

MICHEL SERRES'S MILIEUX

Steven Connor
Birkbeck College

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 machine for inventing mediations, and mediating between them.

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 general, 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 solidifies into space.

This 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*¹. It 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'². 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

¹ 1983, Eng. trans. 1991.

² Serres 1991: 81.

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 ³).

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.⁴.

³ Serres 1991: 82.

⁴ 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, as it had been for Gaston Bachelard, who spoke of a *cogito pétrisseur*, or ‘cogito of kneading’, an image of the activity of thought or knowledge, as well as of the nature of its object. 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’ ⁵. 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 occurs always between events and the shape they take in thought and narrative. History is the shape that time can take and the shape that historical reflexion (doubling back, doubling over) will make of it.

The kneaded dough is only one in a huge ensemble of images for fluctuating mediation that Serres has allowed to propagate across and between his works, which includes, skins, textiles, bags, tapestries, kimonos, rivers, coastlines, clouds, vortices, mountain-ranges and flames. I wish to speak of two of these in particular: the skin; and what Serres calls the ‘quasi-object’.

Mixed Body

⁵ Serres 1991: 78.

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' ⁶)

Serres therefore 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

⁶ Serres 1998: 59.

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’ ⁷. 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’ ⁸). 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. ⁹)

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’ ¹⁰) 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:

⁷ Serres 1998: 34.

⁸ Serres 1998: 97

⁹ Serres 1998: 97.

¹⁰ Serres 1998: 100-1.

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. ¹¹⁾

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 (literally what circles the stance, what stands about the place 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 presents himself as the circumstantial philosopher. 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

¹¹ Serres 1994: 45

distinct parties, there must be some apparatus, some 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, or a congress, a going together, can be both at once. There is never, in other words, what we nowadays so lightly call a simple ‘contact’ or ‘interface’, an immediate encounter between communicating parties, nor is there ever uninterrupted 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, what we sometimes call in English a ‘spanner in the works’. (A spanner will cause the works to grind, eventually to seize up: but a spanner is also another word for a bridge, for that which spans, or crosses between. Under some circumstances, that which obstructs meaning can be a means to new meaning. English preserves the knowledge that ‘meaning’ itself is a ‘means’, is itself medial.

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’. 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.

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 vicariances 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."¹²)

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 copy, or a vicariance? Does it mediate the complex processes it is attempting to describe, or does it participate in them? In modelling the processes it describes, must it also 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 midstream, always leaning, always almost toppling, the halfway house that occupies the whole space of the journey? If the latter, why and how is it graspable?

¹² Serres 1982: 227.

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’¹³). Since it is also true that

‘We live only by relations’¹⁴), 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.

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.¹⁵)

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

¹³ Serres 1982: 230.

¹⁴ Serres 1982: 234.

¹⁵ Serres 1982: 235-6.

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 middle becomes a muddle. Middling, muddling, meddling, medleying, milling and mulling are etymologically distinct in English, but their shimmering coalescence 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* ¹⁶⁾ 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. ¹⁷⁾

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

¹⁶ 1992; Eng. trans. 1995.

¹⁷ Serres 1995: 3.

noise, but then the noise rises up, like a tarbaby or creature formed out of mud, in the form of a new signal.

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' ¹⁸), 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 on history, the space of global communications. On the whole, these meditations have been hopeful. *Atlas* (1994), 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 at the centre: a world without addresses that correspond to unique and determinate sets of coordinates in the physical world ¹⁹).

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

¹⁸ Serres 1982: 224.

¹⁹ Serres 1994: 205-6.

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’ ²⁰). 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’ ²¹). 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 proposed by all the prepositions, declensions and inflections?²²)

The list Serres gives us alludes characteristically to a number of his own works, *L’interference* (the second volume of his *Hermès* sequence, 1972), *The Parasite* (1980) *Detachment* (1983) and

²⁰ Serres 1994: 79.

²¹ Serres 1994: 128.

²² Serres 1994: 83.

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.

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'²³).

Here, though, is the paradox around which Serres's work revolves. If man is in the middle of a process of *éxodarwinist* evolution, he is both outside nature and also able (more than able, maybe even required) to direct it. Precisely by being outside nature, man may be the means by which nature itself grows a mind, evolves into self-awareness. A world of mediations and relations in which we are all of us, all the time, in-between, in passage, promises a world of beauty, subtlety, finesse and invention – a universalism of particulars. The world of particulars that is held together in the philosophy of Leibniz (which is where Serres began his philosophical career) only, in the last event, by God, must in the new world of total mediations, hold itself together from the middle. For Serres, who has said that philosophy is gymnastic, there could be no more apt image of this kind of open totality than the dazzling miracle that grows from the middle of Brazilian football.

But the very subtlety, sensitivity and ubiquity of our mediations also mean a massive increase in risk, a loss of the insulation from disaster that separateness and incomprehension can bring. Without separations, disaster, whether in the form of war, famine, epidemic, ecological catastrophe, or economic meltdown can spread throughout the system, and between milieux with previously inconceivable rapidity. The world of mediations may be a human product, but it has also formed itself into a new nature, a second nature that we urgently need to understand, just as we learned to understand the first nature of

²³ Serres 2001: 67.

rocks and microbes and genes. We need to understand the periodicities, the rhythms, the switch-points and fault-lines of this new nature that come from us, though we are now in the middle of it.

Serres's work speaks from within this condition, poised in what is an infinitesimally thin space of alternation between inventive epidemic ('good Hermes') and undirected epidemic ('bad Hermes'). However we seek to instruct ourselves in order to be able to direct as well as to inhabit this new nature, we will not be able to start with first principles, with a clean slate, looking in from the outside. We will have no choice but to follow the advice given by Stein in Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*, a novel that is full of the sudden saltations and effects of punctuated disequilibrium that Michel Serres was evoking last night, in its leaps into water and mud. 'We must', says Stein in the destructive element immerse'. Being in the water, or in mid-air, is always dangerous as well as exhilarating. I fold the dark warning to be found in the middle of Serres's career in *The Parasite* to join it up with its hopeful latter stages. We need to find a way to protect mediation from the sudden totality of the parasite.

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