

## Antischismatics

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What does it mean to be against things, to be against anything? Some three years before the conversations recorded in *Éclaircissements*, Bruno Latour had characterised Michel Serres's work in terms of its resistance to, or, if that seems too bristling and obstinate a term, declining of the practice of critique. In the course of it, Latour makes an odd observation. Serres, he says,

slowly realized that the sciences were not a way to limit violence but to fuel it. He decided to hear and to feel this terrible earth-shaking tremor travelling from Hiroshima, the only date in history that he takes as a real turning-point; the earth has been shaking ever since. His rupture with epistemology, with Bachelard, with Canguilhem, with the Critique project, comes from this realization: all these eminent gentlemen are deaf to the noise made by the atomic bomb; they go on as if physics was business as usual; as if the emergence of *thanatocracy* – his word for the black triad made by scientists, politicians and industrialists – had not reshuffled for ever the relations between society and the sciences. (Latour 1987, 92)

The oddity, which I do not for a second imagine to be lost on Latour, lies in his use of the phrase 'rupture with epistemology'. How does one make an epistemological break with an epistemology of the break? What does it mean to make a rupture with rupture? Curiously, the more definitely and defiantly you are against something, the more likely you are to find yourself *right up against it*, making it more difficult to put distance between it and you than it would be if you were uninterested in its existence, or more interested in the existence of other things entirely. Almost always, to be against things is to be vehemently *for* being *against* them. Because antagonism compels interest in one's opponent, *inter-esse*, being-amid, there is always intimacy, humid and hugger-mugger, in this enmity.

The conversations between Latour and Serres converge repeatedly on their allied divergence from the fractious and factitious intoxication of critique and the agonistics it allegedly enacts. We can, I think, give this convergence a local habitation and a name, indeed the name that Latour gives it, of 'Gaston Bachelard'. I have been hugely educated by Massimiliano Simons's searching readings of Serres's relationship, and nonrelationship, to the scientific epistemology of his time, and especially to Bachelard, and do not here aspire even to mimic let alone match them (Simons 2022). My interest here is less in epistemology than in what I am incorrigibly going to keep on calling epistemopathy – the term I employed in my book *The Madness of Knowledge* (2019) for the feeling, or phantasms of knowledge. Epistemopathy concerns, not what we know about what we know, but what we feel about knowledge, and feel about what we seem to know. My hope here is accordingly to characterise the dramaturgy of the conversations with Latour rather than to adjudicate their content. In their conversations, philosophy is a matter, and a manner of wanting, in a way that, I hope to intimate, is powerfully Bachelardian.

There are two kinds of antagonism in Bachelard from both of which Serres takes his distance. The first is doctrinal, the second formal. The first is identifiable in and as the content of Bachelard's arguments, in which, from the beginning to the end of his work, scientific rationality is seen in terms of an aggressive negation of ordinary experience, including what settles into the second nature of accepted science.

The second is the breach that Bachelard allowed, with puzzling serenity, to persist between his two kinds of writing, in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of the imagination. Serres recoils from this breach in Bachelard, which is indeed hard to account for, and at times can even seem pathological. According to Serres, Bachelard

consummated the rupture that we've talked about between science and the humanities – perceiving on one side a spirit of burning the midnight oil and working and, on the other, a material imagination that sleeps, dreams, and ponders. This is a traditional and definitive way to bury the humanities in the sleep of reason, to submerge them, to identify them as lightweight, to burn them. It's an ethical, even moralistic, way of distinguishing: nocturnal

laziness on one side, lucid activity on the other. (Serres and Latour 1995, 31)

Serres is right to point to the moralism of Bachelard's outlook, though 'nocturnal laziness' is a strangely moralistic way of referring to the 'philosophy of repose' to which, in the opening sentence of his *The Dialectic of Duration*, Bachelard had declared his allegiance (Bachelard 2000, 18). Partly in reaction to Bachelard, or to this 'Bachelard', Serres's work, priding itself on its suppleness and flexibility, hardens into a series of inflexible postures, centred on what must be regarded as a vast, if understandable overestimation of the militancy of intellectual life. One can assuredly make out in Bachelard a similar fixation on what he calls the 'coefficient of adversity', a phrase he uses only once in *Water and Dreams*, but Sartre thought well enough of to use more than twenty times in *Being and Nothingness* (Bachelard 2006, 159). But I think we can see in Serres an equal and opposite opposition to this principle. Both Serres and Bachelard as a result effect, albeit in different ways, an overestimation of adversity, Bachelard asserting the uses of adversity, Serres, recoiling from them, in the libido of the solitary asserted against the libido of the solidary.

