

in a chapter entitled "Violence et contrat" (included in the collection of translated essays), Serres goes even further back in his speculations and investigations. He begins to examine the threshold of culture, its origin, inception, root, and direction. It is an origin grounded in violence and polarization, in inclusion and exclusion. And this chapter is also a first sketch for Serres of his theory of human relations, a theory that takes shape in this book, *The Parasite*.

The Parasite starts with an author, as do many of Serres's other works; in this case it is Jean de La Fontaine, the author of the *Fables*. Serres develops his theory of human relations, the theory of the parasite—be it noise, guest, leech, or all three—with the support of a series of texts including La Fontaine, Rousseau, Molière, and the Acts of the Apostles. For Serres, the parasite is the primordial, one-way, and irreversible relation that is the base of human institutions and disciplines: society, economy, and work; human sciences and hard sciences; religion and history. All of these have the parasitic relation as their basic and fundamental component. Serres demonstrates this for each with equal facility and equal virtuosity, speaking the language of each of these fields and in the many-tongued, pentecostal language that for him is capable of discussing all these disciplines and institutions: the language of philosophy.

The parasite is a microbe, an insidious infection that takes without giving and weakens without killing. The parasite is also a guest, who exchanges his talk, praise, and flattery for food. The parasite is noise as well, the static in a system or the interference in a channel. These seemingly dissimilar activities are, according to Michel Serres, not merely coincidentally expressed by the same word (in French). Rather, they are intrinsically related and, in fact, they have the same basic function in a system. Whether it produces a fever or just hot air, the parasite is a thermal exciter. And as such, it is both the atom of a relation and the production of a change in this relation. Through a careful and cogent analysis of these various threads, Michel Serres produces an elegant theory of human relations and institutions, all of which have the same common factor: the parasite.

Introduction to the New Edition

Bring the Noise: The Parasite and the Multiple Genealogies of Posthumanism

Gary Wolfe

The theory of being, ontology, brings us to atoms.
The theory of relations brings us to the parasite.

—Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

If ever a thinker made it clear that what we have come to call "posthumanism" is not in any sense what simply comes "after" humanism, it is Michel Serres. Some popular renderings of the *post-* in posthumanism offer it as the mark of historical succession in which (so the story goes) the human is transformed and finally eclipsed by various technological, informatic, and bioengineering developments rooted in the early twentieth century, and then greatly accelerated by the practical demands of two world wars and the cold war that followed them.¹ But Serres's work asserts (to paraphrase the title of his interlocutor Bruno Latour's book) that *we have never been human*, if by "human" we mean, to use Latour's half-humorous litany, "the free agent, the citizen builder of the Leviathan, the distressing visage of the human person, the other of a relationship, consciousness, the *cogito*, the hermeneut, the inner self, the thee and thou of dialogue, presence to oneself, intersubjectivity"—the list could be extended, of course.² "Asserts" is perhaps not exactly the right word here, however, because Serres performs this task—this labor, really—in a dizzying array of registers, a loosely knit tapestry of knowledges and disciplines that are threaded through more books than

one can count (the actual number is upward of thirty-five texts at this point, depending on how you are keeping track). If this is the case with most of Serres's work, it is especially true of *The Parasite*, which (written from late 1975 to 1979, appearing in French in 1980 and in English two years later) stands at the center of Serres's long and distinguished career. *The Parasite* is, as many readers have noted, a book made of books, a text made of texts—so much so that its intertexts are listed by Serres at the end of the volume.

As with Jean-François Lyotard's famous assertion that the postmodern paradoxically comes *before* the modern, for Serres, the posthuman precedes and subverts the human, both ontologically and epistemologically.³ It is constituted by what Theodor Adorno once called, with a rather different critical aim and apparatus at hand, "the preponderance of the object"⁴—an unruly, asynchronous, material heterogeneity that "the human" founds itself upon only by repressing, mastering, or denying it even as, in reality, the human is constituted and in some sense determined by it.⁵ As Serres puts it in the opening pages of *Genesis* (1982), the text that he published immediately following *The Parasite* (and many readers will rightly hear resonance upon resonance with the work of Deleuze and Guattari in this passage):

We are fascinated by the unit; only a unity seems rational to us. We scorn the senses, because their information reaches us in bursts. We scorn the groupings of the world [things like "a flight of screaming birds," "a cloud of chirping crickets," "crowds, packs, hordes on the move"] and we scorn those of our bodies. For us they seem to enjoy a bit of the status of Being only when they are subsumed beneath a unity. Disaggregation and aggregation, as such, and without contradiction [making here his difference with Adorno's dialectics] are repugnant to us. . . . We want a principle, a system, an integration, and we want elements, atoms, numbers. We want them, and we make them. A single God, and identifiable individuals.⁶

For Serres, the challenge is not so much exposing the false tidiness of such unities themselves. After all, he writes (and here he is squarely in line with a range of contemporary thinkers from Deleuze and Lyotard to Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, from Niklas Luhmann to Jacques Derrida), "We are as little sure of the one as of the multiple. We've never hit upon truly atomic, multiple, indivisible terms that were not themselves, once again, composite. . . . The bottom always falls out of the quest for the elementary. The irreducibly individual recedes like the horizon, as our analysis advances" (*Genesis*, 2–3). Rather, the problem for Serres—an intellectual but also methodological problem—is how difficult it is to think otherwise; how to *perform* and *accomplish* such thinking. This is the challenge for what Serres calls "a new object for philosophy": "Can I possibly speak of multiplicity itself without ever availing myself of the *concept*?" (4; emphasis in original).

The one who thinks and writes, the subject of knowledge, must then take the *other* of knowledge seriously. "Noise" is always already part of the signal; blindness inescapably accompanies vision, which is why Serres's writing is so strange and so demanding. In fact, Serres's work, in a profound sense, struggles *against* clarity, which is to say that it struggles, in a way, against language itself, (mis)understood as the more or less transparent and unproblematic transmission of conceptual and analytical content from writer to reader. Indeed, as we know, one of Serres's great themes is *noise* (in multiple senses, but especially in the sense used in information theory in the second half of the twentieth century), and it is noise that Serres's writing doesn't just talk about but generates—not as the other or the opposite of content, but as content's very fiber. This is why Serres's writing—though intellectually powerful and penetrating—is not analytical but experimental; not cumulative and aggregative but discursive; not linear but meandering, doubling back on itself to remind itself of stones left unturned, details too readily smoothed over, conclusions too well-varnished. And then we're plunged back into the welter, back into the complexity of it all. Back into the sea foam of noise.

Here, we need to remember that "noise" (for the English reader) forms the third and unsuspected meaning of the French word *parasite*: 1. biological parasite; 2. social parasite; 3. static or interference. As we know from classical information theory and its model of the signal-to-noise ratio, noise was typically regarded as simply the extraneous background against which a given message or signal was transmitted from a sender to receiver. For Serres, however, "as soon as we are two, we are already three or four. . . . In order to succeed, the dialogue needs an excluded third" (*Genesis*, 57); we may begin with "two interlocutors and the channel that attaches them to one another" but "the parasite, nesting on the flow of the relation, is in third position" (53). For Serres, then—and here he joins a line of systems theorists that includes figures such as Gregory Bateson and, later, Niklas Luhmann—noise is *productive* and creative: "noise, through its presence and absence, the interminence of the signal, produces the new system" (52). Or as Bateson puts it in the very last sentence of his seminal essay "Cybernetic Explanation" (1967): "All that is not information, not redundancy, not form and not restraints—is noise, the only possible source of *new* patterns."⁶ Luhmann helps clarify and develop the point in his major work, *Social Systems* (1984):

The difference between meaning and world is formed for this process of the continual self-determination of meaning as the difference between order and perturbation, between information and noise. Both are, and both remain, necessary. The unity of the difference is and remains the basis for operation. *This cannot be*

emphasized strongly enough. A preference for meaning over world, for order over perturbation, for information over noise is only a preference. It does not enable one to dispense with the contrary.⁷

This is exactly what Serres has in mind when he asserts in *The Parasite* that "systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning." Given the basic informational and communicational paradigm of "two stations and a channel," messages are exchanged, and "if the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed." Thus, he continues, "Relation is nonrelation," and if the channel that carries the message "disappears into immediacy," then "there would be no spaces of transformation anywhere." In this context his apparently paradoxical assertion that "the real is not rational" makes perfect sense (79).

