

## **Michel Serres's Milieux**

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## **Mitten Drinnen**

Mediation means that which stands, comes or moves between things otherwise separated or opposed. Serres's work has never ceased to meditate upon mediation in every possible sense: as arbitration; moderation; mediocrity; passage; communication; combination; exchange; translation; transformation; substitution; surrogacy. Serres is fond of representing himself as a cross-over, an intermediary between worlds: a 'middler', to awaken from its sleep for a second a sixteenth-century word. More than a compendium or encyclopaedia of such forms, his work can be regarded as a kind of self-inventing machine for mediating between mediations.

There is a Yiddish expression used in London which always gives me a little jolt of pleasure whenever I hear it. 'In mitten drinnen' is a corruption of German 'In mitten darin', which means 'in the middle of it' or 'in the middle of things'. Actually, in common use, the phrase might be more idiomatically rendered as 'right in the middle': though this is a bizarre-enough phrase in itself. If it is really right in the middle, dead centre, as we also sometimes say, then why does the word used to signify this seem to have a list, in etymologically leaning to the right, as so many of our words for straightness do? I have already got myself embroiled in some of the things Michel Serres has had to say about mediations, crossings, middles – and leanings. 'Everything that you do is "in the midst" ' says Bruno Latour to Serres at one point in their *Conversations* (a title which represents a sort of elucidation or converting explication of the book's rather more exacting French title, *Eclaircissements*).

There is something else I enjoy in this phrase, in both its German and Yiddish versions. 'In mitten drinnen' is made portable and adaptable to any number of situations by means of the 'da' suffix, the function of which is to signify 'it' or 'that' as the object of a preposition: thus, *darin*, inside it, *darüber*, over it, and so on. So the 'it', the whatever-it-is that the expression allows one to say one is in the middle of is actually tucked away in the middle of the locution. In the Yiddish contraction of the German, the 'da' has been worn away, or swallowed up somewhere in the middle of the mouth, between the teeth and the uvula.

Of course, 'in mitten drinnen' is also a pretty close approximation to the Classical 'in medias res'. The phrase derives from Horace's *Ars poetica*, 148, where he recommends Homer's practice of proceeding without delay into the heart of things. Although 'in medias res' is often translated as 'in the middle of things', it is in fact an accusative to signify motion towards: thus 'into' rather than simply 'in'. Michel Serres's work, too, goes into the middle of things. Into the middle of the thing, or in the thick of things, as we might say in English, though the

Latin idiom looks like it ought to mean 'into the middle things', the medias being adjectival rather than substantive. This is a central ambivalence or oscillation in Serres's writing: is the middle an imaginary place of absolute equipoise, attenuated into abstraction, the immaterial seam or soul that runs down the middle of things, but, being immaterial, does not form part of them? Or is it a middling thing itself, that forms a part of the interior that it marks out? Is the centre of the circle in the circle? Is the middle aspatial, or is it a place? Is the heart of darkness necessarily made of darkness, or might it be something that resides in the dark that is not itself dark?

There are two kinds of middle, static and dynamic. There is the abstract middle, or centre, that part of a structure which is equidistant from all bounding edges. Then there is the more dynamic kind of middling or mediation, which consists in a movement towards the middle, which never comes to reside there. The line which runs down the centre of an opening in a book divides it into two, but does not belong to the space of the page, since there is no part of the page that does not belong to the recto or the verso. The dynamism of the middle arises when the middle of the page is folded into the middle of one of the spaces it divides off, which then creates two more halves, and another middle into which the centre may be drawn. This kind of middling is always on the hop, unbalanced and attempt to re-topple itself into balance. It is a mobile mediation which seems truly to take us further into the midst of things. It finds one of its most fascinating extended images in Serres's work in the image of the folding of baker's dough in his *Rome: A Book of Foundations* (1983, Eng. trans. 1991) The discussion of baker's dough in *Rome* is an image of the complex overlaying of time in history, an image not of time moving on and dissipating, but of endlessly regathering itself: 'The system grows old without letting time escape; it garners age - the new emblems are caught up and subsumed by old ones; the baker molds memory...Time enters into the dough, a prisoner of its folds, a shadow of its folding over' (Serres 1991: 81). Serres imagines trying to map or model the involutions of the dough as it is moulded, perhaps by making a mark and plotting its changes of position in three or more dimensions through successive stretchings and foldings. To those who can think of progress only as the extension or unrolling of a straight line, the trajectory of this point relative to other points in the dough would very quickly become undetermined, irrational, as seemingly random as the flight of a fly. This apparent unassimilability to the spatial intelligence occurs because

