Abstract

Michel Serres’s work traces a historical transition where technologies of mediation replace a framework of life formerly managed by an economics of production. Readings of Serres tend to affirm in this transition the opening to an ecology (econarratology or media-ecology) or towards a replacement of the human in trans- or post-humanism. In this article I analyse the terms of the transition in Serres’s affirmation of a philosophy grounded in the potential for connection between the traditions of storytelling and the sciences of connection. The article rediscovers within his overt Hellenism a figure of the Anthropos affirmed in the Sophist philosophies that Plato had set out to destroy. If science proceeds, first in its Hellenic dawn, and more recently in seventeenth century arithmetic, then it must be disabused of its war-game attitude. Serres affirms science (almost singularly) as the condition on which the species might continue its adventure into the future, and in the process he establishes a position that may challenge ecologically oriented discourses.

Keywords

Accident, Algebra, Communication, Cosmology, Fractals, Information, Mythology, Noise, Ontology

Hermes contra Prometheus

The space of the world is described as requiring artful connection (Serres, 1983: 48).

Hermes, the god of intermediaries and translators, the Angels bearing messages and their incalculable number, took the place of Prometheus, the old solitary hero of fire. Thus, our body alleviated its pains (Serres, 2019: 17).
The later writings of Michel Serres seem to take a generalizing turn. He refers to the specific structure of a fabulous récit, in which Hermes replaces Prometheus in the care of world affairs. More prosaically: a way of life directed by the forces of mediation has replaced one previously managed by the forces of production. But if we have learned to eliminate the pains of the body by operating various technologies of mediation, then the question arises: whither misfortune in this palliative age? The manner of replacement occurs within and as a significant moment of a larger mythopoetic or cosmological narrative arc, which specifies the space of origination as an opening towards its own end in the entropic heat death of a given universe. We equivocate between mythos and cosmos because the precise yet elusive form of a connection that endures between them, between multifarious traditions of storytelling—the saga, the fable, the tale—and the natural sciences, helps establish the problem to which Serres’s philosophy consistently responds: inquiries generally concerning mediation and, with the stakes raised, of remediation, of recursive systems and the becoming-meta-media of the medium. Difficulties concerning the space of a possible connection consistently mark Serres’s philosophy, in which he considers the medium in terms of the technical determination of the connective interval. These kinds of possibility can be perceived in the crossing of remediated passages as they turn back across their own tracks.

In philosophy and across the disciplines today a similar set of questions, albeit more obscurely, underwrites the escalating expression of an already widespread concern with the passage from nominally economic systems (systems of production) to novel ecological rationalities (relational or cooperative arrangements). The passage follows the historical form of a gradual replacement of emphasis, where a former model, stressing the role of the adversary and implicating the scientist in a quasi-military calling, is relaxed in place of a new one whose object has emerged out of an intensifying focus on the problems of mediation. Two kinds of attitude are voiced in the expression of this concern, with both often interacting in the same work. One is oriented towards an epochal change that almost no one denies has occurred in the structure of relations since the middle of the last century. It affects the identities of mediated bodies beyond yet traversing narrowly anthropocentric viewpoints, which must be adapted if they are to comprehend the vivacity of inanimate beings as well as the escalating hyper-spaces of machine life. The other kind of attitude helps fashion the insistence of an ethical imperative, marked most clearly in academic scholarship from both the sciences and
humanities, towards a concerted attempt to rethink and express—to communicate—the question of being as an ecological imperative. Captured with some force in Peter Sloterdijk’s response (after the poet Rilke) to the naked assertion that *You Must Change Your Life*, this ethical attitude partly recovers and partly invents its object, in an anthropotechnics contributing to a new sense of disciplinary practice capable of bringing this object for once into the open so that it may resound among the other entities of the biosphere (Sloterdijk, 2013: 1-16).

For example, the passage to a kind of story-telling in Serres’s later work, and the grand cosmology within which it occurs, takes it in a direction that Christopher Watkin argues can disclose an “econarratology.” The stakes for Watkin are clear: “In developing a narrative of the universe, this new departure begins to show us how the powerful tool of narrative identity can be brought alongside Serres’ existing biosemiotics to challenge and shape the way we understand the ‘non-human’ world” (Watkin, 2015: 171). As the terms of his subtitle announce (“from biosemiotics to econarratology”), Watkin approaches narratology in his reading of Serres by telling the intellectual story. The hint of a narrative chiasmus suggests that bringing the more recent “departure” alongside an “existing” understanding of Serres might have created an effective interference, maybe even an ironic reversal (the conventional chiasmus effect). The story depends upon Watkin’s sense of a biosemiotics that, from the 1960s through to the 1990s, characterises Serres’s philosophy. During this era, Watkin points out, “Serres has rooted the origins of human language firmly in the rhythms and calls of the natural world” (Watkin, 2015: 171). So a biosemiotics means a study of signs that affirms in the sign a natural origin and a structure (of communication, of community, of mediation, of the relation of guest and host and so on) that continues to operate in connection with its origin as a natural process. On the back of biosemiotics, econarratology reassesses the place of the hominid formally known as the human within the complexity of a cosmic ecosystem that already exhibits a semiotics (already expresses, communicates, writes) in all of the ways traditionally reserved for the productive singularity, in Serres’s term the *hominescence*, of the human.

