

## Parables of the Para-

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Michel Serres's concern in his book *The Parasite* is with this relation of the aside, beside or alongside; but this forms part of a more general concern with position and the large role played in thought by the prepositions, the lowly way-signs or synapses of speech which Serres once called the 'algebra of fluxes'. In one of only a couple of short conversations I have had with Michel Serres, I asked him whether he felt that in speaking French he was speaking a dialect of Latin, and he replied 'But yours is the language that allows one to say "postpone" '. A preposition is wittily recursive, for the word signifies that it gives you the position of something in advance – pre- or prior to position. And, look, in the word *preposition* itself, the prefix *pre-* is there before the position is determined. Why do certain prefixes get recruited to our needs and others not? I recommend the game of inexistent prefixes. We have preposition, proposition, exposition, transposition, composition, supposition, apposition, disposition, imposition, interposition and juxtaposition, for example. It feels like that ought to be the complete set, a full symposium of inclinations and orientations. Yet there is no perposition or periposition; I can purpose and I can postpone, but I cannot forepone, and I no sooner recognise that it is not possible to metapose or parapose something than I feel I know what it is to need to (for perhaps we try to parapose something every time we prefix a word with *para-* ). Of all confected words, the most persuasive, the ones that we feel should exist, and understand most intuitively, are these arbitrary nuts-and-bolts kind of composition. Our most familiar word-families have these far-flung, distant relatives, fellow-travellers, roads not taken, or roads taken but disused in language. I recommend the generation of imaginary prepositions as a kind of gentle cognitive gymnastics, and a way of toning and extending the work of thought – though I warn you the practice carries with it the risk of addiction. Such imaginary words make us imagine what we like to think of as 'parallel worlds'. Peter Sloterdijk begins his huge *Spheres* trilogy with a reminder of the tradition that Plato put a sign on the outside of the academy reading 'Let no-one enter here who is not a geometrician' (Sloterdijk n.p.). And Michel Serres has often identified himself through this kind of lexical geometry, or rather topology:

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)

The alongside concerns the parallel, and plunges us instantly into its enigmas. There is something mysterious about all parallels; they have the uncanniness of twins and mirrors. My image in the mirror matches my every move, point for point, motion for motion; but it can do so only because I can never intersect with it, can never cross over into its world, or it into mine. And yet it is this very feature of the parallel that makes of it a kind of haunting, and that thereby reaches into me. Edward Thomas's poem 'The Other' tells of a traveller who, hearing of a man resembling him who has preceded him on his journey, sets out in pursuit of his double. Eventually, he comes upon him, complaining 'in the tap-room's din' of the one, the other one who is the speaker of the poem, who has been making his life intolerable by his unrelenting pursuit. The poem ends in a kind of stalemate, as speaker and other keep their distance, the poem eventually collapsing into a kind of flat and deathly identity of sound, the parallel of rhyme becoming the identity of repetition:

And now I dare not follow after  
 Too close. I try to keep in sight,  
 Dreading his frown and worse his laughter.  
 I steal out of the wood to light;  
 I see the swift shoot from the rafter  
 By the inn door: ere I alight  
 I wait and hear the starlings wheeze  
 And nibble like ducks: I wait his flight.  
 He goes: I follow: no release  
 Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease. (Thomas 2008, 42)

The world of parallels is both alive and magically inert, alive and alert because intently inert; the cosmos imagined by Lucretius before the world-forming accident of the *clinamen* has no life, no form and, most importantly, no time, for it consists of atoms which proceed in laminar

form, keeping themselves to themselves in non-interfering parallel lines. Nothing can occur in such a universe without the arbitrary and unpredictable swerve of the atom that creates a chain reaction of adjustments and perturbations. I think of Lucretius every time I enter the hall that debouches from the Victoria line at King's Cross station: we all move smoothly and privately to our goal as long as we move in parallel lines; but the passenger who cheats, cutting diagonally across the combed lines with a sudden, spasmodic hypotenuse, gaining time for themselves but at the cost of turbulence and irritation.