we simple blind people, simplistic, short-sighted, have not imagined implication, inclusion, fold; we have never known what a tissue is, never noticed or listened to women, never known what a melange might be, and never understood, or even imagined, time (Serres 1991: 82).

In the folding and refolding dough of history, what matters is not the spreading out of points of time in a temporal continuum, but the contractions and attenuations that ceaselessly disperse neighbouring points and bring far distant points into proximity with one another. The totality of these foldings would assume the fractal or fluctuating forms of natural structures, rather than the straight lines of the geometrical imagination:

The route from local time to global time, from the instant to time, from the present to history, is unforeseeable; it is not integrable by reason, as analysis has shaped it. It seems to go crazily, no matter where, and drunkenly, no matter how. If the baker knew how to write, she would lazily follow the fly's flight,

the capricious foldings of proteins, the coastline of Brittany or of Ile d'Ouessant, the fluctuating fringe of a mass of clouds. (Serres 1991: 82).

The image of history not as an inert or given shape, exposed and disposed to the investigating eye, but a dynamism, folding over automorphically on itself, makes the dough an image of the activity of thought or knowledge, as well as of the nature of its object. Serres describes this kind of knowledge as the opposite of analysis, or the separating of things one from another (for topological transformation disallows cutting). It is, or would be 'a knowledge that multiplies gestures in a short time, in a limited space, so that it renders information more and more dense, until it forms a rarer place that sometimes becomes a dark solid' (Serres 1991: 78). It is an image of time gathering into history, but also the image of the way in which time is thought, in time. It is as though history gains its shape from the ways in which it reads itself or gathers itself up, as we say, reflexively, as well as the ways in which its time happens to fall out. History is the shape that time can take and the shape that historical reflexion (doubling back, doubling over) will make of it. History occurs always between events and the shape they take in thought.

The kneaded dough is only one in a huge ensemble of images for fluctuating mediation that Serres has induced to propagate across and between his works, of which I will note only skins, textiles, bags, tapestries, kimonos, rivers, coastlines, clouds, vortices, mountain-ranges and flames. But it is also a kind of metametaphor, which figures the topological generation of metaphor itself. Indeed, it may even be an image for the relations between Serres's different works, in which it is similarly extremely hard to mark out any clear and determinate progress from origins to ends, so full is that work of anticipations, dawdlings, accelerations, rewindings, recapitulations. The more Serres writes, the more he finds himself crossing the path of his own sylleptic footsteps.

What has middling to do with mediations? It is not for nothing that we still speak of the 'ether' when trying to represent the passage and radiation of signals, for we still, like classical and medieval thinkers, though without really thinking about the matter, regard as abhorrent the idea that there might be nothing between separated or distanced objects (In brief, the reasoning goes: if there is nothing between separate objects, then they cannot in fact be separate at all; so there must always be something between objects, and the void that lies between them cannot be void after all.) Mediators are not static betweennesses; rather, they are go-betweens, in movement. Or rather, in the absence of a void in which to move, they *are themselves* movement.

Serres's notion of the milieu mediates between channel and environment. The medium of communication is not only that through and across which messages pass, but also an environment within which communication occurs – or fails to. These different meanings come together in Serres's conception of the milieu or mid-place of communication. Serres's work characteristically represents channels of communication as complex locations, as involutions of time and space, rather than simply movements between poles or positions in a stable space. What is communicated is not just the message, but the medium itself, the social collectivity itself, in all its stable mobility.