I have gone into this paradigm of "noise" in some detail because, in the trajectory of Serres's thinking, it complicates and refines the central model of "translation" (between elements of different disciplines, different bodies of knowledge, different loci in historical and social space) that occupied him in the five-volume *Hermes* series that precedes *The Parasite*—a model that might well be too readily understood, rightly or wrongly, in terms of a fundamental structuralism whose limitations were certainly evident, at least to thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, by the late 1970s.⁸ "Can we rewrite a system," Serres asks, "not in the key of preestablished harmony," but rather as "the book of differences, noise, and disorder"? After all, "the difference is part of the thing itself, and perhaps it even produces the thing. Maybe the radical origin of things is really that difference."⁹ In Derrida's formulation, there is "difference at the origin." And it is noise, of course, that interrupts the already parasitic exchange between the country rat and the city rat in La Fontaine's fable that opens this book, which is why (remembering the third meaning of the French) Serres writes, "The parasited one parasites the parasites" (*Parasite*, 13).

Other obvious comparisons could be made here with Derrida's work, not least his meditations on hospitality, particularly since the "Translator's Preface" to this book reminds us that the French word *hôte* corresponds to both "host" and "guest" in English. As Serres notes, "The host, the guest: the same word; he gives and receives, offers and accepts, invites and is invited, master and passer-by" (15). The logic here is in an important sense deconstructive, of course, but it is also perhaps more than that, more profoundly unsettled by the noise of the third, the noise from the outside, that in La Fontaine's fable disrupts the momentarily structured (but also always already reversible) relations between the first and second parties, creating what Serres calls a para-

static cascade (5): "But who expels him? Noise. One parasite chases another out. One parasite (static), in the sense that information theory uses the word, chases another, in the anthropological sense. Communication theory is in charge of the system; it can break it down or let it function, depending on the signal. A parasite, physical, acoustic, informational, belonging to order and disorder, a new voice, an important one, in the contrapuntal matrix" (6).

For Serres, this parasitic cascade, the chain, or what he sometimes calls the arrow of the ongoing movement of parasitic relations, forms the ur-dynamic of social and cultural relations.¹⁰ As Serres puts it in the opening pages, "A human group is organized with one-way relations, where one eats the other and where the second cannot benefit at all from the first. . . . The flow goes one way, never the other. I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, 'parasitic'" (5). And, much later:

The chain of parasitism is a simple relation of order, irreversible like the flow of the river. One feeds on another and gives nothing in return. Asymmetry is local on a chain and is propagated globally the length of a series, through transitivity. They make a line. . . . For parasitism is an elementary relation; it is, in fact, the elements of the relation.

The relation upsets equilibrium, making it deviate. If some equilibrium exists or ever existed somewhere, somehow, the introduction of a parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium. Immediately, the system changes; time has begun. (182)

From this apparently quite simple principle (although the same could be said, of course, for the principle of feedback, which Bateson will use to give original and penetrating accounts of everything from schizophrenia and alcoholism to "primitive" art in Bali), Serres will develop an extraordinarily novel theory of the very foundations of human relations, which are now seen as "derived," Steven D. Brown writes, "from a founding disorder by way of a minor differentiation"; noise, the event, constantly forces temporarily homeostatic systems of interaction to reconstitute and reorganize themselves.¹¹ For Serres, Brown writes, human relations form "a parasitic chain which interrupts or parasitizes other kinds of relations (that is, those of other animals, or the natural words itself)," as in animal husbandry or agriculture; but then those relations are in turn disrupted by the arrival of the "third," the "uninvited guest" or "new arrival" who "provokes a new form of complexity" and "engineers a kind of difference by intercepting relations."¹² The arrival of the "third," the "joker," provokes what may be viewed in Serres as a primordial act of exclusion or "sacrifice"—radically contingent and in some profound sense nonsensical—whereby society constitutes itself in a founding countermove against the endlessly complexifying and disrupting

parasitic chain. As Serres puts it in a fascinating meditation midway through *The Parasite*, "Agriculture and culture have the same origin or the same foundation, a white spot that realizes a rupture of equilibrium, a clean spot constituted through expulsion. A spot of propriety or cleanliness, a spot of belonging" (179). In fact, he argues, "The first one who, having enclosed a field or a bit of land, decided to exclude everything there, was the true founder of the following historical era" (178).

Many commentators have noted the influence of René Girard's work on sacrifice, in *Violence and the Sacred* (1978), on Serres's ideas here, but one might also mention the close proximity of Derrida's analysis of the "sacrificial symbolic economy" in two particular registers. First, Derrida insists, like Serres, that we cannot simply step outside of the regime of what Derrida calls "carno-phallogocentrism" any more than we can step outside of metaphysics. For Derrida, the "question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat." Rather, "since one *must* eat in any case . . . *how* for goodness sake should one *eat well*?"¹³ Not whether to eat, but how, is precisely what Serres's model of the parasite takes for granted:

Parasite. The prefix *para-* means "near," "next to," measures a distance. The *sites* is the food. In this open mouth that speaks and eats there the resonances with Derrida's "Eating Well" are manifold, what is next to eating, its neighboring function, is what emits sound. *Para* measures a difference between a reception and, on the contrary, an expansion. The latter makes one's own what is in common and what will soon be even more one's own, the living body. (*Parasite*, 144)

He concludes, reaching back for a moment to his thesis on (agri)culture just noted, "I already eats space."

Second, both Derrida and Serres suggest that the "anthropological" aspect of sacrifice is tightly coupled—coterminous, in fact—with its conceptual expression in the philosophical canon. Serres writes:

The classical age appears to be a founder to us only by having taken up and performed this same motion elsewhere. The Cartesian meditation eliminates, expels, banishes everything, hyperbolically. Once again, a clean slate and a clear spot in the religious major mode, and this slate and this spot are the extent of which I am the master and possessor of my thought. The thinking ego chases the parasites out, chases out in prosopopoeia the most cunning of all who return, who might return at any moment and everywhere, thus chases everything out, speaking absolutely; it discovers, elsewhere, the world, the white of our dominance. (*Parasite*, 180)

This has profound implications, of course, for how one understands time, history, and historical explanation—implications that, as I have already indicated, make it impossible to understand the *post-* of posthumanism as simply "what comes after." This is so in Serres's thought for two reasons. First, as Maria Assad argues in her study of Serres and temporality, society for Serres is "founded on an act of vio-

lence by exclusion, while history is the chain of repetitive imitations of this act."¹⁴ For Serres, this means that one can no longer continue to just "do" history in a way that, underneath its account of apparent changes and transformations, is subtended by a fundamental repetition of the sacrificial structure identified by Girard and Derrida. Hence, the strangeness, the demanding nonlinearity and episodic quality, of Serres's writing. One must—in fact and also performatively, on the page—construct an alternative view of time and history that makes possible the submission of the familiar frames, proportions, and exclusions of historicism and its fundamentally linear, narrative mode to the creative force of the new, the unthought, the unexpected: to the incursion of noise and the force of the event.

Second, then—against the view of what Serres's contemporary Louis Althusser once characterized as an "ideological" understanding of time and history as one-dimensional and univocal, cut from one cloth, in synch with itself, moving at the same pace and rhythm throughout the social fabric—Serres will work to craft a different theory of time and history, one that is dynamic and "topological" rather than linear and repetitive. As Steven Connor explains:

Topology may be defined as the study of the spatial properties of an object that remain invariant under homeomorphic deformation, which is to say, broadly, actions of stretching, squeezing, or folding. [It is] not concerned with exact measurement, which is the domain of geometry . . . but rather with spatial relations, such as continuity, neighbourhood, insiderness and outsiderness, disjunction and connection. . . . Because topology is concerned with what remains invariant as a result of transformation, it may be thought of as geometry plus time, geometry given body by motion.¹⁵

For Serres, topological temporality is thus multidimensional and asynchronous, and in that sense it is subjected to a kind of spatiatization that renders relations between near and far, past and future, ancient and modern in new and unexpected ways. In his conversations with Bruno Latour, Serres gives a wonderfully simple example:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. The science of nearness and rifts is called topology, while the science of stable and well-defined distances is called metrical geometry. . . . As we experience time—as much in our inner senses as externally in nature, as much as *les temps* of history as *les temps* of weather—it resembles this crumpled version much more than the flat, overly simplified one.¹⁶

There are very obvious, and very important, resonances here with the work of Gilles Deleuze, particularly Deleuze's study *The Fold*:

Leibniz and the Baroque—resonances that are only underscored when we remember that Serres wrote his doctoral dissertation on Leibniz.¹⁷ But the point I want to stay with for a moment more is how this changes how we think about history and about “doing” history. As Connor characterizes it, “In place of the line of history, Serres proposes a series of different figurings of time, based on dynamic volumes. . . . Time is seen as a river, forking, branching, slewing, slowing, rolling back on itself, . . . a complex volume that folds over on itself, and in the process does not merely transform in time, but itself gathers up and releases time.”¹⁸ What this means, as Serres puts it, is that “every historical era is likewise multitemporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic. An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats.”¹⁹