That which moves alongside me seems to be a kind of companion or second self, yet may also be my rival, the one who stands on the opposite bank, *rive gauche* to my *rive droite*. Our bodies operate in parallel, with our many coordinated pairs of limbs and organs, feet, nostrils, kidneys. In a certain sense, my left hand never knows what my right hand is doing; I can rub my hands together, but I cannot look at my left eye with my right, or cock one ear to listen to the other. I can, I must, sleep on side or the other, but I cannot, as Michel Serres is fond of saying, sleep on both ears at once. Perhaps the relationship of the *para-* underlies the particular kind of hostility that is reserved for the one who lives a parallel life, that may, that must, be close without ever closing the gap, through the savage diagonal that enters into the dangerous buffer-zone, the no-man's land between the trenches. The parallel is the social relation itself, perhaps, in which, though we may often collide, we can never wholly coincide.

But part of the mysteriousness of the parallel is that it does in fact embody an intersection. As every schoolgirl once knew, parallel lines never meet, or meet, as used madly and oxymoronically to be said, only at infinity, as though the impossibility of coming to rest were the name of a station. In the closed and finite space in which Euclid's postulates operate, parallels represent the appearance of the infinite within the bounded, or neverness within sometime. Euclid's fifth postulate is known as the parallel postulate. It is a troublesome anomaly, a little hiccup in the smooth line that propels us from axiom to axiom. For, unlike the preceding postulates, that a straight line can be drawn between any two points, or that all right angles are equal, the fifth postulate is not self-evident. There is a long history of dispute about the postulate, given that, as one historian of the dispute puts it, Euclid himself realised 'that he could neither prove it nor proceed without it' (Lewis 1920, 16). The parallel postulate seems to come from, or point to some new dimension of space, the dimension of the unfinished; as the

intersection of the infinite and the finite, it is itself a kind of arbitrary swerve or spasm. And indeed, it would be the struggle to prove the fifth postulate that, during the nineteenth century, would make possible the non-Euclidean geometries of Lobachevsky and Bolyai. C.F. Gauss began working on the problem at the age of 15 and 21 years later wrote that the problem was the ‘shameful part of mathematics’ (quoted Bardi 2009, 118). He delayed publishing his demonstrations that Euclid’s parallel postulate was not deducible from his other postulates or fear of seeming to precipitate a collapse of something like the whole structure of human learning (Lewis 1920, 19). The parallel lines of the fifth postulate are the point at which some other kind of world, or many other kinds of world, lying alongside our own, breaks across into it.

Music depends on the capacity to mix and mingle what occurs simultaneously and separately in what the score represents as geometrical lines. But, as always, parallelism has an ambiguous status. The practice of singing in parallel fifths arises spontaneously in many forms of popular or folk music, but theories of musical counterpoint in the West strictly prohibit the construction of harmonies with such exact parallels. It is for this reason that perfect fifths are used so often to signify the barbaric or the alien or the Oriental, the almost-same. Steve Reich’s *Different Trains* enacts historical crossings between different musically-invoked train journeys. In fact the principle of the perturbed parallel might be said to be the essential compositional principle of Reich’s work, since many of his works depend upon the fact that true and complete parallelism cannot in fact exist or be indefinitely sustained. In tape pieces like *Come Out*, a single phrase is played simultaneously on several tracks, which slowly drift out of phase with each other, creating aural bunches and clusters. In *Piano Phase*, two pianos try and fail to play exactly the same phrase simultaneously. What matters is what makes the unison of the two parallel voices impossible, their inevitable interference with each other, that makes of the two a three, or a syncopated succession of threes, as the piece drifts between the two of perfect parallelism and the three of interference.

The train tracks that began to make their appearance across Europe and then quickly the rest of the world during the nineteenth century provided a psychosocial diagram of our many parallel lives. The train or tram track suggested a remorseless linearity, but could also, in its patterns of switchings and divergences, suggest the sudden possibility of bifurcation or divagation. In the nineteenth century, psychologists reported on an outbreak of fugue, not in the musical sense, but in the *fuga*, or taking

flight from oneself that people experienced in sudden amnesia, which might find them living and working in another town; often, this switching of identity seems to have been prompted by the experience of railway travel, coming to a junction which tempted or prompted one to aside or jump the tracks. Philip Larkin's poem 'Dockery and Son' takes the occasion of a return visit to his old college to reflect on how far seemingly parallel tracks can diverge – 'For Dockery a son, for me nothing,/Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage' (Larkin 1988, 153). At the centre of the poem is an image of the traintracks at Sheffield station:

where I changed,  
And ate an awful pie, and walked along  
The platform to its end to see the ranged  
Joining and parting lines reflect a strong