In one sense, exact middles are fugitive, exquisite and rare. In another sense, they are everywhere, for everywhere we could ever happen to be would be middling, inbetween times and places, in this universe of becoming that never comes to rest in being, time that never fully sets into space.

## **Mixed Body**

From the dough, I move to the skin. If the eye and its associated cognitive apparatuses seem to set us in front of the world, rendered for our pinhole camera in a plane projection as on a screen, our bodies install us as a mobile volume placed in the midst of the things of men and of the world. We are placed in the middle of things because we are embodied. The body communicates with the world and vice versa through the senses, which have traditionally been regarded as the interface between world and mind. Most traditional accounts of the senses work by isolation and reduction. Serres's consideration of the senses in his *Les Cinq Sens* (1985) repeats and yet undoes this way of proceeding. Instead of a series of chapters headed Touch, Hearing, Taste, Smell and Vision, Serres provides us with a series of meditations upon locations, memories and objects, all of them designed to show the senses not as separate channels, but as milieux, places of mingling

The skin is one among many of the senses, the location and the organ of touch. But the skin has a special place in Serres's account of the senses. This is because it is the most widely distributed and the most various of the organs of the body. Unlike the other organs, it is not concentrated in one portion of the body. Indeed, the skin is the ground against which the other senses figure: it is their milieu. If all the senses are milieux, or midplaces where inside and outside meet and meld, then the skin, is the global integral of these local area networks, the milieu of these milieux: 'The skin forms the variety of our mixed senses' (Serres 1998: 59) Serres uses Bonnard's painting *Nu au miroir* to evoke the mutual implication of painter and model in the space of the representation. The painter sees and paints the model as she sees and paints herself, tattooing her own skin with make-up in precisely the way the painter will render her. Painter and subject enclose and environ each other. As she applies her cosmetics and ornaments she draws a map of her own sensory receptivity, highlighting ears, lips and eyes. This 'cosmetography' underlines the etymological link between the cosmetic and the cosmic, for her skin becomes a meeting place for her different senses: 'The tattooed nude, chaotic and noisy, bears on herself the shared and immediate place of her own sensorium, plains and risings in which mingle the flows which come from or are drawn to the organs of hearing, sight, taste, smell, variegated skin where touch summarises the sensible' (Serres 1998: 35-6). Serres begins mapping the senses with the skin because it is the milieu of the senses, a kind of 'common sense'. But he does so indirectly, tacking left to move to the right, by looking at a painter's act of looking, in order to show how 'the eye loses its preeminence in the very domain of its domination, painting' (Serres 1998: 40). This painting is already an amalgam or mediation of seeing and touching. Serres suggests that Bonnard's paintings can be seen as simulacra, not in the Baudrillardian sense, but according to the Epicurean doctrine that sight, like all the senses, works through being touched by simulacra, the fragile films of atoms which are stripped off bodies and fly to other bodies. Bonnard's canvases are simulacra, not just because they produce semblance or resemblance, but also because 'parting from the skin of the painter and the subtle envelope of things, the veil of one meets the veil of the others', forming 'a simultaneous simulacrum' (Serres 1998: 41).

Serres rejects the predominating metaphor of the skin as a surface, membrane or interface. The skin is an entire environment. Half-quoting Valéry's judgement that there is nothing deeper than the skin, Serres writes 'Nothing goes down so far as makeup, nothing extends as far as the skin, ornament has the dimensions of the world' (Serres 1998: 34). The skin is the meeting, not just of the senses, but of world and body: 'through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border. Contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet and caress in the skin' (Serres 1998: 97). Serres would see the body as a milieu, were it not

that this would seem to mark it off too exclusively from the world of milieux or minglings in which it has its place:

I do not like to speak of the place where my body exists as a milieu, preferring rather to say that things mingle among themselves and that I am no exception to this, that I mingle with the world which mingles itself in me. The skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling. (Serres 1998: 97)