We could not be farther from the “ideological” view of one-dimensional time criticized by Althusser. In fact, Serres argues, his approach is more *empirically* responsible than that, for “history is the locus of full causes without effects, immense effects with futile reasons, strong consequences from insignificant causes, rigorous effects from chance occurrences” (*Parasite*, 20). But precisely this, of course, is what separates him from Althusser’s attempt to understand the complex phenomena of what he called “uneven development” and “overdetermination” because Serres’s view rules out explaining them in terms of their determination by the economic infrastructure “in the last instance,” as Althusser put it (even if, as he added, “the last instance never comes”).²⁰ In what will turn out to be an ongoing if oblique dialogue with the Marxian theory of value throughout *The Parasite*, Serres sees the Marxian privileging of exchange and use value as determinative forces of social life and historical development as itself part of that same humanist legacy he is trying to complicate and combat.²¹ Instead, *The Parasite* asserts the importance not of exchange or use value but rather of what Serres calls “abuse value” in the organization of societies—an abuse value that is indexed to the fundamental dynamic of a primary parasitism and secondary sacrificial expulsion that we have already discussed. This dynamic, Serres insists, comes *before* property, exchange, and the labor theory of value. As Serres puts it, “The balance of exchange is always weighed and measured, calculated, taking into account a relation without exchange, an abusive relation. The term *abusivité* is a term of usage. Abuse doesn’t prevent use. The *abusivité* is complete, irrevocable consumption, precedes use- and exchange-value. Quite simply, it is the arrow with only one direction” (80).

This will be easier to understand, perhaps, if we think of it in terms of one of the more familiar, adjacent motifs in contemporary

thought, *the gift*, which is a close conceptual cousin to the parasite (the host gives to the parasite in a one-way transaction, without receiving anything in return). Students of the analysis of the gift and its ramifications in work by Derrida, Bataille, and others that is bent on complicating and deconstructing the pioneering analysis in French anthropology by Marcel Mauss will find much here to admire.²² Serres writes that in modernity, “the freely given occurs only after the owing, the feast after the payment.” But “for the gods, the situation is the inverse; the given comes before the owed.” “This is certainly the world upsidetdown,” he continues:

The world turns in one direction; history has its economy where exchange is fundamental: it is called the meaning of history. It stops a moment, turns in the other direction, and in this new (hi)story, exchange appears after everything was freely given. It is not a new story; on the contrary, it is an ancient one, lost in the dark recesses of memory. . . . There are only barely perceptible traces of the history of giving in texts and on monuments. Since then, we have been caught up in economic history, a time of calculation and exchanges and of making up for losses. Does this history have an outside? That is precisely the subject of this book. (*Parasite*, 30–31)

Of course, Serres’s handling of the economy of the gift also marks a divergence, in a way, from the work of Derrida, one that is only amplified in the very ways that the two thinkers approach the closely related figure of *the hand*. As Steven D. Brown notes, one important difference between Derrida and Serres is that “Serres partakes, he savours the materials he works with. There is demonstration and invention, but very little critique.”²³ But might this partaking not be viewed as a variety of the “eating of space” that we saw Serres discussing earlier, an “eating” that is perhaps also not so much, to use Derrida’s phrase, an “eating well”? Some critics seem to think so; Connor, for example, thinks that Serres, particularly in those works of the 1990s that follow *The Parasite*, “seeks the same kind of vast, encompassing synthesis of relations and inter-implications as did Leibniz,” envisioning “a plenitopia of included middles in which no exceptions or exclusions or residues can be tolerated.”²⁴ What Connor calls Serres’s “ethical claims for synthesis, a holistic *grasping* of the complete shape of things” directs us in turn toward Serres’s reading (derived in no small part from his mentor Gaston Bachelard) of the *hand* as “an image of pure possibility, a readiness to take any shape,” as Connor puts it; “a naked faculty,” in Serres’s words.²⁵ Serres writes in *Genesis*—conjugating now the relationship between the figure of the hand and of thought itself—“When I think a given concept, I am entirely this concept, when I think tree, I am the tree. . . . That is the unquestionable experience of thinking. No invention, no innovation without it. . . . The hand is no longer a hand when it has taken

hold of the hammer, it is the hammer itself. . . . The hand and thought, like one's tongue, disappear in their determinations" (30). Thus, Serres asserts, "Inventive thinking is unstable, it is undetermined, it is undifferentiated, it is as little singular in its function as is our hand" (34).

For Derrida, of course, matters are quite otherwise, and thinking—after *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*—is nothing if not differentiated. Indeed, that differentiation (Derrida's various terms for it are *écriture*, trace, supplement, *différance*, and so on) is the source of thinking's dynamism and spatializing movement. For Derrida (and here his reading of Heidegger is fundamental) there is no "naked" hand, no pure potentiality or plenitude that would, in a second moment, make available the hand's prosthetic transformation. Similarly, thinking, as Heidegger characterizes it, is "Hand-Werk," but it is less an act of "invention" or "expansion" than one of "reception," of which the open, skyward-facing palm might be a fit emblem—hence the common etymological root of "thinking" and "thanking" which leads us directly back, of course, to the question of the gift. Thinking is not, to use Heidegger's formulation, determined by biological or utilitarian function; it is not, Derrida writes, "of the order of conceptual grasping"; rather, it is a kind of *reception*. Most important, however—and this has a very direct bearing on the model of the parasite—"nothing is less assured," Derrida writes, "than the distinction between *giving* and *taking*."²⁶ For Serres—to put it very schematically—thinking, like the hand, is able to de-differentiate into prosthetic inventiveness on the basis of a prior plenitude as "pure possibility"; for Derrida, on the other hand (if the expression can be allowed in this context), thinking is already constituted by difference, and the hand (to stay with Heidegger's rendering of it) is already nonidentical with itself because the difference between opening and closing, grasping and receiving (a difference that makes the hand what it is, from Heidegger's point of view) cannot be secured.²⁷

But perhaps we will do more justice to the peculiarity and specificity of *The Parasite*—which is not yet, after all, the work that will become the Serres oeuvre of the 1990s—by understanding the "abuse" of "abuse value" not in the common pejorative sense of "mistreatment" but rather in light of the Latin prefix *ab-* meaning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, "off or away from"; "abuse" value *at a langent* to use and exchange value, at a distance from it: a different vector, a different type of value. Serres writes—again in obvious if indirect dialogue with the Marxian theory of value:

The producer plays the contents, the parasite, the position. The one who plays the position will always beat the one who plays the contents. The latter is simple and naïve; the former is complex and mediatized. . . .

To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation. It is to

have a relation only with the relation itself. Never with the stations from which it comes, to which it goes, and by which it passes. Never to the things as such and, undoubtedly, never to subjects as such. . . . And that is the meaning of the prefix *para-* in the word *parasite*: it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation. It has relations, as they say, and makes a system of them. It is always mediate and never immediate.²⁸

This is clearly the logic behind the most well known and much-discussed concept to emerge from *The Parasite*, what Serres calls "the quasi-object." "This quasi-object is not an object," he writes, "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" (225). Take a basketball, for example. "A ball," he explains, "is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it. Over there, on the ground, it is nothing; it is stupid; it has no meaning, no function, and no value" (225). But when it circulates among subjects in a game, things change dramatically. "The laws are written for it, defined relative to it, and we bend to these laws." In fact, "the ball isn't there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball"; "playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance" (226). For Serres, as we have already seen, sacrifice, expulsion, and scapegoating are rudimentary forms of achieving social cohesion and producing intersubjectivity; we might say that they are fundamental displacements in the sense that (to stay with Serres's terminology) they mistake "contents" for "relations" and "persons" for "positions." But the quasi-object produces intersubjectivity in a much more subtle and dynamic (and for that reason more powerful) way. Brown explains the link between these two dynamics succinctly when he notes, "The principle question in the sacrificial scene is 'who will be excluded?' Which of the parasites will be expelled, breaking the chain? Who comes last in line? Who will be '1'?"²⁹

The one holding the quasi-object, that's who. "This quasi-object designates him," Serres writes. "He is marked with the sign of the ball. Let him beware" (*Parasite*, 226). In a process that Serres likens to the game "hunt the slipper" or "button, button, who's got the button" (225), the quasi-object is that "by which I am a subject, that is to say, sub-mitted"; it is not just "a marker of the subject" but also "an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity" (227). "More a contract than a thing," Serres writes in *Genesis*, "the object here is a quasi-object insofar as it remains a quasi-us" (88). In fact, as Niklas Luhmann has observed, for Serres "the stabilization of objects (identification, recognizability, and so on) is more likely to contribute to stabilizing social relationships than the famous social contract" that Serres discusses in *The Parasite* in his very densely textured meditations on Rousseau. In systems theory

terms, quasi-objects aren't objects at all but rather recursively stabilized designations. "Presumably," Luhmann writes, "the objects that emerge from the recursive self-application of communication contribute more than any other kinds of norms and sanctions to supplying the social system with necessary redundancies," whereby we know that "we" are "we," and as such "their significance as objects implies a realm of social regulation."³⁰

