishments disadapt it for every local niche, leaving without limit or definition. Indefinite in certain organs as in our possibilities, we become the champions of inadaptation; we no longer know how to define ourselves. (Serres 2003, 81)

Atlas had offered the prospect of a world in which the conditions of space had changed, such that the local and the global were in intimate connection with each other. Ten years later, in *L’Incandescent*, Serres maintains that we have left space, being-there and finitude, behind altogether: ‘unfinished, we have become infinite. Without niche or cradle, house or road, without borders or limits. Incomplete, certainly, imperfect, to be sure, but launched into an unpredictable time and space, in an open universe’ (Serres 2003, 82). Philosophy, Serres has urged, should learn to inhabit a ‘non-place’ – between the media who speak of everything without ever having anything to say and the niche of the specialist who says everything about almost nothing’ (Serres 1995, 63).

But, in doing so, it will mimic the new condition of a humanity that is encroaching on or even entering into different forms of ubiquity, and thus

becoming *hominescent*. *L'Incandescent* rehearses the names of this new, emergent being. First of all, Pantope, because this being lives anywhere and everywhere; Panchrone, because he begins the work of integrating the different time-scales in which he participates in his embodiment, from the Grand Narrative of the DNA that dates from billions of years ago to the forms of technical and medical supplement that may have been developed mere months ago (Serres 2003, 216-9); Pangloss, because he accesses and negotiates between all possible languages (Serres 2003, 220-7); Pangnose, because of the prospect of the generalisation and dissemination of knowledge, accessible to all at every point 'human knowledge like the knowledge of the things of the world becomes the most widely-distributed thing in the world' (Serres 2003, 236); Panthrope, since universal communications dissolves the distinction between stranger and neighbour (Serres 2003, 234-6); and Panurge, because we make use of every conceivable form of machinery and energy-production (Serres 2003, 238-41).

Tendency

Under preexisting conditions of finitude and distance, the rule of non-contradiction or the excluded third will always apply. I am either here or elsewhere, either present or absent. Things either occur – they 'run up against', or, as we say, they *take place* – or they do not. In short, it is possible to distinguish the possible from the actual, and the passage of time can be thought of as a shrinking or cutting down to size of the possible, as it passes through the strait gate of what actually happens to happen. We still perforce think in this way. I either call home or I do not. I have 500 people in my contacts list, but I am in active contact only with a small number of them at any one time, and usually only one of them at a particular time.

At the same time, and as a result of the vastly increased connectivity of the contemporary world, the range of my possible contacts and relations is very much greater than at any other time. What are we to make of this enlargement of latency, or laterality, which gives me so many more points of the compass? Every culture and period of human history establishes its own distinctive calculus of the actual and the possible, sometimes with surprising outcomes. Thus, for example, studies have sometimes suggested that increasing the range of consumer items available actually narrows the range of the actual choices that consumers are likely to make among them; reduce the range on offer, and consumers seem to become more adventurous. Serres's work not only shows that the range and reach of the possible has

increased and ramified, but also suggests that the possible thereby begins to enter into the actual.

Serres frequently makes use of the expression ‘tending towards’. The world, the system of human relations, is often said in Serres’s work to be in the process of changing phase – tending towards the light, the volatile, the virtual. This connects with a general interest in the thematics of direction or inclination. Everything in the universe, Serres argues in the course of a remarkable discussion in his book *Le Tiers-instruit*, exhibits a preference for one direction over another; everything, planets, plants, living creatures, crystals, particles, lists or leans:

Direction or orientation comes neither from men nor from their preferences, from their inclinations, but from the inanimate world that precedes the living and from the living that precedes culture. Things lean to one side: force fields, boreal auroras, twisting turbulences, cyclones, spots on the planet Jupiter... the universal was born, it is said, from spontaneous symmetry breaking... Orientation can thus be said to be originary, invariable, irreducible, so constantly physical that it becomes metaphysical. (Serres 1997, 14, 15)

We persuade ourselves that we are interested in the direct, the straightforward and the regular, but the very words we use to express this – such as *direction*, with its relations to the word *droit* – exhibits a right-handed bias: ‘How can justice present itself according to the promotional image of the balanced scale, when the word *right* itself makes it lean to one side?’ (Serres 1997, 15).

The integral calculus devised by Serres’s abiding philosophical source, Leibniz, provides a mathematical basis for taking account of such potentials. Serres urges us to imagine a mode of philosophy that could equally integrate potentials and actualities. This is largely a matter of the prepositions that we use to govern our thought. We are accustomed, Serres has repeatedly said, to a philosophy governed by prepositions such as *in*, *on*, *under*, *above* or *at* – prepositions, in other words, that seem to designate a specific station or location. We would benefit from a philosophy governed by prepositions that more closely approximate to the etymology of the term ‘preposition’, in that they come before, anticipate, point or tend towards a position rather than already occupying it, and therefore imply a movement, imply implication itself, between positions – prepositions, therefore, like *along*, *between*, *amid*, *around*, *while*, *during*, *through* and, of course, *throughout*.

