

Michel Serres, 1930–2019

Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier

In Serres's works, the table of method is the method, the idea is its own image, the code is already overcoded. Serres cannot be commented but only stuttered. A repetition won't add anything to a text that knows better than anyone how to repeat itself in its innovations, or how to innovate by repeating itself.

Régis Debray¹

Michel Serres passed away in Vincennes, on June 1 2019, at the age of 88. Much appreciated by the French general public, he was one of the most unclassifiable characters of the generation of French philosophers who came of age in the 1960s. Serres was born in Agen, in the South-West of France, to a modest family of peasants. His father worked as a sand dragger on the Garonne river, and, as Serres would often state, his early years followed the rhythms of the Garonne river, which was at the root of his long-standing curiosity not only regarding navigation, but all questions of transport. An outstanding student, Serres was a pupil of the Republic and moved from one public boarding school to the next. After a brief attempt to join the navy he went back to Bordeaux to complete a Licence in mathematics, and then to Paris to join the philosophy section of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure. Serres would always emphasise this dual training, and highlight that although he ended up choosing philosophy he remained attuned to the mathematical developments of his time. As he wrote in a letter to Canguilhem, 'As a mathematics student I would read Bergson and Plato, as a philosophy student I would study Bourbaki.'²

He entered the ENS in 1952, the same year as Jacques Derrida, and placed second in the philosophy aggregation in 1955. It is little known that, like his former classmate, Serres spent much time reading and commenting upon Husserl: in particular, 'The Origin of Geometry', a reflection on the philosophy and historicity of mathematics,

to which he would periodically return until his 1993 book *The Origins of Geometry*. Up to the 1990s, Serres's interest in the sciences would remain a foundation of his philosophical works, evolving through several different phases – including structural mathematics, information theory and thermodynamics, chaos theory, biology and ecology. While his scientific references changed, however, his philosophical companions would not alter much through the years: Lucretius and Plato, Leibniz, Comte or Bergson.

In 1958 Serres moved to Clermont-Ferrand to teach in the philosophy department directed by Jules Vuillemin, where Michel Foucault was also working at the time. There he composed his doctoral dissertation, which was initially focused on the philosophy of topology and ended up as a 900-page long monograph on Leibniz, *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*, which he would publish shortly after its defence in the hot days of June 1968. Engaging with Leibniz's systematicity not as 'dream' but as realised 'structure', the monumental study reflects Serres's evolving rapport with French structuralism, moving from a strong formalism grounded in Bourbaki's definition of mother structures towards a 'transformational' structuralism in which the principle of identity gives way to a principle of translation. In the prologue of his thesis, Serres thanks his teachers: George Canguilhem, Jean Hyppolite and Yvon Belaval. Like Foucault, Serres enjoyed a particularly privileged relationship with Canguilhem, and the ambitious methodological apparatus of his PhD thesis is replete with his master's epistemological themes: the role of the scientist and the role of the philosopher, science, truth and normativity.

In many ways, Foucault's retrospective labelling of this period as that of the 'philosophy of the concept' as against the philosophy of 'consciousness' is relevant to

Serres's own earliest philosophy, albeit according to a different orientation than Foucault. For Serres, this entailed a return to the classical philosophical concepts of *form* (Eidos/Morphe) and *relation* (as methodic path between two points or systematic connexion) through the lens of the scientific inventions of his time, such as the axiomatisation of mathematics by Bourbaki, the second principle of thermodynamics, the discovery of the relationship between information and entropy, or the determination of the structure of DNA. The first *Hermès* volumes located themselves at the frontier between the history and epistemology of science and structuralism, delving into the question of a 'history of truth' which, arguably, haunted his generation as a whole. Puzzled by Husserl's intentional account of idealities, Serres helped to stimulate reflection not only on the historicity of scientific notions but on the languages spoken by science; the uncontested reference for which was still the work of Gaston Bachelard. From the beginning, Serres's confrontation with the latter was open and explicit, as he chose to focus on impurity by mixing scientific discourse with the language of rites and mythical narrative. For his minor thesis, published as *Hermès II, L'Interférence* in 1972 – less to the liking of Canguilhem than his study of Leibniz – Serres undertook to rewrite the 'new scientific spirit' into a theory of 'interference'; that is, into a philosophy of networks (epistemological and cybernetic) and a theory of transdisciplinarity.

From the start, Serres's epistemology was programmed to dissolve itself, not in the autonomy of each self-regulated science but in the heteronomy of 'inter-objective' communications: objects *speak*: 'Here I enter the circuit only by integrating the fundamental communication network drawn up by the object-object diagram. When reflexive epistemology becomes intrinsic, the transcendental field turns objective.'³ Through this bold choice, he announced his divergence from French epistemology. For going beyond a modest theory of the history of science, Serres's ambition would be to recover and narrate the philosophy of science in the making, seeking to situate himself ahead of the contemporary. And indeed, at the same time as the publication of his doctoral thesis, he started publishing volumes of essays on the philosophy of science, culture and literature under the title *Hermès*. The series comprises five volumes in total, and it is widely agreed that they contain some

of Serres's richest intuitions and densest philosophical essays.