But Serres and Luhmann—and this is my final point—come at the dynamics of social systems in complexly related but also crucially different ways. Like second-wave figures in systems theory such as Luhmann and Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, Serres is keenly interested—as any student of science after Heisenberg must be—in the question and status of the observer. As he puts it, "a given noise, the sound of the conversation in the room, is a noise for the conversation I am having with my interlocutor on the phone, but it is a message for my guests. And for them, my conversation is a noise for their own. It all depends on the position of the observer" (*Parasite*, 66). Here, we seem to be quite close to Luhmann's theory of observation as fundamentally a phenomenon of making self-referential distinctions, whereby what counts as meaning or knowledge is produced by the self-referential code of the system in a kind of radicalization (or just taking seriously) of the mantra by Korzybski that Bateson was fond of quoting: "The map is not the territory."³¹ For Luhmann, since the environmental "noise" outside the observing system is literally overwhelming, any system, if it is to continue its autopoiesis, must reduce that complexity by filtering it, if you like, in terms of a self-referential code. But at the same time, systems constantly transform themselves—build up their own complexity, to use Luhmann's terminology—by having to respond to environmental noise.³²

In that sense, Luhmann would agree with Serres that "an observer seated within the system. . . overvalues the message and undervalues the noise if he belongs to the functioning of the system" (*Parasite*, 68). "He represses the parasites," Serres writes, "in order to send or receive communications better and to make them circulate in a distinct and workable fashion. . . . Whoever belongs to the system perceives noises less and represses them more, the more he is a functioning part of the system" (*Parasite*, 68). And he does so, from Luhmann's point of view, because noise, environmental complexity, is an overwhelming adaptive and evolutionary *problem* for systems that wish to continue their autopoiesis.

Here, however, things get complicated, for Serres contends, "It is not so simple. If systems were univocal or if they had one norm, this description would be enough. But systems function with several norms

at a time" (*Parasite*, 68). This means, as he puts it with characteristic nonchalance, "Bivalent systems get lost around here"; "give or take one vibration, moving a hair's breadth in either direction causes the noises to become messages and the messages, noises." "The value of belonging passes through space," he continues, "through the spectrum that separates or unites the two old values" (67)—hence, Serres's interest in what he calls "spaces of transformation," "the milieu, the mediate," "what exists between" system and environment (71, 65).

Luhmann would put things rather differently. On the one hand, he would insist that *all* systems operate by a "bivalent" logic whose ur-form is the system/environment distinction. In this sense, he would flatly disagree with Serres that "systems function with several norms at a time" (*Parasite*, 68). For Luhmann, the only way a system could be said to operate with "several norms at a time" would be in the sense of their hierarchical nesting (as in, for example, the subsystems of the legal system), which would continue, however, to operate by a bivalent logic. At the same time, however, since there *are* no observer-independent systems (how would we know if there were?), systems can be said to operate "with several norms at a time" in the sense that they can be the site of a "semantic overburdening" (to use Luhmann's phrase) in which several different second-order observations, using different codes, can make different observer attributions to any observed system. In a way, this does nothing more than acknowledge Bateson's well-known appropriation of Kant when he notes that the most elementary act is "the selection of a fact" (a selection based on a given map or code or schema) from an object that is actually constituted by "an infinite number of potential facts."³³

But—and this is the crucial turn that separates Luhmann from Bateson and actually *links* him with Serres—Luhmann would add that any such selection is based on a constitutive distinction that is itself not just contingent (as Bateson insists) but also *paradoxical*, just as in the ur-form of distinction (system/environment) both sides of the distinction are a product of only *one* side (namely, the system making that distinction). This is what Luhmann calls the "blind spot" of observation, the paradoxical identity of both sides of the distinction that grounds observation (an inversion of what Hegel called "the identity of identity and non-identity") to which an observer must remain blind if it is to use that distinction to carry out its operations. (For example, the legal system cannot acknowledge the paradoxical identity of legal/illegal—the paradoxical fact that both sides of the distinction are self-instantiated by *one* side, namely, the legal—and use that distinction at the same time). This is what Luhmann means—and it is crucial to understanding his relationship with Serres—when he writes that "reality

is what one does not perceive when one perceives it."³⁴ The very distinction that makes the world cognitively available for an observer is also—just because that distinction is contingent and paradoxical—what makes the world *unavailable*, in the sense of generatively creating its own outside, what Luhmann calls the “unmarked space” of distinction. And this is why, Luhmann insists, “the world is observable *because* it is unobservable.”³⁵

An irresistible and important moment in *The Parasite* that seems to be directed toward this “parasitical” ongoing movement and “distribution” (as Luhmann sometimes calls it) of observation surely suggests itself at this point, where Serres writes:

The observer is perhaps the inobservable. He must, at least, be last on the chain of observables. If he is supplanted, he becomes observed. Thus he is in a position of a parasite. Not only because he takes the observation that he doesn't return, but also because he plays the last position. . . . The observer always makes less noise than the observed. He is thus unobservable by the observed. That is why he troubles and is never troubled, that is why he is an asymmetric operator. . . . He is in the position of the subject. (237–38)

Here again, the relations between Serres and Luhmann are anything but straightforward since, for Luhmann, there can be no “last position” when we talk about observation, no noncontingent, nonparadoxical observation, which is why for Luhmann the observer could never be “in the position of the subject.” To put it another way, for Luhmann, the observer would be “parasitical” not because he is “last on the chain of observables” but because the movement of observer attribution always flows in one direction, from second order to first order, in a process whose “motor” or “engine” is the paradoxical deconstructibility of any observation's grounding distinction. The observer is “inobservable,” then, not to the other but only to itself (Luhmann's “blind spot”). Or, to put it in terms that are more those of intellectual history than epistemology, Serres's critique of the observer would take for granted a first-generation systems theory view of that concept (found in Norbert Wiener, for example, and even, as it turns out, in Bateson) that Luhmann, like Serres, aims to deconstruct and expose.³⁶

We are now in a better position, I think, to appreciate a remarkable moment in *The Parasite* where Serres suggests that therefore “the system is very badly named. Maybe there is not or never was a system.” “The only instances or systems are black boxes,” he continues:

When we do not understand, when we defer our knowledge to a later date, when the thing is too complex for the means at hand, when we put everything in a temporary black box, we prejudge the existence of a system. When we can finally open the box, we see that it works like a space of transformation. The only systems, instances, and substances come from our lack of knowledge. The system is non-

knowledge. The other side of nonknowledge is chaos; the other, system. Knowledge forms a bridge between the two banks. Knowledge as such is a space of transformation. (73)

Can there be undervalued knowledge? Can we open the black box? And what would such a thing look like? These questions bring us back, in the end, to Serres's “method,” to his writing, perplexing and unwieldy here as perhaps nowhere else in his body of work. Perhaps, to answer those questions, we just have to do the impossible anyway. Perhaps it is a question of what we think “thinking” is, not a reflection or representation but a performance, a practice. To paraphrase Serres's philosophical soul mate, Deleuze, Serres is not content to say that we must rethink certain notions, redefine certain concepts; he doesn't *say* it, doesn't argue for it, he just *does* it, and in so doing, he sets out new coordinates for the *praxis* of thinking.³⁷

Notes

1. See, for example, Francis Fukuyama's popular tract *Our Posthuman Future* (London: Picador, 2003).
2. I refer to the set of interviews Latour conducted with Serres. A best seller in France, they are available in English as Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). The Latour text in question is *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); the quotation is from page 136.
3. Readers will habitually consult Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition*, but more useful here, perhaps, is his text *The Postmodern Explained*, afterword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
4. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 177–78.
5. Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 2. Further references are in the text. An excellent introduction and overview of Serres's thinking may be found in the wide-ranging special issue of *Configurations* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2000), devoted to his work.
6. Gregory Bateson, “Cybernetic Explanation,” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 410; emphasis in original. Bateson's explanations of information theory and systems theory generally (“cybernetics,” in the parlance of the day) are remarkably lucid and engaging. See also, in the same volume, the essays “Redundancy and Coding” and “Form, Substance, and Difference.” It should probably be noted here, as Bruce Clarke has reminded me, that the crucial bridge (for Serres and in general) between the contexts of physics (and specifically thermodynamics) and information theory is the concept of entropy, which is referenced in the unidirectional flow of parasitical relations. To put it another way, entropy parasites energy. For an excellent introduction to Serres that emphasizes these relations, see William Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).
7. Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. with Dirk Baecker, intro. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 83; my emphasis.