Is there any bracketing of the meaning and value of nature here? Serres’s discovery of nature tends to pass through the mediation of either mythopoetic narrative or mathematical science. He voices Galileo: “nature is written, it is drafted in a language”
(Serres, 1983: 270). Or seeking the relation to the object, he writes: “Let us define nature as the set of objects with which the exact sciences are concerned at a given moment in history” (Serres, 1983: 267). Serres concerns himself more with the relation to the object: to the object by which a historical science produces itself; to an object that it treats as an adversary. We need to go further. The philosophy, the science, and the narrative traditions from which Serres generates his philosophy, tend to approach nature—sometimes with reason refusing the name itself—in terms of a complexity at the edge of which a domain arises that remains inhospitable for thinking. It arises where thought reaches its limit, at its chiasmic edges. It may represent what, in current scientific registers, ensures that the essentially teleological progress of scientific knowledge, i.e., towards its end, will nevertheless not arrive because this teleology describes an entelechy, a structural condition without an end in itself. The narratology of science without end might therefore seem exhausted in its being inextricably hinged to a nature defined before any other value as the object of science. Serres approaches this knowledge in the precise historical emergence of western science, as constituted by the formal characteristics of a game, a ludics of opponents and allegiances, strategies, and cunning (Serres, 1983: 268). And from the earliest texts, Serres treats the chiasmus as constitutive of narrative, in at first an analogous formation in connection with the feedback loop required for the generation of markovian models (later to be designated fractal forgeries). Then, the question of the bridge designated by the term analogy begins to reveal in its own chiasmic structure a further crossing: the logos of analogy, an isomorphic relation that is at the same time an interference between force and writing. Narrative in Serres is disclosed as already presupposing the crossing at the level of the narrating of narrative, the telling of the story and, in the familiar motto, a medium whose passage is the message itself. So, language is rooted in the elusive hyperspace of its connections.

It would be difficult to ignore the shadow of Hellenism as it falls across Serres’s philosophy, at a time when the Helleno-centric viewpoint has been challenged. What is at stake is a historical provenance during which, under the general rubric of science, an information technology prospered alongside the rediscovery of mythology, under a specific sense of its authority as cultural memory. Much of what occurs in Serres’s Hermès involves establishing the connections, the crossings, by which these two kinds of idiomatic knowledge can be made to interfere with each other. It is in relation to the
mythology that Serres can argue: “it must be remembered that the foundation of science—whether it be the pure sciences at the Hellenic dawn or the experimental sciences in the Classical age—had taken place in an agonistic field” (Serres, 1979: 269).

The passages elsewhere on Oedipus (“Language and Space: From Oedipus to Zola”) chart each pivotal moment of the myth by extrapolating from it the function of the *chi* (chimera/chiasmus), whose basic symbol is incest: the three-way road where Oedipus kills the father and appropriates the mantle of law; the chimerical sphinx (itself formed of parts connected by *chiasmic* twists); Jocasta’s recognition of the scar on the foot of her son/husband, and so on. Serres derives a general logic from the consistency of the chiasmatic twists that connect the narrative parts:

Now, then, at a certain beginning of a certain story, on the family tree containing ordered paths structured by some ordered relation, incest describes a loop that turns back upon itself toward a previous crossroads and strongly reconnects the spatial complex (Serres, 1982: 48).

The narrative seems to want to incorporate its narratology, which describes its structure, as if it was its main message. Serres concludes this section by positing “a global law” written into the mythology by way of a fatal imperative demanding “the connection of what is separated” (Serres, 1982: 48). Alongside Oedipus, the movements of Ulysses also crop up in explanatory passages, in relation to whom: “It is not at all the *discours* of a *parcours* [the discourse of a passage], but, radically, the *parcours* of a *discours* [the passage of a discourse], the course, cursus, route, path that passes through the original disjunction, the bridge laid down across crevices” (Serres, 1982: 48). The invariant structure requires a path that follows a *prima facie* order covertly interrupted at its source, which it crosses as it progresses.