Unhindered moon. To have no son, no wife,  
No house or land still seemed quite natural.  
Only a numbness registered the shock  
Of finding out how much had gone of life,  
How widely from the others. (Larkin 1988, 152)

Many such questions are set in train in Michel Serres's *The Parasite*. It is the book by which he is most known to many English readers, especially those interested in theories of information and interference. But it is in many ways his most difficult and intractable book, the one that is most difficult either to enter or fully to inhabit. One might say that it makes itself subject to the logic of the parasite, or some of the many kinds of parasitic logic, that it makes out; and the relation it has to the rest of Serres's work can be seen as a kind of parasitical one, in that it both runs alongside that work, and yet also stands most unassimilably aside from it. Serres's previous works, especially the essays assembled into the five sequences that make up the collection *Hermès*, would often employ fables as a parallel for the main theme. But fable in *The Parasite* is no mere episode, for it seems as though here everything is fable, in which, in Yeats's phrase, 'Mirror on mirror mirrored/Is all the show'. The book begins with and frequently recurs to, the fable of the country rat who is invited to dine handsomely in the house of the town rat. While they are gorging in the house of a rich tax collector, he wakes up and disturbs them, at which the country rat takes flight, preferring to eat simply without anxiety than to eat sumptuously but with the constant fear of interruption. The book multiplies parallels to this primal act of interrupting the feast. Serres's interest throughout the book is in the way

in which the apparently simple model of a closed system interrupted by some noise, or unassimilable element, can effect a kind of shift in relations that, at a higher level, may itself come to be regarded as systematic. The rats are parasites, but they form a stable system that is itself interrupted by the noise that is a kind of parasite for them, an unwilling guest at their feast. The farmer's sleep is interrupted by the noise of the rats' feast at his expense, their noise and his noise forming a kind of parallel system. Guest and host alternate their positions. Serres enjoys the fact that, as a tax collector, the host is here also a predator on others, so a parasite in his own right. Indeed, man '*Parasitus sapiens*' according to Serres (Serres 2007, 104), so multiply parasited, is also to be regarded as the largest parasite of all, taking his percentage of the cornfield, the flock and the beehive.

Serres is particularly interested in *The Parasite*, as he is throughout his work, with the points at which two apparently analogous kinds of system, the system of signs, perceptions or information, and the system of energies and actions (approximately, eating and speaking) can be seen both to parallel each other, in that they follow equivalent logics, and to interfere with each other, the hard system of physical energies crossing diagonally over into the soft system of signs. The word *parasite* does this work very well, for in French, it means not just the one who makes a meal of your meal, or of you, but also the noise or static that eats away at the clarity of a transmission or broadcast.

The word *parallel* is constructed as a coupling. Its two elements are *παρα-* alongside + *ἄλληλ-* one another. So it does not, as one might expect, name in the second half of the paired word *what* lies alongside each other (lines, for example), but rather names the relation or the reciprocity that might be thought of as the result of that lying alongside. The two halves of the word are themselves in the same sort of parallel relation as that named by the whole word.

Serres's book is constructed similarly as a series, or we had better say, an array, of parallel reflections on parallel relations. Perhaps, for this reason, one might probably hesitate to use the word 'constructed' at all. For, less even than in Serres's many other books, does one find the consequential logic by which one thing entails or is entailed by another, or the ligatures that bind together one proposition with another. Instead there are relations of resonance between different, but allegedly parallel series. Many of these are the parallel texts with which Serres puts his text in dialogue, all of them paratexts which Serres parasites, inserting his

own logic into them , as a virus inserts itself into the body of its host, along with the many buried citations and, so to say, paracitations, from Aesop, La Fontaine, Rousseau. *The Parasite* is an anthology or festival of feasts, or feast-fables involving different animal-companions: a festiary.