8. On this point, see Steven D. Brown's discussion in "Michel Serres: Science, Translation, and the Logic of the Parasite," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 19, no. 3 (2002): 1–27. The structuralist cast of the "translation" model is not surprising, given the well-known influence of anthropologist Georges Dumézil on Serres's earlier work, and it is evident in a definition provided by Michel Callon, one of the founders of actor-network theory, a movement profoundly indebted to Serres and his concept of the "quasi-object" announced in these pages. As Callon puts it, "Considered from a very general point of view, this notion [translation] postulates the existence of a single field of significations, concerns and interests, the expression of a shared desire to arrive at the same result. . . . Translation involves creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different" (qtd. in Brown, "Michel Serres," 6). For an early and by now classic critique of the structuralist model, see Jacques Derrida's well-known essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

9. Brown, "Michel Serres," 13.

10. See, for example, Serres's discussion of the master-slave relationship (*Parasite*, 58–60) and his discussion of "The Stereoral Origin of Property Rights" (esp. 144–46, 150).

11. Brown, "Michel Serres," 15.

12. *Ibid.*, 16.

13. Jacques Derrida (with Jean-Luc Nancy), "Eating Well," or "The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava et al. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113, 115; emphasis in original. Derrida's work on this question is by this point quite immense, but see, for example, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 369–418, where Derrida provides a partial list of all the texts in which he has engaged this question (403–6).

14. Maria Assad, *Reading with Michel Serres: An Encounter with Time* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1999), 11.

15. Steven Connor, "Topologies: Michel Serres and the Shapes of Thought," *Anglistik* 15 (2004): 106.

16. Serres with Latour, *Conversations*, 60.

17. And not just Deleuze's Leibniz, of course. The concept of the fold had been appearing in Deleuze's work, and in Foucault's, since the 1960s, and shows up in the 1980s in the work of systems theorist Niklas Luhmann. For a detailed discussion of this concept in the context of the relationship of poststructuralist philosophy and systems theory, a context directly relevant to the signature combination of elements we find in Serres, see chapter 3 of my *Critical Experiments: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the "Outside"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), in particular the section "Folded but Not Twisted: Deleuze and Systems Theory." For Deleuze's Leibniz, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Connor points out that Serres's approval of Deleuze's work in *The Fold* is one of the rare acknowledgments of conceptually adjacent work by a contemporary ("Topologies," 5)—a point about Serres's work that is also pressed by Latour in their *Conversations*, 80–84.

18. Connor, "Topologies," 109.

19. Serres with Latour, *Conversations*, 60.

20. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1977), especially the chapters "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "On the Materialist Dialectic." On "structural causality," see Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), 189ff.

21. See the discussion of money and exchange on pages 150, 156, 161, and 163.

22. Mauss's thesis is that the gift is above all given in the expectation of reciprocity. In pre-market and pre-monetary societies, it serves as a kind of abstract exchange value before the fact. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Hallis (1954; New York: Norton, 2000). For an important recent critique, see Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Georges Bataille's most well known early discussion of nonproductive exchange is probably *Visions of Extremes: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. and intro. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); but see also *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 1991).

23. Brown, "Michel Serres," 5.

24. Connor, "Topologies," 111.

25. *Ibid.*, 116, my emphasis; 111; Serres, *Genesis*, 34.

26. I am summarizing here a number of different texts by Derrida, a more detailed discussion of which can be found in my essay "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal," in *Zoologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1–57 (especially 19ff). Of course, it should be noted that Derrida's disagreement with this cluster of figures in Heidegger is how it reconfirms Heidegger's humanism by separating the human and nonhuman animal ontologically. In a fuller discussion, we would surely want to trace more carefully Serres's rendering of the animal in *The Parasite*, which, as I have already suggested, contains multiple resonances with Derrida's; see, for example, pages 5, 10, 62, 65, and 86.

27. An insightful and important related point that bears directly on the Derrida-Serres relationship (although he doesn't say so) is made by Connor when he suggests that Serres's desire to dispense with "progressive or sequential time," his "effort to show how time is inscribed in and punctuated by different kinds and states of matter leads him to deny all difference between time and its traces. . . . The most important loss in Serres's topologizing of time," he writes, "is the non-assimilability of time within thought" ("Topologies," 112). What is lost—and this is crucial for understanding Derrida's critique of Heidegger—is what is so fundamental for Derrida, namely, time's *alterity*. On this point, see Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996), especially chapter 3, "Aporia of Time, Aporia of Law: Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida."

28. *Parasite*, 38–39. Here I think we must hear an explicit critique, or at least as explicit as Serres is likely to get, of Althusser's famous notion that ideology is "a 'lived' relation to the real," that is, in his words, "a relation of a relation" (namely, of the subject to an imaginary—in the Lacanian sense—representation, and of the imaginary representation to "real conditions of existence"). The relevant texts here are Althusser's famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1971), 127–86; and *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1977), especially the essay "Marxism and Humanism," where the "relation of a relation" formulation occurs (233–34).

29. Brown, "Michel Serres," 20.

30. Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 47.

31. Batseson, "Cybernetic Explanation," 449.

32. This is not the place, of course, for a comparison, even a very general one, between Serres and Luhmann on the question of systems. For an excellent overview of the theory of observation, and of Luhmann's work generally, see William Rasch, *Wildes*

Luhmann's *Moderernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). Especially relevant are chapters 1 and 2.

33. Bateson, "Form, Substance, and Difference," 453.

34. Niklas Luhmann, "The Cognitive Program of Constructivism and a Reality That Remains Unknown," in *Selbsterorganisation: Portrait of a Scientific Revolution*, ed. Wolfgang Krohn et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 76.

35. Niklas Luhmann, "The Paradox of Observing Systems," *Cultural Critique* 31 (Fall 1995): 46; emphasis in original.

36. Directly related to this point is Serres's wonderful rendering of the difference between seeing and hearing as modes of knowledge, which is meant to take issue with the (pan)optical associations of "observation" in the visual sense. See, for example, *The Parasite*, 125-26, and *Genesis*, 7.

37. Deleuze is characterizing the work of Foucault, in his book by the same title, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 30.



Part One

Interrupted Meals

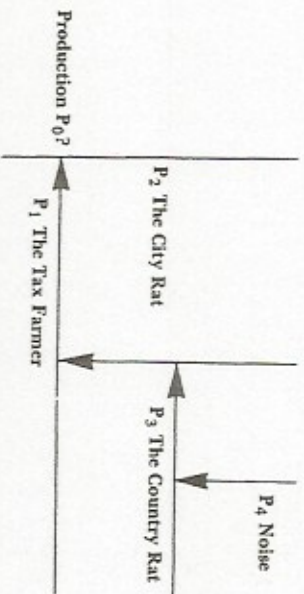
Logics

The city rat invites the country rat onto the Persian rug. They gnaw and chew leftover bits of ortolan. Scraps, bits and pieces, leftovers: their royal feast is only a meal after a meal among the dirty dishes of a table that has not been cleared. The city rat has produced nothing and his dinner invitation costs him almost nothing. Boursault says this in his *Fables d'Esoppe*, where the city rat lives in the house of a big tax farmer. Oil, butter, ham, bacon, cheese—everything is available. It is easy to invite the country cousin and to regale oneself at the expense of another.

The tax farmer produced neither oil nor ham nor cheese; in fact, he produced nothing. But using power or the law, he can profit from these products. Likewise for the city rat who takes the farmer's leftovers. And the last to profit is the country rat. But we know that the feast is cut short. The two companions scurry off when they hear a noise at the door. It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of a parasite? A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order. Let's go to the country where we eat only soup, but quietly and without interruption.

The tax farmer is a parasite, living off the fat of the land: a royal feast, ortolans, Persian rugs. The first rat is a parasite; for him, leftovers, the same Persian rug. Nothing is missing, says La Fontaine. At the table of the first, the table of the farmer, the second rat is a parasite. He permits himself to be entertained in such a fashion, never missing a bite. But strictly speaking, they all interrupt: the custom house officer makes

life hard for the working man, the rat taxes the farmer, the guest exploits his host. But I can no longer write; the noise, the ultimate parasite, through its interruption, wins the game. In the parasitic chain, the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor. The noise chases the country rat; the city rat remains, for he wants to finish the roast. A given parasite seeks to eject the parasite on the level immediately superior to his own. The following shows the cascade, which collapses when $P_1 = P_4$.



I leave it to you to think about this loud noise: the sounds of the street which would make the tax farmer give in; the creaking of the floorboards, the cracking of the beams, which would chase the rats from the building.