**Dangerous multiplicities**

So, when Serres describes the non-Euclidean geometries as “a dangerous flock of chaotic morphologies”, he situates mathematical science and Hellenic mythology on the same discursive plane (Serres, 1982: 53). “Myth,” he writes, “attempts to transform a chaos of separate spatial varieties into a space of communication, to re-link ecological clefts or to link them for the first time: from the mute animal to the proto-speaker” (Serres, 1982: 50). Language is thus rooted in the indecipherable space between
muteness and speaking. The clues are at this stage less in nature than they are in the puzzling modes of connection discoverable in already constituted technologies of language. And so, myth mediates the state of nature and the condition of language. The “flock” describes a kind of multiplicity, intuited wherever a certain nature throws together the sound of an innumerable and mobile assembling: “a flight of screaming birds, a school of herring tearing through the water like a silken sheet, a cloud of chirping crickets, a booming whirlwind of mosquitoes … crowds, packs, hordes on the move, and filling with their clamour, space” (Serres, 1995: 2). But these examples of the calls and rhythms of nature, explicable as aggregates or sets within a universe contained without issue by philosophies like that of Leibniz, serve inadequately (or analogically) for a kind of noise, a kind of multiple, that does not after all fit the classical conceptual container: “The multiple as such. Here’s a set undefined by elements or boundaries. Locally, it is not individuated. Globally, it is not summed up. So it’s neither a flock, nor a school, nor a heap, nor a swarm, nor a herd, nor a pack. It is not an aggregate (Serres, 1995: 4-5). A reading adequate to the object that Serres intimates here in the opening sections of Genesis (1982) might take a guideline from the obscure boundary suggested by a peculiar incompatibility between e.g., Locke and Leibniz (between empirical and arithmetical logic), which Serres sums up with the motto: “empiricism would always be correct if mathematics did not exist” (Serres, 1983: 230). The field of cacography, which would study the operations by which the mishaps of form (slips of the pen or stammers of the tongue) emerge as constitutive for but accidental to communication, can seem to be an explicit subversion—a deliberate perversion—of the orderly progress of logical abstraction. But the reverse is also true: abstraction subverts the empirical order by establishing the repeatable as a formal exclusion of plurality and of differentiation (Serres, 1983: 228). The perversion lies in the peculiar structure of repeatability, which doubles down on the powers of plurality and differentiation in the assembly of relatively noise-free contact zones (free from plurality and differentiation). Serres owes his explanation of language as much to the arithmetic of information theory as he does to phenomenal nature. Methods for the reduction of noise in telecommunication, which may be understood entirely from within the field of engineering, employ a mathematics of hyperspace that exceeds our capacity to intuit the phenomena of the world. With references to Leibniz, to the mathematical in the empirical, to fractal geometry, to cybernetics, and to myth, Serres
discovers human language as occupying an unnatural space, not filling space with noise but subtracting noise from space and thus introducing noise in another sense: it introduces into the world a novel formation of chaos.

