Glu-Gloriole: Michel Serres, Glory and the Social Bond

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One of the most insistent and, as things currently stand, institutionally unappealing mottoes of Michel Serres's writing is that 'all the evil in the world' derives from 'the libido of belonging' – the *libido d'appartenance* (Serres 2003, 141; my translation). It would be easy to mistake this for the assertion that the longing for belonging produces nothing but evil. This is not in fact what Serres says, which is that whatever evil may arise, will have arisen from the collusive lust for inclusion. Serres does not therefore rule out the possibility that some kinds of good might also arise from belonging, which is just as well given that his own writing is so expressive of and responsive to the goods associated with loyalty and membership – in terms of class, region and language, for example. Still, what Serres does say seems disconcerting enough and perhaps especially unpropitious for a group of persons hoping to find 36 hours' worth of things to riddle out concerning the relation of Serres's work to the idea of social contract.

In his *Grand Récit* tetralogy from 2001 onwards, Serres does his best to persuade his reader and himself that we are entering a phase of hominescence, employing the kind of verb known as inceptive or inchoative, in which human communication will sublate the dichotomy between connection and disconnection. Electronic communications, he believes, will enable a kind of particulate ubiquitarity that will no longer require the cancelling out of individuality by generality:

> All the old *belongings* are dying: brotherhoods of weapons, parishes, motherlands, unions, and even families, which are being reorganized … Rather than these belongings, whose names are abstract virtualities and whose bloody glory is praised by the history books; and rather than these false gods who consume infinite victims, I prefer our immanent virtual which, like Europe, does not require anyone's death. We no longer want to coagulate our assemblies with blood. (Serres 2015b, 56, 57)

It was an audaciously sunny prospect and one that does not currently look close to being realised. One of the most prominent obstacles to it is the mode of socialised, and socialising vehemence, that might be

called the *libido exaltationis*, or lust for glory, which Serres links with assembly through the coagulation of blood.

Serres is understandably celebrated as a philosopher of communication, whose work is animated, not only by the study of forms of transmission, passage, mediation and communication, material and technological, but also by the ambition to establish lines of communication between different styles of thought relating to those subject. In a footnote in one of his earliest essays, he establishes a link between communication and the thermodynamics, proposing that every form of communication for a homoiothermal organism may amount to saying 'Keep me warm' (Serres 1982, 76). But in fact one of the structural features of Serres's work is its unresolved oscillation between the warring principles of contraction and detachment, coherence and dehiscence. Serres is almost obsessively convinced that the libido of belonging is never far removed from the making of war, while peace depends on distance and detachment, exemplified in the posture of detachment from tribe, party and allegiance which he himself maintained, with pertinacious politeness, through his career. The thermodynamics of communication tend to the conditions of autistic inferno:

> The collectivity knows only itself and gives itself only itself as object, its noise, its relations, its streets and its swamp, its glory, its power, its politics, its hatreds. The collectivity is fed by and makes its clamors its delights, deaf to the noises of the world, blind to its light, insensible to its calls. (Serres 2015a, 101)

Serres joins a long tradition in setting knowledge against worldly glory through the story of the meeting between Diogenes and Alexander the Great, in which Diogenes replies to the offer of worldly power and riches offered to him by asking Alexander to get out of his light.

> Indifferent to power, disgusted by competition, culture escapes glory. The culture which makes living possible, the kind of culture which does not delight in death, which laughs at hierarchy, is never part of the race. Pitiful in its barrel, it watches the barbarians play the deadly games of competition. (Serres 1989, 72)

For Serres, glory is the joining of the secular and the eternal, a 'glory-glue' that is constituted by the essentially religious ceremonies of the media: 'Informative, symbolic, and virtual – in a word, negentropic –

this immanent, gentle, vainglorious cohesiveness [*glu-gloriole-colle*] comes back on our screens, from the virtual to a sort of reality by giving substance to the exchanged glances of society' (Serres 2022, 98; 2019, 127). 'La glu de la gloire colle le collectif' (Serres 2019, 192) Serres crisply declares, an aphorism wanly translated as 'Glory holds the members of a group together' (Serres 2022, 149). One might perhaps have ventured something like 'glory-glue is the collagen of the collective', or 'the glue of glory is the protocol and eschatocol of the collective'. Glory produces war, the glory of war, the war for glory, the glory-war of all against all, the war for glory prosecuted in the glory of war, the spectacle that attests to glory, and on which glory in fact depends: 'This exchange of glances – televised images, in their modern incarnation – holds human beings together through the spectacle of glory, which is to say, glory itself' (Serres 2022, 97).