Let's draw up the balance. In the beginning is production: the oil crusher, the butter churn, the smokehouse, the cheesemaker's hut. Yet I would still like to know what *produce* means. Those who call production reproduction make the job easy. Our world is full of copiers and repeaters, all highly rewarded with money and glory. It is better to interpret than to compose; it is better to have an opinion on a decision that has already been made than to make one's own. The modern illness is the engulfing of the new in the *duplicata*, the engulfing of intelligence in the pleasure [*jouissance*] of the homogeneous. Real production is undoubtedly rare, for it attracts parasites that immediately make it something common and banal. Real production is unexpected and improbable; it overflows with information and is always immediately parasited.

It attracts the farmer, whom I catch in the act of stealing (away). If he is a peasant, he raises cows and calves, pigs and poultry, living on butter and ham, eating at a table furnished with other foodstuffs; sometimes he sleeps in the barn, in the manure, among the livestock; he does not destroy nonrenewable resources, like a vulgar industrialist, but lives off the newborn. Industry pillages and plunders. Such a farmer is part of

a matrix. Is he a parasite? If he is a tax-collector (an interrupter), he takes part of the products of others for his own profit or for the profit of the state to whom he respectfully defers. He is a veritable impostor.* His table abounds with cheeses, ham, bacon, butter, all produced by the first farmer. The situation repeats itself throughout history, for history has never lacked for political parasites. History is full of them, or maybe is made solely of them. Dinner is served among the parasites.

The rats are attracted to the table. One invites the other. It wouldn't occur to Bertrand or to Raton to eat, quite simply, something like chestnuts. They march Indian file, the monkey behind the cat, the country bumpkin behind the city slicker. Hence, the chain of my decisions, unitary in nature. The guest, though a rat, is a parasite for anthropology, a guest at an interrupted banquet, like that of Don Juan's Stone Guest, like the Last Supper.† The parasite of a meal, the parasite of satire and comedy, of Molière, Plautus, and Xenophon, of the history of religion. The host is not a parasite in this sense, but in order to live in the house of the tax farmer, within his walls, in his larder, he is a parasite in the biological sense, like a common louse, a tapeworm, like mistletoe, an epiphyte. I am broadening the matter; I shall come back to it. If the "guest" is a tax-collector, in the broadest sense, I consider him to be a parasite in the political sense, in that a human group is organized with one-way relations, where one eats the other and where the second cannot benefit at all from the first. The exchange is neither principal nor original nor fundamental; I do not know how to put it: the relation denoted by a single arrow is irreversible, just takes its place in the world. Man is a louse for other men. Thus man is a host for other men. The flow goes one way, never the other. I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, "parasitic." If the "guest" is a farmer, I consider him to be a parasite in the economic sense. La Fontaine explains this to me further on. What does man give to the cow, to the tree, to the steer, who give him milk, warmth, shelter, work, and food? What does he give? Death.

The system constructed here beginning with a production, temporarily placed in a black box, is parasitic in a cascade. But the cascade orders knowledge itself, of man and of life, making us change our terminology without changing the subject. It is an interesting circuit which we shall follow in order to understand one thing, various

*The word *imposteur* means both "tax-collector" and "impostor."—Trans.
†See *Le Festin et la Cène*, forthcoming.

landscapes, several epistemologies. Maybe polyphony is in order. I call the language of many portals "philosophical."

But that's not all. You need the peasant's moral at the end of the fable—the first member of the chain must be excluded. He will never come back to the glorious sites of the bourgeois and rich farmer, this spot of terror and irreversible exploitation. He will not or he cannot, it all depends. He does not feel at ease when he is anxious. He leaves to go back to the flat countryside, to the peace of the fields, to meet Horace, who is waiting for him. But who expels him? Noise. One parasite chases another out. One parasite (static), in the sense that information theory uses the word, chases another, in the anthropological sense. Communication theory is in charge of the system; it can break it down or let it function, depending on the signal. A parasite, physical, acoustic, informational, belonging to order and disorder, a new voice, an important one, in the contrapuntal matrix.

Let us stop for a moment. I am using words in an unusual way. For the science called parasitology, a rat, a carrion-eater like the hyena, a man, be he peasant or high official, are not parasites at all. They are, quite simply, predators. The relation with a host presupposes a permanent or semipermanent contact with him; such is the case for the louse, the tapeworm, the *pasturella pestis*. Not only living on but also living *in*—by him, with him, and in him. And thus a parasite cannot be large. Parasitism pertains only to invertebrates, coming to an end with mollusks, insects, and arthropods. There are no parasitic mammals. Not the rat, not the hyena, not even the administrator.

Here's the answer. The basic vocabulary of this science comes from such ancient and common customs and habits that the earliest monuments of our culture tell of them, and we still see them, at least in part: hospitality, conviviality, table manners, hostility, general relations with strangers. Thus the vocabulary is imported to this pure science and bears several traces of anthropomorphism. The animal-host offers a meal from the larder or from his own flesh; as a hotel or a hostel, he provides a place to sleep, quite graciously, of course.

These customs and manners can be the object of anthropological study; they were once the pleasures of idle reading, when literature still existed. Literature made clear, even for the blind, a kind of figural, instructive anthropology that was both accessible and profound, but without theory, without awkward weight, not boring but intelligent. Why do we have to pay nowadays with lead for what we used to get from a quill pen? This way of obtaining knowledge was an enchanting one. May our own science get to that point beyond the death instinct.

Horace or La Fontaine thus have two rats as companions, not a louse and a tapeworm—no worms in intestines for them. The importation does not have the same goal but nevertheless has the same meaning: it goes from man to animal but does not touch the same little bugs. The fable's anthropomorphism is the same as that of science; just the phyla are different.

Two arrows leave a common origin and arrive at different points. I am simply closing the triangle.

To parasite means to eat next to. Let us begin with this literal meaning. The country rat is invited by his colleague from town, who offers him supper. One would think that what is essential is their relation of resemblance or difference. But that is not enough; it never was. The relation of the guest is no longer simple. Giving or receiving, on the rug or on the tablecloth, goes through a black box. I don't know what happens in there, but it functions like an automatic corrector. There is no exchange, nor will there be one. Abuse appears before use. Gifted in some fashion, the one eating next to, soon eating at the expense of, always eats the same thing, the host, and this eternal host gives over and over, constantly, till he breaks, even till death, drugged, enchanted, fascinated. The host is not a prey, for he offers and continues to give. Not a prey, but the host. The other one is not a predator but a parasite. Would you say that the mother's breast is the child's prey? It is more or less the child's home. But this relation is of the simplest sort; there is none simpler or easier: it always goes in the same direction. The same one is the host; the same one takes and eats; there is no change of direction. This is true of all beings. Of lice and men.

I'll close the triangle, agreeing with science rather than with the fable. The intuition of the parasitologist makes him import a common relation of social manners to the habits of little animals, a relation so clear and distinct that we recognize it as being the simplest. Let's retrace our steps for a moment, going from these habits back to those manners, reversing anthropomorphism. We have made the louse in our image; let us see ourselves in his.

The intuition of the poet of the fable of the rats, and that of the philosopher who wrote of the eagle and the lamb, makes them import a very common relation in the realm of mammals and of the vertebrates in general, the relation of the hunt and of predatory behavior to human habits and customs. Man is a wolf for men, an eagle for sheep, a rat for rats. In truth, a *rara avis*. I've seen few men with the bravery of the rat, the courage of the wolf, the nobility of the eagle. I speak in figures to those who speak in figures; we know not what we say. We are in a

labyrinth of images; we'll never get rid of these illusions. Let us leave the theater of representations, which can only become serious in the tragic instance of the unspeakable horror of metamorphosis of becoming a rat. Let's return to our writers. Quite curiously, the manners of this wolf, fox, lion, monkey, cat, or rat are never, or seldom, those of predators; in these stories, they are almost always those of parasites. In the guise of an attack, a theft, a power-play, in the person of these animals, the simple relation of the abusive companion reappears. Beneath the apologist, the parasitologist. Quite simply, what is essential is neither the image nor the deep meaning, neither the representation nor its hall of mirrored reflections, but the system of relations. The relation is that of guest to host [*hôte à hôte*]. Copying the relation of man to man brings us back to parasitism. Thus the writer agrees with the scientist and agrees with the intuition that makes the book enchanting. Of course, we may speak of rats, snakes, or hares and none of them can be assimilated to the louse or the tapeworm, and yet, what is in question will be nothing but the *Parasitic*.

The triangle is closed. At each of its points, through story or science, social science or biological science, just one relation appears, the simple, irreversible arrow.

One could draw up a list of attacks on human narcissism. That the center of the world be removed from the earth to the sun is an objective attack. That the Copernican revolution be interiorized in the mind, the clear or not so clear soul, work and economy, is a triple subjective attack. Our main object is decentered; the subject is decentered in turn, three times. Philosophy is still caught in the relation between subject and object.

The parasitic relation is intersubjective. It is the atomic form of our relations. Let us try to face it head-on, like death, like the sun. We are all attacked, together.