If the skin mediates the world by mingling with it, this may be because the world itself may be apprehended as a kind of flesh, or what biologists aptly call 'tissue'. If 'the world is a mass of laundry', then we might expect that, reciprocally, '[t]issue, textile and fabric provide excellent models of knowledge, excellent quasi-abstract objects' (Serres 1998: 100-1) As with the dough, the object of thought seems to prescribe the manner of its being thought. Serres carries this insight on a little in *Atlas*, one of a series of books from the 1990s which attempt to map the world of global media communications. There, he, Serres carries this insight a little further, proposing that philosophy might find in textiles a different, intermediary sort of 'metaphorical matter' of which, and with, which to think:

between the so-called rigorous hardness of crystal, geometrically configured, and the fluidity of soft and sliding molecules, there is an intermediary material which tradition leaves to the female, and is thus thought little of by philosophers, with the exception perhaps of Lucretius: veil, canvas, tissue, chiffon, fabric, goatskin and sheepskin, known as parchment, the flayed hide of a calf, known as vellum, paper, supple and fragile, linens and silks, all the forms of planes or twists in space, bodily envelopes or writing supports, able to flutter like a curtain, neither liquid nor solid, to be sure, but participating in both conditions. Pliable. tearable, stretchable...topological. (Serres 1994: 45)

### ***Three and Fourpence***

A milieu means literally a mid-place, a place that is in the middle. But its more common use in both French and English, is as a context, a frame, a set of framing circumstances (what circles the stance, what stands around where one stands). It is in *The Parasite*, which is what is perhaps his wildest, wildest, most difficult, and therefore in a sense his latest book, that Serres discovers himself as a philosopher of the circumstantial. The book has as its generative centre the proposition that there is no message or communication possible without a context or channel. In any dialogue between apparently free and distinct parties, there must be some apparatus, some frame, form of contact which enables the communication to take place; this can be material – a meeting-place, a postal service, or a network of wires – or immaterial - a discourse with rules of functioning. A conference, literally a bringing or carrying together, is both at once. There is never, in other words, what we nowadays so lightly call an 'interface', an immediate encounter between communicating parties, nor is there ever passage of what is communicated across a neutral space. Something always happens in the space of traversal to slow, deflect or deform the message; there is always noise on the line, a spanner in the works.

*A spanner in the works.* This last expression is a poignant survival from a newly-ancient world in which nothing that worked came without its set of complex but compliant, withdrawn, but revealable workings. But it is a little allegory all on its own of the logic of the parasite. The workings of communication are themselves no more than a sort of bridge-work, made for the spanning of a gap, or traversal of a distance. But the absent-mindedly misplaced spanner within the works is enough to make it grind, scrape, clank, eventually seize up altogether. Something alien, something stubborn and slow, has intervened in the angelic passage of messages. But that gratuity, that fly in the ointment, that demon (so often in fact identified in sixteenth and seventeenth-century cases of demonic possession as Beelzebub, the lord of the flies) will always intervene to some extent, because it is the medium of communication, the means by which meaning takes place (we are really in the *mittendrinnen* thick of things here, for what does 'meaning' mean in English but that which is medial or comes in the middle?) Interference comes about not just because the apparatus of communication is too dull to convey the subtleties of our thought and voice, but also because it is too sensitive, too easily inflected by the medium through which it should travel indifferent. Without the sensitivity and responsiveness of the wire which renders it apt to act as a carrier of the voice or the word, there could be no passage or message at all. Its risk, its exposure to interference, is what makes it work. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have put this differently but perhaps equivalently, when they speak in *Anti-Oedipus* of machines which only start to work when they break down.

This has to do with the residual materiality of the most seemingly immaterial processes of communication. Speech is only possible because of the physical apparatus of tongue, lips, larynx and palate that produces it. Sound engineers spend a great deal of time attempting to clean up the wet and dirty sounds that impinge on ordinary voices – the pops and slurps and catarrhal gurgles or ordinary voices. Under certain circumstances, these can drown and distract, the background swallowing the foreground.