Why glory-glue? Surely the desire for glory is thymos, which if untrammeled must be fissiparous, an esteem-war of all against all? How does the superlation of glory become collateral? Part of the answer is that the *libido exaltationis* is parcelled out between the desire to be glorious and the desire that, as the once popular phrase had it, *glory be*. And the desire for there to be glory is multiplied and intensified by the *fiat gloria* of collective glorification. We can surmise that every glorification of a particular object, whether it be deity, nation, saint, star, general, guitar-hero, or team, is a *magnificetur*, a magnification of magnificence itself, through its often asymptomatic carriers.

Angels are messages and messengers, but *en masse*, in the mediation of their multitude, their role is to give unceasing glory to the godhead. The hosts of singing angels that populated the theological imagination and are literalised in the teeming broods of carved angels perched on the hammerbeams of East Anglian churches – *non Angli sed angeli* – are the heavenly doubles of the hosts of the faithful, giving and making glory, in the magnificence, literally the making-great or artifice of greatness, of their own glorification *en masse*. We worship what exceeds and has no need of us, but in the process make ourselves its necessity.

The implication should be clear. Glory is a phenomenon of the host, and the maximal most. We magnify it as we magnify ourselves, by making ourselves part of the first person plural, the plurality made first-personal, of collectivity. The first and primal glory is in fact the

infinity of the human, not of what infinitely exceeds it: for what infinitely exceeds the human is just the human itself, in its sense of its own gloriously uncompletable auto-essay. The glory of the human is the human capacity to glorify.

For this reason, glory is wedded to the order of symbol, precisely because glory is the incommunicable, even as it depends upon the communication of this incommunicability, and is perhaps nothing less, nothing other, than this communication. This makes glory the commons of the uncommon, and the all-too-worldly figuring of the out-of-this-world,. The fetishes and false gods that Serres decries are indeed the signposts of absolute glory. Since glory must be beyond symbols, glory must also be activated in the very falling short of symbols, their idolatrous way of indicating that indication is all they can do. Those who lust after exaltation must also lust for and through its indicative symbols, which are able to lift up the lust for exaltation into the exaltation of lust.

Glory exceeds, and in no wise more gloriously in mass communications, as they go about the work of communicating their own gloriously inestimable massiveness and multitude. The greatest glory is in the saturating exorbitance of symbol, the secret indication of every local instance of the glorious.

But the same time, Serres wants us to think, in particular in his last book, *Relire le relié* (2019) that the absolute glory of the godhead is designed to bring peace to the warring world, through the very image it provides of the absolute unattainability of absolute glory. False gods eventually give access to the inaccessibly true God: '*False gods produce the collective relations that produce false gods, but in the end serve as filters of the truth*' (Serres 2022, 100-1). Absolute glory serves to absorb and neutralise the war of all against all for relative, rivalrous glories:

> To avoid the prospect of total war, then, and the possible extinction of the human race, glory must be given only to Him than whom no one else is higher. This title, Most High, aligns the scale of comparison vertically, while emptying it of all gradations, as though the rungs of a ladder were ripped out. … Once the mortal poison of glory will have been borne away from us , carried off to infinitely inaccessible heights, we will live in peace. (Serres 2022, 151-2)

That is, very possibly, the aweing aim of the idea of transcendent glory. But, responding to the arresting question he asks at the beginning of his *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 'why does power need glory?' (Agamben 2017, 369), Giorgio Agamben comes to a different answer about what his subtitle calls the '*Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*'. For Agamben, the superlative must always engender comparatives, or relative superlatives: absolute height must always seem to let down rather than kick away the ladder of degrees and gradations. Glory is the necessary accessory to the kingdom and the power:

> the function of acclamations and Glory, in the modern form of public opinion and consensus, is still at the center of the political apparatuses of contemporary democracies. If the media are so important in modern democracies, this is the case not only because they enable and control and government of public opinion, but also and above all because they manage and dispense Glory, the acclamative and doxological aspect of power that seemed to have disappeared in modernity. (Agamben 2017, 370)

Serres writes always of the need to break with glory. Serres tries to keep himself in the condition of what he calls the 'mystic miscreant' (Serres 1997, 151), and holds out the promise that we might be able to 'avoid all membership' (Serres 1997, 136). But he is fully aware too of the collegiality (a word which does not come from reading together, but from sticking together) of power-glory and the glory-power of what we call knowledge:

> I have passed enough of my life on warships and in lecture halls to testify before youth, which already knows, that there is no difference between the purely animal or hierarchical customs of the playground, military tactics, and academic conduct: the same terror reigns in the covered playground, in front of torpedo launchers, and on campus, this fear that can pass for the fundamental passion of intellectual workers, in the majestic shape of absolute knowledge, this phantom standing behind those who write at their table. I sense it and divine it, stinking, slimy, bestial, returning as regularly as the bell rang, opening and closing colloquia where eloquence vociferates in order to terrify speakers all around. (Serres 1997, 134)