What is this sudden dangerous noise at the door that prevents me from finishing and leads me to other actions?

I must put three things together: habits or customs, animals, noises. At first glance, they are unrelated. Yet I am not putting them together haphazardly. I am forced to do so by my tongue: Latin, Greek, Roman. In this somewhat fuzzy spot, a parasite is an abusive guest, an unavoidable animal, a break in a message. In English this constellation does not exist: a break in a message is called static, from a different semantic field. And there are of course some groups, now dominant, for

whom table conversation is not at all a means of living, is not an art at all, and in fact for whom such an art has no reference at all.

My linguistic reason is not sufficient: a semantic field is not a concept but a fuzzy set, a playing field for what amounts to, sometimes, only a play on words. Meaning, inevitably; play, obviously. A stronger reason is the tradition it belongs to. How can it be that such a simple and common fable associates, for these rats, table manners, a figuration of animality (though a predatory one), and static? Parasitism is never mentioned, but it is really a question *only* of that. This constellation is a constant one. We shall see this everywhere, from fable to history, from comedy to philosophy, from the imaginary to the scientific. Willy Odysseus leaves the cave of Polyphemus by hanging onto the belly of the ram, like some inhabitant of its unshorn wool; he dines with Alcinous, paying for his meal with his edifying stories; he frees himself from the song of the Sirens; he eliminates from his house the "pretenders," who themselves act like parasites. One of our first texts could have for its title, since it already has as its subject, our title and subject. Maybe I will write an odyssey too. Moreover, how many others wrote one despite themselves, or even hoping to do so? We'll soon see the impressive list, an unfinished one to be sure. What started out looking like a play on words is now compact and coherent. Here is a colossal tributary of our own history; we will soon be astonished that it had not been recognized earlier.

The word and the history are only paper. But the experience, especially the experience of suffering. Open your eyes and ears, open your door, open the leaves of your table, open your heart, open your homes, your arms. Open what philosophers most often seek to close. Everything but the mouth. Give what they hold back. So? So: the noise for your ears, stereotyped behavior for your eyes, the crowd who eat the last scraps from your table. The noise of their chewing produces a noise in the organized cloud of those whom I can only call parasites.

My friend, the parasitologist, at the door, insists again. We never live in the animals we eat, he says. Indeed.

His objection, it seems to me, is the following: every parasitic animal lives, eats, and multiplies within the body of its host. Men, whom I call parasites, are never, as far as we know, inside another animal. Except the great beast, the 666, the Leviathan. Back to beasts of prey, back to hunting, and so forth.

First of all, hunting is not an answer. I have never found a group of men who did not go through with their action to the bitter

end. The depopulation of the prey is immediate, brutal, explosive. I am willing to admit that we began with hunting, but this first stage, like the first seconds of the universe, was so short, so limited, that it is not worth the trouble of talking about it. From the dawn of time, there are no more prey.

Our relation to animals is more interesting—I mean to the animals we eat. We adore eating veal, lamb, beef, antelope, pheasant, or grouse, but we don't throw away their "leftovers." We dress in leather and adorn ourselves with feathers. Like the Chinese, we devour duck without wasting a bit; we eat the whole pig, from head to tail; but we get under these animals' skins as well, in their plumage or in their hide. Men in clothing live within the animals they devoured. And the same thing for plants. We eat rice, wheat, apples, the divine eggplant, the tender dandelion; but we also weave silk, linen, cotton; we live within the flora as much as we live within the fauna. We are parasites; thus we clothe ourselves. Thus we live within tents of skins like the gods within their tabernacles. Look at him well-dressed and adorned, magnificent; he shows—he showed—the clean carcass of his host. Of the soft parasite you can see only the clean-shaven face and the hands, sometimes without their kid gloves.

We parasite each other and live amidst parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment. We live in that black box called the collective; we live by it, on it, and in it. It so happens that this collective was given the form of an animal: Leviathan. We are certainly within something bestial; in more distinguished terms, we are speaking of an organic model for the members of a society. Our host? I don't know. But I do know that we are within. And that it is dark in there.

Hosts and parasites. We live, in the city or in the country, in the space of the two rats. Their fabulous feast is this book. A book that is oral and aural, about famine and murders, about knowledge and bondage. Both in the fable and in this book, it is a question of physics, of certain exact sciences, of certain techniques of telecommunications, a question of biophysics and of certain life sciences, of parasitology, a question of culture and of anthropology, of religions and literatures, a question of politics, of economics. I am not sure of the order in which these distinctions appear. But La Fontaine must have made them, just like Aesop, Horace, and Boursault. In another language, but what does it matter?

Stations and paths together form a system. Points and lines, beings and relations. What is interesting might be the construction of the

system, the number and disposition of stations and paths. Or it might be the flow of messages passing through the lines. In other words, a complex system can be formally described (that of Leibniz, for example) and then a system in general. Or, one might have understood what is carried within the system, naming the carrier Hermes. One might have sought the formation and distribution of the lines, paths, and stations, their borders, edges, and forms. But one must write as well of the interceptions, of the accidents in the flow along the way between stations—of changes and metamorphoses. What passes might be a message but parasites (static) prevent it from being heard, and sometimes, from being sent. Like a hole in a canal that makes the water spill into the surrounding area. There are escapes and losses, obstacles and opacities. Doors and windows close; Hermes might faint or die among us. An angel passes.* Who stole the relation? Maybe someone, somewhere in the middle, made a detour. Does a third man exist? It is not only a question of the logical. What travels along the path might be money, gold, or commodities, or even food—in short, material goods. You don't need much experience to know that goods do not always arrive so easily at their destination. There are always interceptors who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths. Parasitism is the name most often given to these numerous and diverse activities, and I fear that they are the most common thing in the world.

One has to speak of Prometheus from the bird's-eye view—that of the eagle. Prometheus is one and the same as this greedy creature who finally, at the end of an evolutionary process, made its nest within the thoracic cavity of the producer in chains, now devoured.

Saying that this system includes the telephone, the telegraph, television, the highway system, maritime pathways and shipping lanes, the orbits of satellites, the circulation of messages and of raw materials, of language and foodstuffs, money and philosophical theory, is a way of speaking clearly and calmly. And looking to see who or what intercepts these different flows is also a way of speaking clearly and calmly. It is a complicated way of speaking, but it is really an easy way. I shall answer the question, for it can be answered.

And if the system in question were the collective as such? What relations do we really have with each other? How do we live together? What really is this system which collapses at the slightest noise? Who or what makes this noise? Who or what prevents me from hearing whom, from eating with whom, from sleeping with whom? How can I love,

*"Un ange passe" is said of a sudden silence during a conversation. —Trans.

whom should I love? Whom could I love and who will love me? Who forbids love?

Is this noise both the collective and the sound coming from the black box?

Look again at the diagram based on the story of the rats, paying attention to the succession of parasites in stepladder formation, and ask yourself if it is something added to a system, like a cancer of interceptions, flights, losses, holes, trapdoors—if it is a pathological growth in some spot or if it is quite simply the system itself. The rats climb onto the rug when the guests are not looking, when the lights are out, when the party's over. It's nighttime, black. What happens would be the obscure opposite of conscious and clear organization, happening behind everyone's back, the dark side of the system. But what do we call these nocturnal processes? Are they destructive or constructive? What happens at night on the rug covered with crumbs? Is it a still active trace of (an) origin? Or is it only a remainder of failed suppressions? We can, undoubtedly, decide the matter: the battle against rats is already lost; there is no house, ship, or palace that does not have its share. There is no system without parasites. This constant is a law. But how so?

Someone once compared the undertaking of Descartes to the action of a man who sets his house on fire in order to hear the noise the rats make in the attic at night. These noises of running, scurrying, chewing, and gnawing that interrupt his sleep. I want to sleep peacefully. Good-bye then. To hell with the building that the rats come to ruin. I want to think without an error, communicate without a parasite. So I set the house on fire, the house of my ancestors. Done correctly, I rebuild it without a rat. But in order to do that, as a mason I must work without sleeping, without turning my back, without leaving for a moment, without eating. But at night, the rats return to the foundation. I was thinking yesterday, What did you do in the meantime? You slept, if you please, you ate, dreamt, made love, and so forth. Well, the rats came back. They are, as the saying goes, always already there. Part of the building. Mistakes, wavy lines, confusion, obscurity are part of knowledge; noise is part of communication, part of the house. But is it the house itself?