Has not philosophy restricted itself to exploring – inadequately – the ‘on’ with respect to transcendence, the ‘under’, with respect to substance and the subject and the ‘in’ with respect to the immanence of the world and the self? Does this not leave room for expansion, in following out the ‘with’ of communication and contract, the ‘across’ of translation, the ‘among’ and ‘between’ of interferences, the ‘through’ of the channels through which Hermes and the Angels pass, the ‘alongside’ of the parasite, the ‘beyond’ of detachment... all the spatio-temporal variations preposed by all the prepositions, declensions and inflections? (Serres 1994: 83)

There is one preposition which has preoccupied Serres in particular, which conveys the force of the leaning tendency of things, the tendentious tendency of things, and which therefore may seem like a metapreposition: *vers*, to, or towards. One might say that the whole of Serres’s recent work is an attempt to think under the sign of the *vers*, to think of things ec-statically, to feel the tug of time in things (Serres 2003, 307-21).

We are tending towards a system in which, more and more, tendency is part of the actual, in which potential gains potency, and the possible is more and more part of the existent. The strictness of the dichotomy between the actual and the possible is in large part a function of the kinds of relation we have to the latter. The more information, or lines of relation there are, the more we can anticipate, the more we will be both able and impelled to take action in respect to those possibilities. Vigilant attentiveness to unlikely events sometimes makes them more likely. It is possible to project and stage a much wider range of contingencies and possible relations to them than ever before, and those contingencies become more and more part of the tractable actual. In the past, we could entertain possibility in thought, but without being able to see, feel and touch it in actuality; now we can hold the possible in our hand – when, for example, we calmly connect with a mobile phone to an antipodean daughter or colleague via satellite – but do not yet know what kind of thought to entertain of it. In the past what we thought outstripped what we were; now what we are outstrips what we can think. The more connections we have with one another, the more thickly our present time is packed with protentions and retentions, the more tenses we need, the greater the number of arcs of tension running between the present and numerous possible futures and yet-to-be pasts. This is nowhere more true than in the financial system. The rumour of a bank collapsing is just as actual as the collapse itself, and may lead to it; so we need to have a strategy for coping with rumours as well as with the possibilities they noise abroad. Biding our time means inhabiting and managing what bankers call ‘futures’. We dwell, like the speaker in Emily Dickinson’s poem, ‘in possibility’ (Dickinson 1970, 327).

Pandemic

Serres's recent work is unashamed in its optimistic demands that we embrace rather than recoil from the fragile audacity of the universal condition towards which we may be orientated. But this audacity is fragile precisely because of the danger, so well-documented by contemporary philosophers, of a universalising of the uniform. Since his work *The Parasite* (1982), Serres's work has haunted by what may be called 'bad Hermes', a relationality that in fact abolishes fluctuation and invention because it localises the general rather than generalising the local. The final part of this talk will consider the question of evil, which may be defined as the appropriation of the universal by the local, as it periodically erupts in Serres's work.

The newly or prospectively ubiquitous arts and technics of the everywhere bring together good and evil in exquisite, terrifying ubiquity. The seventh name of the hominescent is derived directly from the god who gives his name to all the six other avatars of omnitude – it is *Panic*, at the thought of entering, perhaps irreversibly, into limitlessness. Serres is inhabited by twin passions – on the one hand a passion for the expansive, for that which propagates, ecstasises or generalises itself, leaving behind every parochialism and, in the process, every violent self-assertion of identity, every form of secure belonging, which Serres calls the source of every evil; but on the other, a passion for the exceptional, the withdrawn, the subtle, the fragile, the detached (Serres 1983). These two movements are contained in the term 'universal', the centripetal convergence of systems that tend towards unity, and the centrifugal dissipation of systems that move away from integration: 'What we call inert things, the sea, the earth and the universe, the sky, landscapes, time, living beings, we and our history, cultures and knowledges, abstraction and experience, you, me, and our soul, all of them move turbulently move between these two conditions' (Serres 2003, 308).