Knowledge, and the soft realm of the sign have multiplied the signs of glory and the glorification of signs. I run a research centre tumultuously called CRASSH, though, for something that I am on the point of ceasing to do, I really need some such mood of the verb as the depletive or the anceptive. I tell people cheerfully that the centre is well-named, because it engineers what Shaftesbury calls 'amicable collision', whereby, he promises, we civilly polish one another off (Cooper 1999, 1.39). But the acronym has a sonorous dimension too, in a way that may connect to Serres's reflections on the philosophy of noise, for the acronym CRASSH is also, of course, a caconym. And noise is inseparable from glory, and the shivering imperium of noise of noise the caconomy and cacocracy to which communication always tends. Many cultures make a noise as part of their ceremonies of acclamation, as enjoined by Psalm 100: 'Make a joyful noise unto the Lord'. Noise here is Hebrew *ruah,* רוּעַ, used many times in the Bible to signify a war-cry, alarm, roar of triumph or, less often, howl of distress. Spenser in 1590 could still evoke 'an heauenly noise ... /Like as it had bene many an Angels voice,/Singing before th'eternall maiesty' (Spenser 154), and noise could also name a company of musicians or noisemakers, as well as, up to the end of the sixteenth century, fame or reputation. But in English thereafter, the idea of noise seems steadily over the last four centuries to have absconded from the realms of glory, and become ever more noisome and nauseous, even as the phenomenon named by the word has increased in amplitude and volume.

The noise of communications, and the urge to blare abroad the noise of one's own communication, has become an ever-more encompassing principle – in UK higher education, for example, communication being understood in military terms, as the principle of what is known martially as *impact*, often micro-measured in what are called 'hits'. An academic research centre in a large university – and even a small university can provide a wormhole into the global chorality of publicity– is no still small voice, but is the peri-epicentre of the shuddering earthquake that binds the earth together. An earthquake destroys: the reports of earthquake, recent or impending, are cohesion itself.

The solemn-sinister history of the word *doxa* hums the understory of the affinity between thinking and glory that Freud would wisely name 'omnipotence' (*Allmächtigkeit*). Democritus famously surmised, or is said to have, 'The first principles of the universe are atoms and empty space' (Diogenes Laertius 1925, 2.453) 'Nothing exists except atoms and

empty space'. But then, apparently, a third existent occurs to him, rushing in to fill the space between being and space: [ἄλλα πάντα νενομίσθα]; 'everything else is merely thought to exist', sometimes rendered 'everything else is opinion'. But this sentiment itself is what Democritus supposes, or is reputed to suppose: 'Δοκεῖ' (Diogenes Laertius 1925, 2.452). Doxa, deriving from δοκέω to think, imagine, consider, suppose, presume, is translated throughout the bible with the word glory, the idea being that the glory of God is such as to demand its reflection back on itself via the angelic surrogation of human glorification. The doxology is therefore the glorifying utterance of glory in formula like 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' and 'Glory be to the father'. Glory and opinion remain impossible to dissever.

Serres's later belief is that absolute glory will cancel out the pitiable tootlings of worldly glory, and the glory of divinity diminish to nothing the libido of ersatz earthly exaltations. His self-wrought intoxication may point us a path to a soberer apprehension, that, as communication approaches its maximum, what must hold humans together, the fractious community brewed from the buzz of their communications, is the esteem war of all against all. In the eighteenth century, many believed that the search for the good opinion of others, the economy of Mandeville's 'Aerial Coyn of Praise' (Mandeville 1989, 90), was, in the absence of any indwelling instincts of sorority, the sovereign form of social cement. But such arguments must disturbingly accept the indissoluble continuity between what Mandeville calls 'the noisy Toils of War and publick Bustle of the Ambitious' (Mandeville 1989, 91). Serres himself is unable to reconcile his own fluctuation between the rapt belief that 'Culture escapes glory' (Serres 1989, 72) and that 'Culture continues war by other means – by the same means maybe' (Serres 1997, 134). But this is not because glory and war are irreconcilable, but rather because they are everywhere glued together – cohering, cohabiting, colleged, we might even say – in the very forms of human collectivity, through the exaltation of repute, report, and the rancorous rumour of acclaim. The difference is not one of quality, but of scale, quantity, mass and multitude. It is certainly true that communication is a good thing. It is equally certainly not true, as Aristotle, Confucius, and everybody's mother knew, that the more of a good thing you have, the better.

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