Serres's meditations on the intermediary and the circumstantial dimensions of communication in *The Parasite* come to a climax with an extraordinary evocation of what he calls the 'quasi-object'. The quasi-object is a form of mediation which originally comes into being as a way of fixing or stabilising social conflicts which might otherwise tend to degenerate into absolute chaos, or all-out, all-against-all war. In that it marks the boundary between the subjective and the objective, Serres's quasi-object resembles Winnicott's 'transitional object'. But, where Winnicott's model explicates the way in which an individual negotiates its relations to the world, Serres's model concerns the complex interchanges involved in collectivity. What lies between partners in a dialogue, combatants, or opponents can be thought of like the mobile objects employed in games: the ball in a game of rugby, the parcel in pass-the-parcel, or the 'furet' ('ferret'), used in a French game resembling hunt-the-slipper. Serres explicates the process whereby the rapid passage of the furet both distinguishes and connects, fixes and dissolves, the parties to the collectivity and their relative positions:

The quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. He who is not discovered with the furet in his hand is anonymous, part of a monotonous chain where he remains indistinguished. He is not an individual; he is not recognized, discovered, cut; he is of the chain and in the chain. He runs, like the furet, in the collective. The thread in his hands is our simple relation, the absence of the furet; its path makes out indivision. Who are we? Those who pass the furet; those who don't have it. The quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. If he is discovered, he is "it" [*mort*]. Who is the subject, who is an "I," or who am I? The moving furet weaves the "we," the collective; if it stops, it marks the "I." (Serres 1982: 225)

Serres's concern in this section of *The Parasite* is to use the quasi-object to construct a model of intersubjectivity, or collectivity. Most models of intersubjectivity involve the static configuration of nodes and connections: sociality as circuit-board or wiring-diagram. In such models, subjects may interlock with other subjects, or move round positions, like chess-pieces on a board, or other invariant ground. In Serres's model, what lies between the elements of the system is itself volatile, and the whole is held together by what agitates it or keeps pulling it apart and back together:

This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. "We": what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of "I." The "I" in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariants of subjects, weave the collection... The "we" is made by the bursts and occultations of the "I." The "we" is made by the passing of the "I." By exchanging the "I." And by substitution and vicariance of the "I." (Serres 1982: 227)

I want to ask here, as I do at every point in Serres's writing in which a story, figure or myth suddenly captures and magnifies my attention: is this a model, or a vicariance? Does it mediate the complex processes it is attempting to describe, or does it participate in, and therefore perhaps meddle with them? Is it a means, a *via media*, a middle way between where I am now and where Serres would take me, or is it already in the fluctuating medias res, always leaning, always almost toppling, the halfway house that occupies the whole space of the journey?

We learn that 'The position of the parasite is to be between. That is why it must be said to be a being or a relation' (Serres 1982: 230). Since it is also true that 'We live only by relations' (Serres 1982: 234), this seems to put us, humanity, in the place of the parasite. Serres dares to indulge the risky dream of a paradise of participations between host and parasite, inhabitant and milieu, in terms of a sacramental mediation of word and flesh:

Words, bread, and wine are between us, beings or relations. We appear to exchange them between us though we are connected at the same table or with the same language. They are breast-fed by the same mother. Parasitic exchange, crossed between the logical and the material, can now be explained, At Pentecost, the new-born apostles, suckle the tongues of fire, divided and coming from a single base; at the Last Supper, everyone is a parasite at the master's table, drinking the wine, eating the bread, sharing and passing it. The mystery of transsubstantiation is there; it is clear, luminous, and transparent. Do we ever eat anything else together than the flesh of the word? (Serres 1982: 232)

And yet at the same time, cohabiting within the same chapter, Serres confronts the problem of the parasite in a different sense, of a mediation in which error and distortion occupy, overrun and obliterate the whole field. For

relations can also mean mistellings, mishearings, and muddy misapprehensions.