This becomes very clear in a book published earlier this year, *Le Mal propre*. The book zooms in on and amplifies a claim that has been made in incidental fashion at various points in Serres's work, that there is a close relation between dirt, waste, evil, violence and place. How, Serres asks, do we establish ownership of a territory? We mark it with our excrement. Just as the tiger urinates on the boundaries of its territory, so the child ensures exclusive rights to its lollipop by giving it a generously slurping lick. How does a nation establish its immemorial autochthonous relation to a territory? By fighting wars that result in the interment in it of innumerable bodies. The Romans buried their dead outside the city walls, but thereby maintained the

integrity of the city. We make a Holy Land for ourselves by sullyng its earth with the unclean blood of our sacrificed young. No wonder we call it 'soil'. One remembers the remark made by a French president some decades ago that the French people would never be free until every last American soldier had left its soil, causing Lyndon Johnson to enquire whether that included the ones buried in it. For Mary Douglas, famously, dirt is matter out of place. For Serres, place is a matter of dirt. He derives from it what he calls a 'theorem of natural right', as follows: 'the proper acquires and conserves itself through dirt. Or, better: the clean and proper [*propre*] is dirty' (Serres 2008, 7). Serres permutates a number of meanings of the French *propre*, which connotes cleanness, property and propriety: 'either clean and proper [*propre*] means appropriated [*approprié*], but then signifies, dirty; or clean and proper means really clean [*net*], and then signifies, without a proprietor' (Serres 2008, 7). The world is structured through the ordure of things.

In one sense, the movement from the regime of what Serres calls the 'hard' (*dur*) to a 'soft' (*douce*) regime of signs and information means a move away from the assertion of territory. But in another sense, signs make enlarging the work of appropriation through symbolic pollution even easier, for now, it is no longer a matter of symbolic pollution, but of a generalised pollution by symbols. The world is bleared and smeared, not just by physical effluents, but by visual and verbal sullyng, by the garish, blaring ugliness of billboards and traffic signs and ring-tones and chat-shows. Evil is vile because it expands possessively, exponentially; no longer content to sequester particular territories, the tsunami of signs has inundated the entire world, in pure, ravening expansiveness.

And yet, just at this point of maximal horror, when expansion has become a space, the territory of the exponential, a chink of redemptive possibility opens. For the generalisation of publicity, of the 'technologies of rumour' (Serres 2008, 59), has used up all the available space – at which point, it suddenly starts to lose its rationale:

The owner of a furnace could pollute the air as far as the oceans and the stratosphere; suddenly, he aggrandised his ownership over the earth, the waters and the air without limits; whether he wanted it or not, his proprietorship swelled, globalised...exploded. It was constituted in and through all its others, neighbouring or far-flung. (Serres 2008, 67)

At its limit, limitation evaporates, which is to say, meets its limit. The universalising of pollution ensures the inappropriability of space: '*we can no longer enclose a territory*' (Serres 2008, 68). This, in turn, means 'the end of geography' (Serres 2008, 67). Serres offers a vision, delicate and ardent at

once, of a universalised horizon, of an aperture on to the *apeiron* of Anixamander, the condition of being unconditioned, that will require from us a generous renewal of thought about the most general of our concepts – subject, object, body, place, time, generality itself.

Serres is, I fear, much less persuasive, much less invigorating, when he tries to show the implications and applications of this thought. In considering the question of evil, for example, he can become prosaic, formulaic, parochial, prescriptive, even a little monomaniac, often grotesquely against the grain of his own thought. Not all evil comes from belonging; language effects something more and other than the murder of the world.

What Serres can help us to do, better perhaps than any other contemporary thinker, is to recognise the hitherto-unconceived scale on which we must now live and think, or rather the necessity of integrating scales – the fly and the satellite. He helps us to apprehend the actuality of the possible. He helps us get a feel, a kinetic foretaste, of the form of the thought, technical, historical, philosophical, political, that will be called for from us. So Serres's thought may be said to be virtual, or prepositional, which is to say, in advance of, or on the way to becoming position, thesis.

Serres's thought has the reach it does because, at the very moment at which we are becoming, perforce, more than ever integrated, more exceptionlessly proximate to each other than ever before, we (the 'we' being a motley crew of academics, politicians, religious leaders and anti-globalists) are everywhere recoiling from the prospect of such enlargement of scale and such alarmingly contracting horizons. Mundophobes, we are becoming more and more determined only to see and value what we call difference, specificity, exception, unassimilability, heterogeneity, gratuity, or the singular 'event', all of this often paradoxically heightened into a new rhetoric of the absolute and the illimitable. Perhaps we are becoming vulnerable to that horror of connections that W.R. Bion analysed, under the name of 'attacks on linking' (Bion 1993, 93-109), and thus in the process becoming timorously allergic to the enworlding function of thought itself.

Previous ages have sought to temper their lust for the infinite and make peace with the finitude of man. We, on the contrary, must make accommodation to our new evicted condition, whatever queasiness our quasi-omnitude may cause us. For this not-being-there, this uninhibited uninhabiting, is in fact our new finitude. We are as stuck with our illocative *Umwelt*, our Pandominium, as unable to opt out of or escape from our surpassing of our own life and history, as the spider in its self-made web, or the anaerobic microbe sheltering from oxygen and history in riverbed or intestine. There is no choice about the path that lies in our path. The world

is, as it was for Milton's disgraced Adam and Eve, all before us, so there is nowhere else for us henceforth to go, except simultaneously in the two contrary directions indicated in the lovely, stirring, compound preposition: *out into*.

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