One might say of the book what Michel Foucault does of the logic of resemblance that he claims is dominant until the sixteenth century. The system of knowledge in which what matters is how things resemble each other rather than how they cause each other is 'plethoric' because it has no obvious beginning or end:

Resemblance never remains stable within itself; it can be fixed only if it refers back to another similitude, which then, in turn, refers to others; each resemblance, therefore, has value only from the accumulation of all the others, and the whole world must be explored if even the slightest of analogies is to be justified and finally take on the appearance of certainty. It is therefore a knowledge that can, and must, proceed by the infinite accumulation of confirmations all dependent on one another. (Foucault 2002, 34)

There has always been something wonderful but disconcerting about such systems of resonance. A soprano may set a glass to sing or shatter it. Benjamin Franklin's glass harmonica, which exploited the capacity of glass to amplify sounds musically when rubbed, produced sounds that were ethereal, yet also potentially dangerous in their uncontrollable effects on delicate sensibilities: Franz Mesmer employed the glass harmonica in his séances, using it as a kind of image for the work of animal magnetism he aimed to simulate, and by simulating, actually to produce. The system of resonance seems to borrow from and guarantee the Pythagorean vision of harmonic cosmic proportions: and yet it also seems to produce unpredictability or sudden effects of disproportion. Resonance, precisely because it does not require connection can constitute what Einstein, with a rationalistic shudder, called 'spooky action at a distance', when referring to the condition known as quantum entanglement. Rupert Sheldrake's theory of 'morphic resonance' (Sheldrake 1981, 117) which argues that there are telepathic connections between biological forms that do not require physical modes of transmission such as gene-inheritance, has haunted mainstream biological theory as a kind of parabiology, or parasite-like irritant.

The parasite is etymologically that which eats alongside one, from παρα- beside and οἶτος food. Accordingly, feasting, eating and entertaining, as well as the speaking and singing that may occur in parallel with eating, recur throughout *The Parasite*. One of these many feasts occurs in another of Aesop's fables, which tells the story of Simonides, who agrees to write victory ode in praise of a certain boxer. But Simonides enlarges upon his praise of the boxer, or perhaps interferes with it, by devoting two thirds of his poem to praise of the twin gods Caster and Pollux, who were renowned for their boxing skills. His client refuses to pay his whole fee, offering instead a third of it, corresponding to the proportion of his poem that had fulfilled his commission. But then, by partial recompense, he invites Simonides to dine with him. During the feast, two athletes, grimed and sweaty from their exertions, appear at the door and summon Simonides from the feast; when he gets to the door, the athletes have vanished, and the roof of the house suddenly collapses, killing all the guests but Simonides, who has been saved by the interruption of the athletes, the twin gods in mortal forms, to repay him for his praise of them.

Serres's reflections on this fable speculate on the impossibility of establishing equilibrium, or absolute correspondence. Simonides cannot do justice to the athlete except by doing more than justice, going beyond the strict letter of his commission to include the twin gods:

How do you praise a champion? He is only what he is, once you have said that he has won the race. You can speak of him only by evoking the gods, giants, heroes of the games. This is what Simonides the Elder does, just like some newspaper reporter. He spoke of Castor and Pollux; it was no hyperbole, that is to say, no exaggeration, but a parable. (Serres 2007, 28).

Serres is instantly nudged aside into remarks on the word *parable*, which means literally a throwing aside. But turning aside takes him back to the turning-aside that is in fact the shape of the whole of Aesop's fable, or parable, in which the useless or luxurious excess represented by the two thirds of the ode devoted to the gods comes back to settle accounts at the end.

He throws himself aside, the fabulist says. He makes a distance, a difference [*écart*]. We are indefinitely on the side, the proof of which is the fact that the word *parole* [speech, word] derives, I don't know how, from this parable, parabola. Between the word

and the thing a parasite makes one move aside. The parable was the divine word: Caster and Pollux always return. (Serres 2007, 28)