I think it can be demonstrated quickly that this supposed biosemiotics has already been interrupted at its origin. It interrupts itself in its essentially transversal structure. Nature in its rhythms and calls provides a phenomenal sphere towards which the attentive observer might become attuned, in ways that suggest a deep resemblance to aspects of British Romanticism (as Watkin indeed confirms in his minor disagreement with a currently object-oriented ecocriticism), though less so perhaps with a German tradition that includes Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Heidegger, for which the fissured quality or rift between the natural and the unnatural already constitutes the object in question. And because no value could adhere to the category nature without distinction then the meaning of biosemiotics remains vague or clouded in naïve conceptions within which any rhythm, and any sensible phenomenon, already takes its place under a category within the unity of a generalised bios. What meaningful role does the region of detachment from the bios (detachment from life) serve? This is the question of the media. The inability to ascribe a value to nature that would not be anthropocentric inevitably bothers any current attempts to produce a discourse that would be post- or trans-human. So, despite an undoubtedly absorbing reading of Serres, Watkin may have underestimated what remains wild for philosophy, describing as the basis for an eco-narratological departure the point outside philosophy on which it builds its own narrative. Serres rather consistently makes his own object the point at which science blindly attaches itself to nature. The sense of the object depends upon a rigorous and valid reading of the mathematical theory of information. One might put it like this: Serres has rooted the origins of science in the application of technological solutions. Whatever else one can say of language too, one finds it rooted in a sometimes-obscure domain of solutions: from the cosmologies inscribed on the cave walls (calendrical systems whose accuracy across millennia currently astounds astronomers) to the self-learning systems of rapid data transfer and distribution. But, to begin with, the object strictly can be neither seen nor heard, except as noise, and so can be the object of neither semiotics nor narrative without entailing the fatal deformation of each of these practices, so long as we regard the reduction of noise as the solution to the game.
We might pay attention to a relation that is among the easiest to identify nowadays, although we owe our understanding of it singularly to Serres. Among the ensemble of critiques of classical epistemology arising during the twentieth century, Serres’s distinctive contribution rests on his demonstrating how the supposed parametric nature of scientific knowledge operates instead within a strategic environment that places science in a competitive relation with its object. We can affirm the power of information discourses (information theory, semiotics, narratology) only once we acknowledge their strategic points of departure and make some albeit quite epochal adjustments. For instance, Serres identifies information theory in general as the inheritor of the exact sciences, with a specification by which these sciences, and physics in particular, obscurely evoke a concept of the game derived from the calculation of probabilities, annuities, and so of a life insurance indemnified against death.\(^\text{10}\) The importance of this obscurity lies in what tends to be hidden by the orderly algebra of science: the indistinct sense of a constitutive force fallibly contained by traditional ontologies in the categories of accident or misfortune. The theme of indemnification in Leibniz, for instance, exposes a potential flaw in his metaphysics, which fails to demonstrate a capacity to cope with the accidental as anything other than temporary falling away from substantial necessity: a provisionally inexplicable eruption or monstrous affliction. Hence the obscure emergence of science as a game. Within information theory sciences like structuralism and semiotics\(^\text{11}\) rediscover the game as the model of the exact sciences only to the extent that they share a specific kind of problem: “the notion of structure,” Serres observes, “recently discovered in the realm of methodology, has an algebraic origin” (Serres, 1983: 261). Both sciences (thermodynamics and communication theory) are concerned with the synchronic capture of orders of relations and so will be discovered playing a role that exceeds the parametric establishment of a neutral and objective viewpoint. The methodologies of semiotics seem subjected by their strategic purpose to the interruptions that science seeks essentially to reduce, more visibly at any rate than are classical methods of algebraic ordering. The problem is complicated by the historical analogy of the quantity of entropy, which defines a specific computable quantity in thermodynamics and indeed in statistical mechanics (relating to the conversion of heat to mechanical energy). In communication theory, entropy also stands for a quantum, in analogy with that of mechanics. The quantum of entropy in communication relates to the number of
possible messages an information source (a speaker or writer) might produce on any occasion. An increase in the amount of information produces a higher level of uncertainty (more entropy) in the probability concerning which message is produced. Thus, an essential component in establishing the quantum of entropy in information theory lies in the knowledge (the order of relations) shared by the source and the receiver. “If we take a written message at its source,” Serres writes in reference to the graphic marks of a writing system, “it is understood only if the receptor possesses the key to the drawing” (Serres, 1983: 225). So, in information theory one discovers the bifurcation of one problem into two quite different modalities. In the first a language of information inevitably comes up against a confusion that is bound to arise thanks to the entropic tendency of its object (nature) and the second law of thermodynamics, according to which a quantum of information is progressively reduced in the precession of its transmission. “If static is accidental,” Serres notes, “background noise is essential to communication” (Serres, 1983: 226). Calculations can then be made to recover the loss by feeding in new information previously excluded by the system. In this case the scientist does not regard the confusion as prima facie a deliberate ploy on the part of a nature competitively engaged as a ludic opponent. But a second modality arises in the case of language, for example in the theatres of legal discourse (as in classical rhetoric) where opponents engage each other with the sole intention of destroying orders of meaning. The competitor’s role is to intervene in winning the knowledge it seeks by destroying the other’s meaning. The interference Serres identifies becomes visible where the strategic narratives of myth and fable cross over and subvert the well-ordered algebra of the classical sciences. The drifting arguments of the Hermès series therefore exceed anything that might be reimagined as a biosemiotics. They introduce the cumulative emergence of an object, in both science and literature, across several registers (an indefinite number) that in their interaction form the multiplicity, or the site, from which this object emerges. “The only assignable difference,” Serres recalls in Genesis, “between animal societies and our own resides, as I have often said, in the emergence of the object” (Serres, 1995: 82).

