

*Theorem: the history of science obeys the law of diminishing returns. The first attack on the narcissism of science...*

*Second: if we examine the set made of the problem and of the actions that transform it, there is no doubt that it is, at the beginning, more complex than the thing itself or the process. Clearer perhaps, yet more complicated. The question can then be reexamined in order to try to illuminate this new complexity and maybe, to transform it. Thus we form a set: the chain seems unending. The strategies of intervention, the interruption of the process or of the thing, observation that seeks to clarify, photon bombardment, the inseparable association of the knowers and the known—all make complexity increase, the price of which increases astronomically. A new obscurity accumulates in unexpected locations, spots that had tended towards clarity; we want to dislodge it but can only do so at ever-increasing prices and at the price of a new obscurity, blacker yet, with a deeper, darker shadow. Chase the parasite—he comes galloping back, accompanied, just like the demons of an exorcism, with a thousand like him, but more ferocious, hungrier, all bellowing, roaring, clamoring. Have I described the elementary link of a system of knowledge or its pathology? I do not know. Anyway, it makes work, gives sustenance. One parasite drives out another. The second attack on the narcissism of scientists. The shadow brought by knowledge increases by one order of magnitude at every reflection. Can we henceforth do without an epistemology of the parasite?*

Michel Serres, *The Parasite* 17

Michel Serres' *The Parasite* should be read as an extended critique of media, an impassioned appeal against the all-too-hastily narrowing spaces of historical and scientific explanation and discovery. Instead of confining knowledge within the human or physical sciences we should rather remember that knowledge of any kind irreversibly captures the world. Knowledge parasites real systems. Sometimes, it even begins to govern their evolution.

Serres claims that the parasite invents this very exchange of matter for logic, this mysterious bridge between the segmented sciences, this parasite which creates science and theory on the same day: "What would all knowledge be without this asymmetrical, crossed exchange? This irreversible capture." (P 210) The very same parasitic diagram is to be found in both observation and experiments, both human and physical sciences: they all presuppose an interception, they construct unidirectional flows, they support an asymmetrical balance of operations. There is a unity between the human and the physical sciences, not a convergence but precisely an isomorphic structure:

*Very little literature strays far from science, and much brings us back to science. Very little science strays far from literature, and much brings us back to literature. Logic and anthropology are found in the same strait(s); subdetermination [hypocrisy, 'fuzzy' logic] has to do with all knowledge. (The Parasite 215)*

The parasite is transduction across separated disciplines, bodies, forces, systems. The structure of the interspace is segmented, modular densities broken apart by bits of noise. These interruptions, these knotted and transposed interfaces, turn out to be the noisy origin of information, the terrifying black abyss of knowledge. Parasite: atom of relationality. Therefore it is not the

interspace as such, but the traveller between these distant lands (brought close not by journey but by folding space.)

The traveller who interrupts the meal is invited to the meal immediately, he is asked to join in, to exchange a good tale for his gastronomic satisfaction. From matter to logic, food to words: from speaking to eating, to speaking of eating. Fables of interrupted meals abound in the pages of *The Parasite*: the point, I think, is to emphasize the parasites' role in this transformation, that they create exchanges of the material for the logical, and vice versa.

The parasite is the invention of this passage of transformation between "ontologically" distinct layers and the exchange between (and the noise in the signal, etc.) Serres calls it a semiconductor.

The parasites invent exchange, but a 'broken' logic of exchange, which Serres says we are always forgetting. Serres puts it simply: parasites don't barter, they exchange money. They interrupt a unary operation, they transvernalize an energy flow (introduce a slanted dimension, spontaneously breaking symmetry.) How does a vital, living, material energy engage in becoming verbal, disordered and linguistic information? "The parasite is the location and the subject of the transformation. The collective, at the table, makes noise. The collective, finally, can be unanimous starting with this noise." (P 211)

This raises an interesting and complex political question about the role of 'parasites' in the exchanges between molar solidarity and molecular turbulence. Perhaps this is even a possible critique of Serres: Does the epistemological model presented here really have a clear symmetric functionality as a model for a political struggle/organization? I think he can legitimately make this claim. Parasites, one-way relationships, show up all over nature and society, they are a fair candidate for the foundation for a project of conceptual re-unification. The parasite represents not a broken symmetry but a higher symmetry, a fuzzy and noisy organization, a fractal or proto-biological symmetry.

The parasite is therefore an extremely well-chosen conceptual vehicle for his new philosophy of time and history. The question is the exhumation of various topological spaces of knowledge (currently divided between 'human' and 'natural') and power (divided too, but in a very different way,) an analysis of their populations of intensities and exchanges and disjunctions, and finally the transformation of these spaces of society and the spaces of the earth(s) by the interruption of 'power-' and 'knowledge-vectors,' atoms of information or knowledge, units of qualitative relationality. In short, parasites are really at work all the time in terms of knowledge and power, they are the 'truth' of knowledge (falsification) and power (dissent).

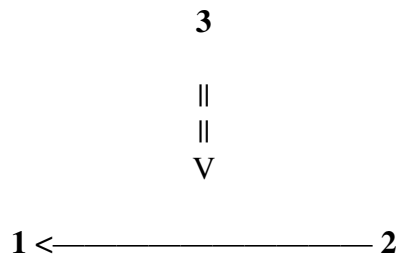
It is interesting that Serres remains ambivalent to the concept of the parasite through the course of its rigorous and powerful exposition, and though fascinated, he is more than a little shaken, repulsed, 'chased away' from himself. He does not know if he has stumbled upon a new atom, the essence of relation. Could Serres finally not stomach the parasite? Could he not abide this tormented and 'diagonal' logic of parasitic relations which obscures and confuses what belongs to the system, what makes the system up and what is against the system? For in closing *The Parasite*, he writes:

*“Inundation of hell, swelling up of history. Here is the Devil then; no, no, I wasn’t expecting him. He’s come; the book is done, as if it were burnt. I didn’t know that it was irreparably a book of Evil. The Evil of noise, of the song of hell, thundering; of hunger, illness, pain; dressed as animals and now undressed as a naked man; of Evil, quite simply. Meal, banquet, feast of the devil.*

*“It finally is separate from me. Thus the horrible insect slowly left my room, through the creaking door, one May morning, in Venice.*

As Serres puts it, he doesn’t know “whether the diagram of the rats is generative or corrupting.” (16) It is a worthy question, one of the most interesting questions raised in *The Parasite*.

*The Parasite* is filled with detailed analyses of stories about interrupted meals, from the Symposium to La Fontaine’s fables. The meal is the original relation. But it contains already a parasitic relation. The diagram is fractal. Serres diagrams its primitive cell this way:



The importance of the meal is the interchange between guest and host, which is transposed in Serres’ text with the juxtaposition between the words ‘guest’ and ‘host’ in the French language, implying a disjunction across ontological layers. This original relation is interrupted by a third (and then a fourth, etc.) This invisible ‘third’ is the structural unity between theory and science:

*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... 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’hote, who has the gift and who has the loss, and where hospitality begins with hospitality... [Michel Serres, the Parasite 15-16]*

The decision to be made is about the space of history, that is, the role of the third, the outsider, the other. How much (r)evolutionary capability are we going to assign to minor elements — to parasites, tiny fluctuations, minimal differences? The lineaments of an alternate history of science are palpable (see Notes on Birth of Physics.) But in short, Michel Serres introduces us to

a new kind of time and history. Time is a dynamic and turbulent space, not a linear or repetitive chain. Serres proposes a multiplicity of different figures for time; we are to understand time topologically, diagrammatically, through methods both exact and inexact, in order to allow creative manipulation of the flow of time.