As an epistemologist and a structuralist, Michel Serres developed a philosophy of *models*, working on the history of science outside of disciplinary constructs and rethinking it from the standpoint of triptychs of figures: point, plane, cloud; vectors, transformation, information; Diagrammes, trees, networks. The five *Hermès* volumes bore titles that summarised different models of relations, brought to bear on different objects. Scientific modernity doesn't depend on stupendous inventions but on the slow progression of a moraine of knowledge, which gradually transforms into entirely new landscapes. There is no authentic and inauthentic science, no obstacles nor mistakes, but cultural formations, which obey mutating forms of order and disorder. Enthralled by the classical question of beginning(s), Serres remained forever attached to the threshold he set for himself from an early stage, between a new epistemology of models and a metaphysical topology or topography of the universe.



Against the 'masters of suspicion' of criticism, Serres's philosophy was not a polemical one; he didn't intervene much into conceptual debates and offered very few philosophical references to anchor his discourse. Yet, through this early reversal, his philosophy stayed in some relation to critical philosophy, since he kept on raising the question of the 'objective-transcendental', of how to establish the conditions of possibility of knowledge – even non-knowledge, or, in a Leibnizian idiom, 'obscure knowledge' – in objects. The topology or 'science of the qualitative' uncovered in Leibniz remained crucial throughout, as it enabled him to reconceptualise

the distance between cultural and scientific formations. He raised the question: 'How shall we take into account forms in history, without bringing these forms back to the concept?'⁴ For Serres, this required practicing a genuine science of the qualitative, a rigorous aesthetics which would 'radically pluralise the traditional unicity of *a priori* forms.'⁵

A seasoned alpinist, Serres compared philosophical work with travels or hikes across landscapes: the figure of the messenger, who relates, communicates, translates or heralds, is a permanent one in his oeuvre. His boldness cost him Canguilhem's friendship and, indeed, that of the French philosophical institution as a whole. After partaking in the short-lived Vincennes experiment, he was invited by the Sorbonne not as a professor of philosophy but as a professor of history of science, which he would always consider as a *de facto* exclusion from the community. Serres attributed his fate to his role of mediator, which, instead of giving him a share of two worlds, alienated him from both. 'I was lucky enough to remain alone for thirty years and work on this passage in indifference and silence. I'm standing in the empty intersection between two groups, ... White space without stakes nor battles ... Why draw on the history of religions to examine a corpus in physics or geometry; could we imagine that literature is a domain [réserve] of science rather than its exclusion?'⁶ This solitary path, however, remained his general theoretical orientation, for he would characterise his subsequent books as such admixtures: sociology and astronomy (*Origins of Geometry*); politics and physics (*The Natural Contract*, 1990); technology and the anthropology of death (*Statues*, 1987); and so on.⁷

Thanks to his friendship with the anthropologist René Girard, Serres started working in the United States: invited first to Johns Hopkins University in 1971, he would then become a professor at Stanford University in 1984, where he taught for nearly thirty years. A prolific writer and speaker, Serres published over sixty books and became, from the 1990s onwards, an unavoidable figure on French radio and television and in the press. He received several official accolades and was elected to the illustrious Académie Française in 1990. Serres's late period, during which he produced an impressive number of programmatic, often self-referential texts on moral, cultural and political questions, alienated him a little more from the French philosophical community. Because of this gradual move away, in style and content,

from academic philosophy, French commentaries on his works have remained extremely scarce. In the Anglophone world we are still lacking translations of many of Serres's foundational writings, in particular of his earliest books, including the thesis on Leibniz, even though these are crucial to the legibility of his better-known books (*The Parasite*, *The Natural Contract*, *Genesis*). Moreover, his own self-marginalisation from the French philosophical landscape has made readers forget the complex ties that bound Serres to his contemporaries. In fact, Serres's philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s offers some powerful reflections on the most important questions of his time, including those concerning structure and subject, truth and historicity, language, information, nature and the social and political role of technology.

His Sorbonne lectures, punctuated by his inimitable, almost prophetic way of speaking, were always packed with students and auditors. Serres was undoubtedly a stylist, a 'poet of the concept',⁸ who believed in the power of analogies and questioned the criteria of philosophical 'rigour' in the name of a broader conception of rationality and a return to great narratives. At a time when the limits between science and the sacred are questioned anew, when local human mastery over the earth has become 'a possible global hell',⁹ we can hope not only that Serres's works will be better read, but that his fearless attempt to grasp the human and political facets of the sciences and technologies in their contemporaneity will acquire new resonances.

Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier is a member of the Radical Philosophy editorial collective.

Notes

1. Régis Debray, 'L'ard du feu', *Critique* 380 (January 1979), 16. Translation mine, as are all subsequent translations.
2. Letter from Michel Serres to George Canguilhem, Archive Canguilhem, CAPHES, Paris. Cote 40.1 Michel Serres.
3. Michel Serres, *Hermès II, L'Interférence* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 99.
4. Michel Serres, *Hermès V, Le Passage du Nord-Ouest* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 72.
5. Serres, *Hermès V*, 73.
6. Serres, *Hermès V*, 17.
7. Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, trans. R. Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 151.
8. Debray, 'L'ard du feu', 16.
9. Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 171.