**The Hominid formerly known as Human**

We seldom leave the point of departure, the sphere of a peculiar multiplicity, which anyway is always in media. The ethical focus that Serres maintains throughout his work
seems attached to the role of origination in the adventure of the hominid formerly named human. The early emphasis on communication accounts for the role of noise in Serres’s lexicon, but the consistency of its appearance throughout his œuvre implies a set of collocations and associations that gathers possibilities of transformation in a return each time to the point of departure. And it gains a paradoxical significance. A version of this same multiplicity, which in its narrative form can conceal the intractable complicity of its structure, nonetheless micro-textually informs each project from the earliest works onwards in a long career rich with surprising departures. The ideas established before Hominescence (2001), but which work as its conceptual support, include the sense of a species without attributes and so not only capable of but also condemned to incessant change within the mildly alterable confines of brute necessity. Independently of the scientific theory of vital evolution, and built over this radical lack—the “blank page” of possibility—Serres discovers the feedback loop of a technology by which the entity that produces it (from prehistoric tools to atomic annihilation) reproduces itself by the same means towards an unwritten future that despite imminent danger it cautiously learns to affirm. What is at stake involves the sense of the epoch and so not merely incessant and unruly change on the back of a technology or a political economy out of control. Such histories remain popular and so difficult to entirely shake off in a narrative currency of apocalypse and dystopia.

Rather, the idea of epochal change requires more detailed explanation, more technical analysis, grounding the historical transitions that have occurred and that might yet occur. Serres opens his discussions in Hominescence with terse observations on the entirely novel senses of death that the species has even recently learned. We come to know it in connection with, on one side, the actuality and further potential for nuclear annihilation as well as climatic catastrophe, and, on the other, a fearless new world of medical solutions. But by way of a persistent interruption he posits the absence of a species-being, the motto of Ulysses heard in Homer via Joyce, “I am nobody,” a motto dependent on a common supposition with provenance in prehistory: that members of the species anticipate without specifying the imminence of their demise. The counterpart involves their finite restriction, their essential fault, and the indeterminate quality of their becoming. “What’s surprising then,” Serres asks rhetorically, “about not wanting to be since we even are not. Except as unexpected, adventuring, unpredictable, seeking, disobedient …, therefore possible and contingent, flexing and
therefore knocked to the point of drawing blood against the impossible and the necessary” (Serres, 1995: 49). The species proceeds in a willing resistance to any ontology of its own and thus to its ends. It affirms the failure to measure the present, the failure to tally the computable and non-computable.

Merging Hellenic with Hebraic lexes, this is the distinct expression of a mythology of origination: in the delicate balance between risk and security, the defence one builds with risk against one’s own defences, the inherent failure (or defeat) of the defensive restriction turns around and becomes the space of possibility. *Genesis* seems devoted to uncovering the object (“a new object for philosophy”) to which hitherto the word *possibility* has been only obscurely attached. If it is correct to identify the method and the mode of expression in Serres as never serving merely supplementary or accessory roles, then we may suppose that the mode of expression should be considered as inseparable from the message. The passages on dance (which contribute to the sense of the object in question) rather evidently “dance” with their source texts and thus perform by “conjuration” how the writer seeks to uncover his object: “I am calling forth, conjuring up with my hand the undetermined places, things, beings that are undifferentiated” (Serres, 1995: 41). The voice of Michel Serres begins to merge into the aggregate of voices of his source texts. This is not (as Watkin I think correctly points out) an eco-mimesis. These passages (as throughout *Genesis*) come across as reconstituted fragments of Serres’s readings of the same finite yet diverse source materials. In the terms of a conventional aesthetics, a good analogue would be the cut-up or collage techniques of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, celebrated in Burroughs’s *Nova* novels.¹⁴ And while these quite contemporary works have no obvious connection with Serres (I have seen very little scholarship on Serres’s evidently neo-modernist techniques), they nonetheless seem to respond as the solution to a similar consternation regarding the authorship of the author at the level of the statement. The solution, sinking one’s voice into the sea of other voices, produces works of almost monstrous singularity. The effect serves the purpose also of a subversion, or at least the interruption, of the tradition on which a work parasitically depends. Rather obviously: in the oceanic background of *Genesis* lies the narrative of creation *ab initio* from the nominally Hebrew tradition; and slightly more to the forefront Leibniz and *The Ultimate Origin of All Things*, its affirmation of a divine unity that fails to capture the object Serres seeks.
This more general or explicable dimension of Serres’s philosophy has found a wide range of hospitable spaces among a current distribution of research fields in the humanities and social sciences. We might acknowledge that the fields belong anyway to a mutation in knowledge, not merely in what one knows but how knowledge is produced, communicated, shared, evaluated. If one identifies one’s field, as for example a branch of post-humanist thought or more distinctly as a kind of media-ecology, then one commits oneself to a historical transition that functions not only as an object for research but also and at the same time as a distinct transition in knowing. Fields like *biopolitics* and *econarratology* no longer rely on disciplinary (or department) anchors but reconstitute in their place a kind of *trans-* or even *anti-disciplinary* practice for which Serres’s philosophy provides an exemplary departure. The object, however, may still be a little obscure in this philosophy without discipline, this field within which the main object has essentially *no field*, the hyperspace of every *trans-discourse*. But Serres’s contribution to philosophy cannot be evaluated as if it was independent of certain trends of the epoch to which he belongs as one of the names by which we might recognize the emergence of a distinct problem, first of all obscurely but becoming recently more familiar.