A story is told that someone else recalls having heard told by a third, who...[ellipsis sic] Mediations, relations - one can make believe one is lost in this fractal cascade....Everything has changed; nothing is constant; the chain has been mutilated beyond all possible recognition of the message. Victory is in the hands of the powers of noise...History in general as it is written or told is a network of bifurcations where parasites move about. (Serres 1982: 235-6)

I remember as a child acting out this process of misapprehension in the game of 'Trench Whispers'. The game, the name of which recalls the imperfect communications systems of the First World War (though it is also known as 'Chinese Whispers'), requires a message to be sent down a line of communicants, each of whom must whisper it quickly, once, into the ear of his or her neighbour, who then passes it on. The ideal outcome of the game is given in the story of how the urgent message 'Send reinforcements, we're going to advance' is deformed into 'Send three-and-fourpence, we're going to a dance'. How appropriate that the story of miscommunication should be located amid the mud of the trench, in which the front line of battle becomes a muddle, a middle. Middling, muddling, meddling, medleying, milling, mulling and moiling are etymologically distinct in English, but their shimmering coalescence on the ear and in the mouth is an example of the parasitic conspiracy of language both to collapse meaning and to make meaning out of collapse. Serres has himself been drawn to the image of mud, the mud that is the inexorable byproduct of battle, and will eventually, provided the battle continues blindly and ferociously enough, draw the combatants down into it. At the beginning of *The Natural Contract* (1992; Eng. trans. 1995) Serres takes Goya's painting *Men Fighting With Sticks* as an imaging of this milieu that has come into the middle of the frame:

The quicksand is swallowing the duelists; the river is threatening the fighter: earth, waters, and climate, the mute world, the voiceless things once placed as a décor surrounding the usual spectacles, all those things that never interested anyone, from now on thrust themselves brutally and without warning into our schemes and maneuvers. They burst in on our culture, which had never formed anything but a local, vague, and cosmetic idea of them: nature. (Serres 1995: 3)

Mud can perhaps be seen as a kind of slack, exhausted, overfolded dough, a material in which all possible lines of folding have been included, to the point where there is no longer any difference or potential left. Like many jokes, it embodies a double movement, whereby a signal is first degraded into noise, but then the noise rises up, like a tarbaby or creature formed out of mud, in the form of a new signal.

The difficulty of *The Parasite* comes from Serres's determination not to edit out any of the interferences, his effort to render the blizzard of circumstance. Acoustic engineers are accustomed to distinguish different kinds of noise. The most familiar of their designations is so-called 'white noise', which is defined as the sound of the sum-total of all possible frequencies. Distinguished from this there is also what is known as 'pink noise', which

is defined as the sum-total of that segment of the total spectrum of frequencies which can be registered by human hearing. When sound-artists and noise musicians, who have found a new seductiveness in noisiness over the last few years frame and manipulate the sizzle of static and the scream of feedback into kinds of work, they are in a sense converting white noise into pink noise. In Serres's terms, the parasite becomes the host. Serres's whole enterprise, like that of many of the twentieth-century writers who have been drawn to noisiness, Joyce, Beckett, Borges, Pynchon, Perec and Ponge, may be summarised as the trick performed by Maxwell's demon of switching randomness into order by an act of sorting or selective attention alone, the attempt to pick out the pink noise amid the hubbub of white noise.

And yet, yesterday morning, just as I was writing these very sentences, my son suddenly screamed with a voice that expressed a kind of agony and horror, and carried on screaming. I rushed out of the room where I had been writing, to see him standing in his pyjamas in the corridor, his eyes wide but blinded with some horror, limbs quivering, his mouth wide and uncontrollably gaping. What had happened? He had turned on the television, which had been left with the volume turned up full and tuned between stations, and had suddenly been invaded by the sight and sound of the white noise, massively amplified, like a deathly, electric living-dead snow. Just for a second, a chink had opened up in the screen which normally held the noise at acceptable levels, and it had spread at the speed of sound, through him and me and the whole house. These inhuman, panic moments have become rarer in Serres work, but are still sometimes to be found, for example in his account of the total eclipse of the sun which took place on 11 August 1999 (Serres 2000).