One of the most telling symptoms of this, indeed almost a kind of blazon for it, is Serres's dislike of footnotes and references. There are good reasons to share Serres's dislike of the footnote, when it is employed for the purposes of exhibitionism, unctuousness or vacuous wrangling. But there is also such a thing as an ethics of reference, which is based upon acknowledgement of inconvenient as well as convenient others. Footnoting can curdle and stifle one's writing, to be sure, but the effort to represent one's thought as self-begotten can itself become, if not imperial, then imperious. Serres sees referencing as armour, the strutting display of invulnerability, and hopes that, by contrast, unfenced by references, the writer can address himself directly to his reader, without the pretence that they are speaking in the name of the law. But this kind of unqualified utterance can also seem to lay down its law, with no interest in dialogue. One can abandon footnotes in the interest of humility, but the abandonment can also lead to disdain. Footnotes need not be a mode of terror, and can sometimes even help to mark or maintain a truce. The strongest thing to say about footnotes is also the mildest, that they constitute the opportunity for politeness.

I admire, and openly acknowledge my admiration for Serres's writing, which is full of many kinds of distinctiveness, but it would have to be acknowledged that it is absolutely original much less often than it aims or claims to be. Of nothing is this more true than the doctrine of the necessary contract with nature for which Serres has become so celebrated and approved in our time, and perhaps for that very reason. So I do not think we can easily credit his claim that his retreat into the wilderness is the necessary condition of the principle of invention, which he sees as the opposite of antagonism. Serres represents his solitude in terms of a retreat from the violent vacuity of polemic. Attractive though the idea is, it is not one that can be maintained consistently in good faith as an adversarial principle:

You seem to think that no idea exists or blooms except in opposition to another or others. This harks back to our previous discussion on debate. An idea opposed to another is always the same idea, albeit affected by the negative sign. The more you oppose one another the more you remain in the same framework of thought.

New ideas come from the desert, from hermits, from solitary beings, from those who live in retreat and are not plunged in the sound and fury of repetitive discussion. (Latour and Serres 1995, 81)

But does this not imply that solitude itself must also derive from the framework it opposes, to the extent that it opposes that framework, as opposed simply to diverging from it? These two alternatives, of polemic and invention, so sharply, and even dogmatically bifurcated in Serres's work, are very far from exhausting the possibilities, and their polarisation is a strange survival of a kind of schismatics in Serres's writing.

The question of the agonistics of knowledge runs through the conversation between Serres and Latour, such that the nature of the conversation itself becomes the topic of debate. At one point, Latour comes close to articulating the charge that Serres's rejection of what he claims to be the spirit of aggression in academic life is itself unwarrantedly aggressive:

*What is hardest for me to understand, perhaps because I belong to the Anglo-Saxon world, is your relationship to discussion. You*

*never see it as anything but a dispute. For you the intellectual milieu is always one of warfare with each and all. (Latour and Serres 1995, 35)*

Latour also teases Serres about his grandiose fantasies of persecution, hinting that it may be a characteristic effect of the sociology of knowledge in France:

*But I see this completely social trait from the outside, and I don't much believe in it. All the great French intellectuals claim to be persecuted. .. Isn't this a French trait? Each one of them claims that the other has the positions of power and that he alone is engaged in mortal combat against universal opposition. (Serres and Latour 1994, 39)*

The Bachelard that Serres criticises is the historian-epistemologist of science. Though he also criticises the extraordinary separation between Bachelard as rationalist and Bachelard as critic of imagination, Serres has hardly a word to say about the workings of Bachelard's material imagination. It is hard to resist the suspicion that Serres would find it more difficult to mark his difference from this Bachelard, given the generosity with which much of his own writing carries forward the methods invented by Bachelard to pursue the rationality of imagination. Perhaps the most singular irony in Serres's hostility to the notion of the Bachelardian doctrine of the break is that it depends on such an amputated view of Bachelard, which does not sufficiently appreciate the brokenness of Bachelard's body of work. This way of making Bachelard coherent sets aside his own, admittedly somewhat perplexing incoherence. 'Je ne suis pas l'homme d'un seul tablier', as Bachelard put it, as though to say 'Give me a break' (quoted Gonseth and Gonseth 1947, 117).