First one locates the site of the *noise*. The importance of locating such a site interferes with more preferred aims that contribute in one way or another to the new ontologies on which our understanding of the relations that prevail in the universe depend. *Ontologies*: that there may be more than one already sounds a strange yet seemingly necessary note. *New*: that we understand ontology as chronically emerging holds back the preferred goals from their arrival at a steady state. *New ontology*: caught between what was and what may be. As if being in itself differed from region to region to the extent that science, which supplies disprovable universals (expressions applicable anywhere and accessible to anyone), must at all costs remain oblivious to, in order to function as separate from, its *regional* provenance. A hypothetical book on twentieth century thought might consider the fate of the scientific *object*. It would begin to chart and perhaps to establish the general law of its itinerary from regional to general. Such a book, which might be imagined if never exhaustively completed, would include chapters on the project of phenomenology, which begins when a consciousness turns its gaze back towards itself by bracketing out both its prior object, and its theoretical motivation, leaving open to examination only the naked intentionality of the gaze itself.
Edmund Husserl in the currency of 1913 uses the figure of an electrical circuit to describe the procedure, and one already may hear in this, as the figurative model folds over the intelligible space in question, something like the hiss of a shorted circuit. Reading Serres, we are reminded that the emergence of information theory in the nineteenth century provides an image of a science that functions as an applied technology; that is, a science devoted to solutions (the quantum of noise produced by submarine cables compared with the Brownian motion in overhead wire: the chaotic noise of nature). Husserl interrupts his own philosophical discourse by regularly engaging, distinguishing philosophy from, the algorithmic calculation of solutions. But the intentional consciousness becomes the noisy domain where such solutions are worked out. The hypothetical book would also have to include chapters on the gradual impact of the theoretical construction of a synchronic linguistics, which in order to create a viable object for the study of languages in general must ignore both the effects of chronic processes and the objects normally considered to belong to a language's field of reference. Ferdinand de Saussure lets into his lectures some interference when he illustrates the functional requirements of a language system with reference to the example of a writing system, by which language traverses itself in the form of a genetic (diachronic) process that must be presupposed, and yet excluded, in order for the synchronic conception to hold. In both these cases, in the case of phenomenology and in the case of structural linguistics, one would have to account for the fatal disappearance of the object as an inevitable consequence of its construction; that is, in the peculiar pattern of a scientific knowledge that builds its object from a structure that necessarily excludes it.

During the early years of the twentieth century these strangely ancient but also neonatal human sciences abide uneasily alongside psychology and anthropology. Their puzzling structure appears novel only if one ignores diverse and perhaps more esoteric strands of the epistemic inheritance: algebra, on one side, and classical poetics, on the other. In examining a polygon, as the distinctive object of geometry, one might follow a bifurcating crossing in hyperspace that occurs as an event in an itinerary that creates and then interrupts the spatial plane, an itinerary that charts topological relations between coordinates that cannot be intuited on the plane. The event and the itinerary cannot be disengaged. Husserl had demonstrated that a phenomenology of geometry takes the formulation (the conscious activity) as its intentional object rather than the
space it hypothetically maps, which anyway disappears beneath the mapping: disappearance is its thing. The object in question emerges as interference between classically distinct orders or registers: between knowledge (epistêmê) and knowhow (technê) as distinct from nature or life (phúsis). Separated from nature, but not ideally from life, we are confronted by the idea of a sphere of thought/language (logos), which to be exact designates in philosophical idioms a form of rational predication (apophantic thought), an expression of the connections by which the object can be grasped as essentially the thing it is. Even so, the operation of the logos entails a sophisticated procedure that determines the language of expression as, at the same time, the logic of the thing. Communication theory with its supersensible hypersphere recovers an ancient truth by which the logos in any event depends upon a heterogeneous structure: that of the legein, the saying, or as some Semitic and Indo-European languages suggest, the saga. Some less certain terms (mêtis, hubris, theatron, choròs) bear on the question of what living together might mean. They are often safely confined to classical rhetoric, to studies of the fable, or to performance studies, just as the theatre itself functioned to express and to contain the paradoxes of the polis, its simultaneous openings and closures, and those of the idea of the collective in general. But métis, commonly considered as cunning, gives the example of a word that conceals a significant complication in strategic operations performed by mythopoetic characters like Ulysses, whose strategies constitute his character. In the peculiar topology of the trojan horse (the canonical solution), an external element infiltrates an otherwise intact structure (the polis) by concealing the fatal force within its own internal boundary: an intersecting of internal and external boundaries that compromises the boundary entirely (technically in a viral manner). The polygon and the trojan horse need not be distinguished in their formal structure: neither at the moment of their respective (topological or narrative) auto-crossings; nor at the moment at which the itinerary interrupts its own trajectory. The chiastic moment provides in each synecdoche the incomplete historicity of a Hellenic tradition that remains uncannily (disturbingly, frustratingly) effective into the twenty first century.