What makes *The Parasite* Serres's most strained and painful book is the equilibrium he attempts to maintain between what he calls 'good and bad Hermes' (Serres 1982: 224), positive, open, inventive mediations and negative, murderous, entropic, epidemic mediations. In the work of the 1990s, Serres has tested these alternatives with respect to the biggest and most proliferating parasite or quasi-object that has ever arisen in history, the space of global communications. On the whole, these meditations have been hopeful. *Atlas*, in particular, proposes that we need a new way of thinking about and representing the world of communications that has already come about. All previous cartographies, whether geographical, biological, economic, or political, have depended upon the principle of logical noncontradiction expressed as a physical principle, namely that one cannot both be and not be where one is, one cannot be in one place and in another simultaneously. This is the rule that seems to be set aside in the world of global communications that makes it possible for every periphery to be in the middle: a world without addresses that correspond to unique and determinate sets of coordinates in the physical world (Serres 1994: 205-6).

At the centre of the book – though how, given its argument, is this centre to be established? – is Serres's reading of the Maupassant story about a man haunted by his invisible other, a horrifying being who represents the principle of being there and elsewhere at once: 'Another puts himself in my place, an otherwhere (autre-là) or *Horla* puts itself in the place of being-there' (Serres 1994: 79). The haunted man in Maupassant's story thinks that his antipodean other may have originated on the other side of the world, in Brazil, in fact; but Serres reads the story in terms of what it predicts: the folding together of near and far, here and there, *hors* and *là*, the literalisation of the virtual in contemporary space. Serres recommends in his *Atlas* (1994) an expansion of categories and dimensions in philosophical writing, to take account of the emerging topological conditions and sensibilities of the modern world, a new universal in which 'the milieu arises in every place' (Serres 1994: 128). In this kind of thinking, everything comes down to, or perhaps, rather moves out from, prepositions:

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 list Serres gives us alludes characteristically to a number of his own works, *L'interférence* (the second volume of his *Hermès* sequence, 1972), *The Parasite* (1980) *Detachment* (1983) and *Angels* (1993), thereby looping together his topologised history of spatial thought with his own efforts to open up the oblique and branching 'North-West passage' between culture and science.

Serres's work may be described as a long response to the challenge posed by Leibniz's monadology once one does without the mediating principle provided by God. In place of the guarantee of integration offered by the divine gaze, there are only the complex, oblique, semi-chaotic but still apparently self-organising systems which work across nature and culture, and in which peaceful integration must emerge out of the midst of randomness and turbulence if it is to emerge at all. Serres sees the work of the parasite as leading to ever more encompassing integrations and self-organisations. The risk that his work takes is to attempt not to skirt the issue, but to plunge into the *mêlée*, in the hope of finding integration from the midst, the buzzing *mittendrinnen* of the blizzard.

I have attempted in another essay ( Connor 2002 ) to mark out three distinct and successive phases in Serres's thought and writing. The truth is, however, that one seems always to have touched down in the swirling middle whenever, and wherever one starts to read the work of Michel Serres. Whenever one thinks one may have tracked a particular argument, allusion, anecdote, figure, or topic to its source, or first appearance, it turns out to have been anticipated or paralleled elsewhere in the work, in another essay or book. The lines leading from one book to the next are crossed lines. The work is holographic, self-replicating at every level.. No item within his oeuvre can stand entirely alone, for every item is honeycombed with tunnels and passages leading to other places, other topics, in other books. And yet, so thoroughly is each book mined with this motion, in Hopkins's figure, that it seems as though that general, explicating context is actually included within each book. An important theme in Michel Serres's work since at least the early 1980s is the new inter-implication of the local and the global. It is as though his own work were a railway network in which every station was a hub offering a direct connection to every other station in the network. It is a structure in which the local contains the global, and the global contains the local. This is a perfect example of the mobile *mis-en-abîme* that Serres's work sets up. In attempting to make out a map that will be coextensive with the territory it maps, it mimes the relations it offers to model, in which there is no stable mid-place between the local and the global, but in which mediation occupies the whole field. Put in the terms of *Hominescence*, Serres most recent and surely his most expansively optimistic book, this involves the necessary embrace of man's liberation from those principles of limit and locality that have always both sheltered and defined him, an adjustment to his 'incipient infinitude' (Serres 2001: 67).

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