Serres is right: the *parole*, in English, the word of honour which one gives in exchange for one's freedom, hence the judicial sense of being 'on parole', is a modification of Latin *parabola*. The parlour where one eats is the parlour, or parliament where one also, in parallel, speaks or palavers. The parable is a parabola, because it is a juxtaposition or throwing together, a process by which something curves or boomerangs back to itself. It belongs to, and sets humming by resonance, other forms of throwing, notably the hyperbolic, in which there is a throwing beyond, the symbolic, which throws things together, the metabolic, or the diabolic, signalling that which is thrown across, as it were diagonally. In English we would have to add to this the wonderful word *shambolic*, wonderful because it is an interloper, which lives illicitly off the energies of the *-bolic* field. The *shambolic*, the messy or chaotic, derives from the Danish *skammel*, footstool, and Old English *sceomol*, a table for setting out goods, especially meat, or for counting money received in exchange for those goods. Because these tables were associated with butchers, their name became a synecdochic way of referring to a meat market, and then, by further association, with the slaughter-house that provided its produce and then, by further extension, to scenes of carnage, disorder or ruin in general. The word *shambolic* is formed, not through the metonymic principle of association or contiguity, but the metaphoric principle, which is perhaps just a little metabolic too, of resemblance, with the word *symbolic*, from which it seems to differ only by a single, shibboleth-like phoneme, and yet also seems to reverse, thereby allowing the word to be both word and thing, both the ruin of the consonance implied in the symbol and the symbol of that ruin. There certainly is a tendency within the word *shambolic* to bring the physical and the semiotic together, as when Shakespeare's Henry VI says 'Far be the thought of this from Henry's heart,/To make a shambles of the parliament-house!' (Shakespeare 2001, I.i, 191)

The parasite is that which disturbs or complicates a system: and yet, by that very action, may provoke a consolidation of the system through complexity. A system must represent an island of simplification amid the greater disorder or unpredictability that surrounds it: but the simpler it is, the more unstable, because more at risk from erosion. A system that gains in complexity is at once less defended against the disorder that threatens it, and more defended, since the menace of the unpredictable

has now been included within it, made part of its structure of predictability. 'Noise', Serres writes, 'is a sign of the increase in complexity. It would seem that the separation of city and country was a decisive one in history: there were simple rats and complex rats afterwards' (Serres 2007, 67). The logic is, as Peter Sloterdijk has been saying for some time now, immunological, a metaphor that arises frequently in *The Parasite*:

[S]ystems have been immunized by becoming more complex. They become stronger by becoming more tolerant. They were acclimated to the revolutionary, the madman, the deviant, the dissident: an organism lives very well with its microbes; it lives better and is hardened by them. (Serres 2007, 68)

Throughout *The Parasite*, Serres is drawn to the moments in which systems are both jeopardised and strengthened by noise. For there to be system, which is to say orderly and regular relations, the parasite which interrupts those relations must be excluded; but in order to be excluded, the parasite must be made a constant preoccupation, and therefore included. To be held at bay, the parasite must be kept at hand.

I am writing this on the 8.58 from Finsbury Park to Cambridge. Every three or four minutes an imperious recorded, attention-grabbing ding-dong sounds, maddening in its jollity, presaging an announcement of the name of the station we are approaching. Or, less regularly, a ticket inspector appears, demanding that I fumble out my ticket for presentation along with my railcard. The train incessantly murders the train of thought. But then I begin writing about it, and begin to see how to catch from the surcease of thinking more success. Writing about interruption I interrupt it into continuity.

Noise is what impedes relation, what arises or comes between communicants. But, since all relation will involve a kind of impedance, just like every electrical current, noise is also necessary to every relation. This is the most important principle of the parasite for Serres, that it is a disruption to a relation that is nevertheless the essence of relation; and so a disruption to a system that is itself system forming. Serres's work never goes further into this paradox than here in *The Parasite*.

Systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning. And they can be formalized. Given, two stations and a channel. They exchange messages. If the relation

succeeds, it is perfect, optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it has failed. It is only mediation. Relation is nonrelation. And that is what the parasite is. (Serres 2007, 79)

The parasite is beside itself; it is the being-beside-itself of every being, and the slant relation to every slant relation.

In the distinguishing of information from noise, everything depends upon the observer, the necessary third for whom there will be information or noise. Modulating the feast-fable with which his book begins, Serres imagines a guest being summoned from a dinner-party by a telephone: close to the phone, the meal is noise; close to the meal, the telephone is the interruption. Deciding which is signal and which is noise will depend delicately and intimately on the position of the observer, and perhaps nothing more is meant by an observer than a distributor of signal and noise. Distinguishing information from noise, the observer will perform work; he will perform the miracle of creating energy through simply sorting. He will be a kind of Maxwell's Demon. That is to say, he will himself be a kind of parasite in relation to the noise-information couple that he will both form and deform by his presence between them.