At sea

At a telling moment in an interview with Serres, Peter Hallward asks: “Heidegger’s works on language, and on being-with, did they have any value for you?” Hallward
seems more than justified in wishing to know about this. Of all the twentieth century philosophies with which Serres might be put into some kind of theoretical dialogue, Heidegger’s must be close to the top of the list. The deconstruction of ontology, the Hellenic precedent, the establishment of the ground of science as applied technics, the blurry objectivity of Dasein, the irreducible role that language plays in Dasein’s own mediation, the historicity of seventeenth century science—all this is echoed or recapitulated with variations that are at first more obvious in the aesthetics of their writings than in their philosophical implications. Serres’s answer suggests both a profound misreading on one level and a clear indication of their points of departure on another.

I was so busy with sciences and techniques that it was very difficult to throw myself into an author who refused them wholesale. There are two kinds of philosopher: there are philosophers who shackle you and philosophers who free you. Once you are “in” Hegel it’s very difficult to speak otherwise than as a Hegelian, whilst with Leibniz you are free. Leibniz never gave me much trouble; he is very intuitive, he throws open many doors and closes none. In a certain way, Heidegger is very confining. Once you follow Heidegger’s reasoning you become a Heideggerian (Hallward and Serres, 2003: 234-5).

Serres’s philosophy shares with Heidegger’s the sense of a historicity that has been exceeded by an epoch that seems (if this is true) even now freshly minted upon the planet. But it is worth considering the terms of his turning away from the kind of philosophy he believes Heidegger (after Hegel) represents. The precise departure lies in the question of how one inhabits one’s tradition in order to access its hitherto unheard-of possibilities for existence. Heidegger’s commitment to the rigorously inexact historical (as opposed to the exact) sciences, as if in a defensive resistance to the epochal technologies that inarguably had become dominant during two or three centuries of rapid development, seems to implicate him in a forceful distinction between science and life. Heidegger, believing that the sciences operate in the fatally confining manner, famously comes down in the spectral debate on the side of life. He roots the origins of language in the calls and rhythms of nature: phúsis means (for the Greeks) a spontaneous arising into becoming; and being discloses itself by means of
language. But conversely, then, Heidegger’s philosophy of life “shackles” or “confines” you. The deconstruction of substance ontology does not escape a generalisable tendency of ontological speculation. It shackles the reader to some kind of ontology. But a philosophy oriented towards possibility, to the opening of unheard-of doors, requires a viewpoint otherwise than ontological, a viewpoint towards the search for solutions and thus grounded not on the question (why are there beings rather than nothing?) but on problems. And solutions often accidentally generate their problem. Following Serres into the later writings, one discovers, even more emphatically than in the earlier ones, that among the forces that shackle and confine you—general forces attached to war games and to agricultural production—nature designates the sphere of forces that shackles you most.

*Hominescence* tells its story on several levels: it is autobiographical, it is cosmological, it is prehistoric, it is prophetic, and it is situated in the present, but nevertheless restricting itself to the global transformation of the species in less than a century of catastrophic development. He calls it a *rebirth*: “a strange world, young and old, in which our contemporaries, fearful in the face of the new, get lost amid the archaisms that return and dominate so often” (Serres, 2019: 252). In Serres’s text, the rise of Hermes has been eons coming but its arrival has been recently and effectively absolute. Taking a framework from before WWII he writes: “I can testify to the fact that no gesture, whether one of sowing or benediction, no act, whether medical or political, no profession, whether smith, wholesale or retail grocer, saddler, farrier, or empirical veterinarian, no social, sexual or pedagogical idea now survives of that era and that conversely I can’t put any of today’s gestures into this more than old framework” (Serres, 2019: 253). False nostalgias arise in the image of an age that has been made redundant for as long as most people have been alive. They adhere to figures of the old framework, in popular nationalism and nanoracism, as well as in the naturalist registers of sex and gender. Although Serres tells the story in the Indo-European and Semitic languages of mythology and western science, it is a story of the dissolution of the regional centrality of those languages. It is a story concerning the discovery of possibilities in dissolution: a radical politics in the dissolution of politics, an affirmation or “song” of the self in the dissolution of the ego, and so on. The sphere of dissolution, or the sphere of mediation, requires an affirmation of scientific solutions for technical problems: “the appearance of a new human body, and of its relations to a now global
planet cadenced this interval as a result of technologies and objective sciences, physics, chemistry and biology” (Serres, 2019: 254). So the complexities of earlier texts like Hermès, The Parasite, Genesis, which chart the crossings of a trajectory retracing its own path, also chart the emergence and dissolution of the entity Serres now refuses to designate human. The hominid proceeds towards its future untethered by existing laws and open to endless mediations of technological solutions.