Perhaps the most striking convergence between Serres and Bachelard concerns their own shared relation of hostility and desire to what might be called the epistemic metropolis, in Bachelard's *Le matérialisme rationnel*, allegorised more explicitly as the 'city of science' (Bachelard 1953, 8). Serres shares with Bachelard not only a rural upbringing, but also a certain romance of the rural. At the heart of the work of both of them there is a resentment of the epistemic metropolis, source of both scorn and yearning.

Bachelard's work became the expression of a rhythm of striving and repose, which increasingly became, not merely the subject of Bachelard's attention in his writing, but a way of dramatising his own fraught relations to the ideas of thought and knowledge. Increasingly, we will be able to take all Bachelard's arguments as allegories of themselves, meditations on the force of their own formation and maintaining, which are driven by the effort to understand, and to live out, the work of thought as it is being undertaken. In a magnificent aside in his 1939 book on Lautréamont, Bachelard abruptly poses the question over which he spent so much of his life haggling: 'why did God make life when he could have made thought directly?' (Bachelard 1986a, 54) The paradoxical adherence to the principle of negation that Bachelard would in the following year call 'The Philosophy of No' (1968b) may be read as an enactment of Bachelard's ambivalence toward the attainment of intellectual autonomy in knowledge, which is both immoderately and insatiably desired, and powerfully resented, as the entry into the very means of his exclusion. Bachelard's Philosophy of No constantly seeks vengeful mastery over the very knowledge that seems to offer him mastery. In Serres too, we have an outsider to what Bachelard called the 'city of science', meaning both Paris as opposed to Bordeaux/Garonne, and also the abstract city of rationality, who can never rest easy within the very institutions of knowledge that he struggles to enter. For Serres, this becomes more complex because of the fact that the very name given to knowledge as institutional violence, is 'Bachelard'.

This fraught relationship to the phantasms of knowledge is on display in two areas: first of all in pedagogy, and secondly in the pseudo-pedagogy represented by psychoanalysis.

Bachelard began his professional life as a teacher (he married a schoolteacher and wrote in a letter at the end of his life that he would have liked to have spent his life in a schoolhouse), and spent a decade painfully educating himself while teaching physics and chemistry in the college of Bar-sur-Aube where he had himself been a pupil. Running alongside his devotion to knowledge, Bachelard maintains, from the beginning to the end of his life, a strangely intense and unabating contempt for any knowledge that is merely inherited, and a deep antagonism to the pedagogy of mere transmission, to a teaching that is itself untutored. It is as if every kind of knowledge that was not self-born,

or born from the refusal of what has been inherited from the past, were a snare and a delusion. So the forming of knowledge was always also a deforming, in which one must continuously attempt to eject whatever one has merely assimilated. What results from this is a simultaneously exorbitant veneration of knowledge, and a hostile rejection of the forms of knowledge that constitute impurity and impediment.

For Serres, too, pedagogy is a continuing preoccupation. As in Bachelard, the getting of the kind of wisdom towards which Serres aspires requires a pedagogy which refuses and goes beyond the assertive and acquisitive will to power of the official forms of knowledge sedimented in 'the organized game of teaching, of masters and pupils, of research labs and patrons, of journals and publications' (Serres and Latour 1995, 85). Like Bachelard, Serres alternates between the bitter resentment at being shut out of institutional knowledge, and the sense of having gone beyond it. Like Bachelard, Serres has the compensatory belligerence of the autodidact, who both despises and magically over-idealises the omnipotence of thought.

In the course of the last section of their conversations, Serres evokes the conditions of wisdom, which may be glossed as responsible knowledge, power that attempts to learn power over itself. The vision that Serres opens up will mature in the sequence of books that begins with *Hominescence*. It is a vision that, astonishingly, reads like the prospects of a second, synthetic nature-culture opened up in the three books of scientific epistemology that Bachelard produced after the Second World War, on the rebound from his alchemical sequence on the elemental imagination:

science and technology make us responsible for the generations to come, for their numbers and their health as well as well as the real conditions that we will leave them - this or that kind of a world, depending on our decisions and our acts. Successful scientific practice objectifies wisdom. (Serres and Latour 1995, 135)

This is one of the many involuntary rehabilitations of the Bachelard whose rejection has led Serres to this point. But this is the Bachelard of universal synthesis rather than of striving against nature – or, as Massimiliano Simons has so elegantly shown, the Bachelard of

phenomenotechnics rather than of epistemological rupture (Simons 2022, 48-59). By saying no to Bachelard's philosophy of no, Serres finds himself having to say yes to Bachelard's own secession from himself.