The conundrum which slowly gathers through the book is that of the relation it has to all the encapsulated relations of which it is the observer. Is this position outside or inside? Serres struggles to become the subject, the external observer of everything, explaining that to be an observer is to make less noise than what is observed:

The observer is perhaps the inobservable. He must, at least, be last on the chain of observables. If he is supplanted, he becomes observed. Thus he is in a position of a parasite. ... the parasite is the most silent of beings, and that is the paradox, since *parasite* also means noise. (Serres 2007, 237)

At times, intermittently, all of this is rendered as a matter of number: mathematics parasites fable, which, fabulating mathematics, parasites it. There can be no one that has not emerged out of the primal indistinguishability of noise, that has not emerged from the cleaving of primal noise into the noise-information couple. That is, one must come second, after two. But the two can only be two for some third, for the observer who sorts the one from the two, whose existence is their

sorting. So, if one comes after two, then two equally comes after three. And so on. There is no primal state which will not be the unfurled final term of an interminable chain of predeterminations.

The book is at once too abstract and too concrete. There is at once too much detail and not enough, too much wood and too many trees; it is exorbitantly terse in its aphoristic plethora. The greatest difficulty presented to the reader of *The Parasite* is distinguishing the fable from the fabled. Are these stories of feasts and interruptions just fabulations of the abstract mathematics of information theory? Or are those equations modelling of the logic of the fables?

It is tempting to believe that the system of relations which Serres makes out through the figure of the parasite ought to be of some utility, that it might be possible to make use of it, to siphon off some of its force for our purposes, putting us thereby in the position of the parasite in relation to it. But, more than any other text of Serres's, the twisting and relentless logic of *The Parasite* makes this simple relation very difficult to maintain. This is not a text that one can simply apply. The parasite would enter even into the relation between the text and the reader that might seek to parasite it: it is a fractal relation of self-similarity, that reproduces itself at every level (Serres 2007, 73).

This is partly because the parasite always fluctuates between 'a value of destruction and a value of construction' (Serres 2007, 67). One of the many meals that Serres evokes is the meal of Pentecost recounted in Acts 2, in which the Holy Spirit appears as the sound of a rushing wind and tongues of fire, and those present are able to speak in many other languages. Serres sees in this the promise of a kind of maximum of relatedness, a kind of pure relation that cancels itself out, as though the parasite were intensified into the condition of the Paraclete, from Greek *παράκλητος* advocate, intercessor, a person called to one's aid, formed from *παρα-* + *κλητός* called out, invited. Early in the book, we are offered an ecstatic vision of this paradise of exchanges, in which 'the parasite Paraclete becomes the Host' (Serres 2007, 47).

Grace passes in the fuzzy area between words and things, between the canals where the substantial foods and sonorous voices flow, between the exchanges of energy and information, an intermediate space, a space of equivalence where language is born, where fire is born, where it makes the things of which it speaks appear. (Serres 2007, 47)

But on the other side of the fluctuant coupling there is a maximum of another kind, a maximum of noise or din formed from human communications, a dense network of disorder and violent exclusion. This is also the maximum of the parasite, as the principle not of grace but of Evil. In the end, appallingly, it seems to be evil that has come near to triumphing. Universal relations can become universal noise.

Inundation of hell, swelling up of history. Here is the Devil then; no, no, I wasn't expecting him. He's come. The book is done, as if it were burnt. I didn't know that it was irreparably a book of Evil. The Evil of noise, of the song of hell, thundering; of hunger, illness, pain; dressed as animals and now undressed as naked man; of Evil, quite simply. Meal, banquet, feast of the Devil. (Serres 2007,253)

*The Parasite* is the equivalent in Serres's oeuvre to Beckett's *L'Innommable*, whose teeming, infinitely involuted structure it seems to listen in on. In each case, arising in the middle of the two writers' careers, it is also the work that marks their terrifying *ne plus ultra*, or point of no return. It is a book which threatens to swallow Serres up; struggling to establish a position from which he can act as the parasite in relation to his own work, he finds himself endlessly parasited by it. In the end, he will need to save himself, not through relation, but through the principle that will give its name to the book that he will write almost immediately after completing *The Parasite*. In place of relation, involvement, communication, there will be the necessity of distance, abstraction, detachment (1983).

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