References


Notes

1 In one notable example, Katherine Hayles, whose career includes a consistent critical engagement with Serres, offers a provocative insight into what this cooperative rationality might be like in her Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious (2017). Two key categories—cognitive nonconscious and cognitive assemblages—at once expand the notion of cognition beyond the boundaries of human consciousness and offer a contemporary conceptual framework within which to assess the intricately symbiotic relationship between biological actors and technological agencies.

2 See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019: S296): “One thing only, perhaps, seems beyond a reasonable doubt, anthropologically speaking: We have entered a new “axial,” historico-metaphysical age, a new “climate of history” that is generating what is increasingly looking like a cosmological paradigm shift—a new worldview, in which the very meaning of the words ‘world’ and ‘view’ and the identity of the ‘viewer’ are in dispute.”

3 The correct historical context would be Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (from 1962). But Husserl had already established the sense of scientific entelechy by 1935. See Phillips (2015: 147).


5 With the reference to force and writing, Serres succinctly captures the complexity of a relation between his own work and the philosophy of his friend, Jacques Derrida (Serres, 1983: 23). Roy Boyne argues that while one can trace a shared sense of exteriority between Serres (angled towards the Greeks and to science) and Derrida (angled towards questions of Jewishness and the Hebraic tradition), the differences between them become significant where the angle towards the future is concerned: “Serres desires to watch the angels in wonder, while Derrida is ultimately concerned to see them on the right path” (Boyne, 1998: 219).

6 Efforts towards the decolonising of political reason include the “deconstruction” of the Hellenocentric worldview by Dussel, 2011: 1-5.

7 Hölderlin recovered the archaic term Beyng, which Heidegger adopts in the 1930s, to distinguish it from the being of classical ontology.

8 Sweatman and Coombs (2019).

9 The point is easy to miss but that may not matter too much to the science of narratology. When one gives a name to a philosophy—in this case biosemiotics—one can reduce or restrict its conceptual fecundity in conformity to a rule whereby such a restriction becomes a productive resource.

10 “Leibniz, among others, computed life annuities …” (Serres, 1979: 275).

11 At Serres’s point of departure these discourses have a novel currency where the mathematical element plays a greater role than is historically acknowledged.

12 Genesis contains a passage that shly recaptures the voice of Protagoras, mediated by Plato: “I believe that man is blank and un-differentiated. Man has no instinct, man is not determined, man is free, man is possible” (Serres, 1995: 47). See Plato, Protagoras, and the myth of Epimetheus [after-thought]. Serres and Bernard Stiegler have some philosophical principles in common, including a grounding in Hellenic mythology, but almost diametrically opposed attitudes towards the currency of scientific solutions. See Stiegler, 1998: 16.

13 See Achille Mbembe (2018): “Because of the current atrophy of an utopian imagination, apocalyptic imaginaries and narratives of cataclysmic disasters and unknown futures have colonised the spirit of our time. But what politics do visions of apocalypse and catastrophe engender, if not a politics of separation, rather than a politics of the humanity, as species coming into being?”.


14 See Bishop and Phillips (2020).
15 See Barker (2015).
16 Edmund Husserl, *Ideen* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1930) 98. “we set it, as it were, ‘out of action,’ we ‘switch it off,’ we ‘encase it.’ It is still there, like the bracketed in the bracket, like the disconnected outside the context of the circuit. We can also say: the thesis is a lived experience but we make ‘no use of it.’”
17 Serres belongs to a generation after Heidegger (i.e., Lacan, Derrida, Baudrillard, Cixous, Irigaray) who despite their differences more or less unanimously reject a logocentric ontology; but that is not to say that Serres rejects a connection between the language of the universe and the language of “man.” The point, though, is the nature of the connection. He follows Mandelbrot in observing the finite requirements of a limited economy so that fractal potentials operate in restricted fashion becoming infinite at the edge of meaning (Serres, 1995: 70): “When languages talk about themselves, they begin the circle again. First through echo, repetition. Then through redundancy.”
18 “What living together is. What is the collective? This question fascinates us now” (Serres, 2007: 224).

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