A system is often described as a harmony. Maybe it's the same word, the same thing. In fact, what use is it to discuss matters, what use is it to be concerned with a system in disequilibrium, a system that does not function right? Yet we know of no system that functions perfectly, that is to say, without losses, flights, wear and tear, errors, accidents,

opacity—a system whose return is one for one, where the yield is maximal, and so forth. Even the world itself does not work quite perfectly. The distance from equality, from perfect agreement, is history. Everything happens as if the following proposition were true: it works because it does not work. That must shock the old-school rationalism, but the rationalists of the generation before my own had the same relation to the rational [*la raison*] as old bigots have to virtue. It was more morality than research, more a social strategy than an intellectual one. I think it was a certain relation with cleanliness; but where do we put the dirt? Fluctuation, disorder, opacity, and noise are not and are no longer affronts to the rational; we no longer speak of this rational, we no longer divvy things up in isms, simple and stiff puzzles, strategic plans for the final conflict. Thus a system has interesting relations according to what is deemed to be its faults or depreciations. What then about its noises and parasites. Can we rewrite a system, in the way Leibniz understood the term, not in the key of preestablished harmony but in what he called seventh chords? Not with the equilibrium he loved to mention in mind but with the waves and shocks on the line in mind? Not with the taste of the exact pleasures of sapidity, that is to say, wisdom [*sapience*], but etched in acid, with a bitter, astringent taste? On the other side of the *Theodicy* where it was a question of the rare harmony. The classical system immediately fills these differences and distances, believed to make the enchantment of the perfect chords of their differential growth. Thus the rational resembles the system of numbers. Yet the irrational infinitely keeps its differences and distances without ever ceasing to be mathematic. Okay. The book of differences, noise, and disorder would only be the book of evil for someone who would prohibit the Author of the universe, through calculation, from a world that is incorruptibly dependable. This, however, is not the case. The difference is part of the thing itself, and perhaps it even produces the thing. Maybe the radical origin of things is really that difference, even though classical rationalism damned it to hell. In the beginning was the noise.

Maybe we should construct the fable of the rats in reverse. At the door of the room, they heard a noise. . . .

Yet noise has a subject, the one who makes the noise, in the fable. No doubt it is the farmer, the parasited one. One of the first in the chain, he was thus cheated on behind his back. Awakened by the noise of the rats, cutting and nibbling, he suddenly opens the door. He jumps behind those who were eating behind his back and chases them. The parasited one parasites the parasites. One of the first, he jumps to the last position. But the one in the last position wins this game. He has discovered the position of the philosopher.

Who is the host? The first rat for the second, the sleeper for the rats who eat his food, the taxed for the tax collector (the tax farmer), and so forth along the chain. The host is in the row in front, the parasite behind him, a bit in his shadow or in his black ignorance. The host comes before and the parasite follows. Such is the case for every system where we eat at the expense of another, where we speak of him.

Who is the parasite here, who is the interrupter? Is it the noise, the creaking of the floorboards or of the door? Of course. It upsets the game, and the system collapses. If it stops, everything comes back, is reformed and the meal continued. Think of another noise: the chain is broken again and everything vanishes in the bewildered flight. The noise temporarily stops the system, makes it oscillate indefinitely. To eliminate the noise, a nonstop signal would be necessary; then the signal would no longer be a signal and everything would start again, more briskly than usual. Theorem: noise gives rise to a new system, an order that is more complex than the simple chain. This parasite interrupts at first glance, consolidates when you look again. The city rat gets used to it, is vaccinated, becomes immune. The town makes noise, but the noise makes the town.

Who then is the real interrupter? It is the country rat. Broken himself by the interruptions, these uneasy feelings, the disruptions of his relaxing meal, it is he who definitively breaks the system. He could live on simple and easy chains, but he is horrified by the complex. He does not understand that chance, risk, anxiety, and even disorder can consolidate a system. He trusts only simple, rough, causal relations; he believes that disorder always destroys order. He is a rationalist, the kind we just spoke of. How many of these rough political rats are there around us? How many of them break things they don't understand? How many of these rats simplify? How many of them have built such homogeneous, cruel systems upon the horror of disorder and noise?

Soon the question becomes more general: such a parasite is responsible for the growth of the system's complexity, such a parasite stops it. The other question is still there: are we in the pathology of systems or in their emergence and evolution?

One of the rats goes to the fields. And so shall we.

Satyrs' Meals

Host/Guest

Everyone knows that satyrs have the tail and two legs of a goat. And being a goat, even half a goat, even the rear end, is really something. These dangerous beings live in forests, where they accompany Pan, the son of Hermes, the god of panic, the mother of all, the prince of fear and of wholes. Wild, they live in their lairs.

Having followed the procession of Dionysos or having been on the lookout for nymphs, they go home, ragged, to eat a good dinner with their wives and children on the mossy rocks. They're seldom seen like that, solid citizens, the way La Fontaine shows them, a family picture, all around the dinner table. Satyrs too wind up thinking about eating. No rugs, no shelter, no Persian carpet—here we are back in the fields. Can fear come to corrupt a wild den?

It is raining; a passer-by comes in. Here is the interrupted meal once more. Stopped for only a moment, since the traveller is asked to join the diners. His host does not have to ask him twice. He accepts the invitation and sits down in front of his bowl. The host is the satyr, dining at home; he is the donor. He calls to the passer-by, saying to him, be our guest. The guest is the stranger, the interrupter, the one who receives the soup, agrees to the meal. The host, the guest: the same word; he gives and receives, offers and accepts, invites and is invited, master and passer-by. The traveller, the homebody, the fixed and the moveable, client and hostler, here and there—city and country, for example. He is the object as well, for in the exchange of the word we cannot see where the exchange of the thing is. An invariable term through the transfer of the gift. It might be dangerous not to decide who is the host and who is the guest, who gives and who receives, who is the parasite and who is the

table d'hôte, who has the gift and who has the loss, and where hostility begins within hospitality. Who hasn't trembled with fear in a shady hotel? Shady, obscure, badly lit. We like to know where we step. Again the same word, host and guest, active and passive, full of outrage and of generosity, of hatred and good-will. A word which hints at the inviter and the invited, the person warming himself by the fire and the one frozen from the cold rain, heat and cold.

The guest cools the soup and warms his hands; the host invites the traveller and sends him on his way, asks him in, asks him to sit down and eat and then asks him to leave, sends him away: don't sleep here, he says. The host, the guest, breathes twice, speaks twice, speaks with forked tongue, as it were. I don't know who the passer-by is or who the satyr is. Both are the host, the guest. And from one mouth they breathe and say yes and no. The traveller, moreover, interrupts the meal of his host; the satyr, moreover, interrupts the meal of his guest. Who cooled the soup, who spoke, but who didn't eat. The two rats here look alike. I would not be at all surprised if the passer-by's overcoat hid his tail and his goat's legs. Excluded even before he parasitised the satyr.

But the excluded one, just a while ago, was making his way through the countryside; the passer-by goes out again in the rain that, as far as we know, never stops, beating incessantly on the roof of the host and guest. That noise too interrupted a process: a trip. And from this noise comes the story. Hosts and parasites are always in the process of passing by, being sent away, touring around, walking alone. They exchange places in a space soon to be defined.

There are some black spots in language. The field of the host is one such dark puddle. In the logic of exchange, or really instead of it, it manages to hide who the receiver is and who the sender is, which one wants war and which one wants peace and offers asylum. In the satyr's den, the host interrupts the guest and vice versa, and this is another black theorem. Or the non-zero sum of two things with opposite signs but the same value. We saw this shadow a short while back: we don't know what belongs to the system, what makes it up, and what is against the system, interrupting and endangering it. Whether the diagram of the rats is generative or corrupting.

Diminishing Returns ————— *The Obscure and the Confused*

Given a black thing, an obscure process, or a confused cloud of signals—what we shall soon call a problem. We intervene to illuminate it, define it, reduce it to something simple. Someone comes alone in these parts, no gloves, no hat. He opens the black box, Pandora's box with all its gifts. Attracted by such a source,* some others join the first, organize the work site, bringing light, equipment, documentation, increasing sophistication of means and the ever more complex organization of their group. Two things.

In the beginning, the investment is minimal and what one pulls out of the box is marvelous. The greatest results for the smallest outlay. The intoxicating ecstasy of the inventor, scorned and laughed at. History then assumes its rights, rights which are always the same everywhere. The load increases and the fruits decrease. Legions of researchers infinitely better equipped no longer find anything but bits and pieces. The first shepherd lays his hands on the treasure of the scrolls found in the cave; there are a hundred thousand. Now, with electronics and international relations, you glean rare, scattered, barely noticeable atoms of letters. Newton under the apple tree, all alone, gives the law of the world, leaving only a few marginal scraps for his innumerable offspring. Theorem: the history of science obeys the law of diminishing returns. The first attack on the narcissism of science. This law was not visible as long as we claimed to work on hypercomplex sets: the word, the organization of the biosphere, and so forth, whose information always exceeded the means of knowledge. But the narrow division into fields of

*Source means "light," "river," "source." —Trans.