Psychoanalysis is a much more tangential presence in Serres's work than in Bachelard's, but in both of them psychoanalysis is what might be called a touchy subject. In his somewhat tortured denunciation of Bachelard, 'Reformation and the Seven Sins', Serres is quite right to observe that there is 'not a word of psychoanalysis' in Bachelard's *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, (Serres 2019,37), in which psychoanalysis is really just the moral engine of Bachelard's chastisement of corporeal allurements. Bachelard's determination to represent psychoanalysis as a means of alchemical purgation is in fact an instance of just the aggressive and avaricious will to knowledge that Bachelard himself denounces, and that psychoanalysis might itself profitably take as its object (not least in relation to itself). But this is not the end of the psychoanalytic story for Bachelard, who came to believe through his encounter with Ludwig Binswanger, Jean-Paul Sartre and existential psychoanalysis that there was a psychoanalysis of self-formation and of worldmaking as well as a psychoanalysis of purifying negation. Bachelard is much more inclined to call this 'phenomenology' or 'psychosynthesis' rather than psychoanalysis. This kind of psychoanalysis is not so much a means of driving out the alchemy of dream as a willingness, in Jung's terms, to 'dream the dream onward'. It is this Bachelard, rather than the one banished by Serres and Latour that seems so powerfully at hand in Serres's later writing, not least in his frequent rhapsodies on the 'naked faculty' of the hand itself (Serres 1995, 34), which are a comradely commingling with Bachelard's 'chiromancy' of 'the dreaming hand' (Bachelard 1988. 53, 52).

Serres has little dalliance with psychoanalysis, beyond a couple of passing and inconclusive references, and it seems likely that he would have included it in the dogmatic kinds of intellectual tradition he resists. And yet there is much in Serres's writing that seems intuitively hospitable to psychoanalysis, not least the psychoanalysis of knowledge, of which psychoanalysis itself seems so suggestive without often being fully articulate, though not being fully articulate is one of the things to which psychoanalysis can be so sensitively attentive. Serres returns to the psychoanalytic term 'libido' (though he would probably



prefer to see it as a classical term) in the principle he repeatedly asserts that the 'libido of belonging' is the source of all evil. Bachelard, though similarly hostile to institutional belonging, is more attuned than Serres to the opposite condition of what might be called the libido of apartness rather than *appartenance*.

Bachelard is the Eumaeian 'third who walks always beside' Latour and Serres (Eliot 1969, 73). Science is at issue in the chiasmatic counter-transference *à trois* played out between Bachelard, Serres and Latour, but it is less its object than its occasion.

If this is not a psychoanalytic reading, it is equally not a philosophical reading either, since I am unpersuaded that what Serres finds his way to writing, in part through his intimate enmity with Bachelard, is really philosophy, or wholly philosophy, at all. But the drama of thought staged by and between Bachelard and Serres gives us a way of wondering whether any truly interesting philosophy could ever be wholly philosophical.

Though Serres is astonished and appalled that there is no mention of Hiroshima in Bachelard's writing on science after the War - and it is to be sure, a perplexing and somewhat mulish muteness - one might say that Serres's sense of having been 'formed intellectually by science's internal revolutions, and philosophically by the relationship - internal and external - between science and violence' makes him sound like Bachelard's allotrope (Serres and Latour 1994, 18).

So Bachelard becomes the code-name for agonistic philosophy, for thinking conceived as a mode of warfare. But the militancy that Serres and Latour rightly attribute to Bachelard, using it as the lever for their own rupture with rupture, returns in the agonistic principle that will come to the surface more and more in Serres's writing hereafter. Thereafter, Serres and Latour, in their own intimate enmity, will be the militants of the complex way of taking up arms on behalf of the sea of troubles, that both will invite us to see as 'world war' (Serres 2008), or war of the worlds (Latour 2002).

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