

## Fabled Animals

**Review of Michel Serres (translated by Lawrence R. Schehr) *The parasite*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. xxviii + 255. (All page references are to the French edition of *Le parasite*. Paris: Hachette, 1997.)**

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In the case of any new publication of Michel Serres' classic fable, *Le parasite*, it is appropriate—indeed properly ironic—to begin with the cover. How is the work presented on this particular occasion? What kind of multiplicity is traced out by the (anticipated) circulation of this edition of the book as a species of quasi-object? The cover of any book indexes the composite nature of printed works as media of communication. Although the book is one of the oldest and most persistent of technological inventions—compare the evolution of media for the performance or distribution of music—it has become the vector of more than one mode of communication; books articulate money, knowledge, reputation and aesthetic form. And the specific aesthetic of a cover points to this multiplicity. Recto, a cover expresses a commercial aesthetic: colours, figures and images are tuned to the pitch of an imagined market, and are calculated to make a work stand out on a bookshop table or a merchant's webpage. None of this is a matter of indifference, even for those academic authors who do not aspire to the potential circulation of a trade book, and the prospect of a good cover (that is, the right publisher, series, title, binding and marketing strategy) is liable to influence what is contained in the cover. Verso, a cover switches the book from a commercial economy to what Mario Biagioli would call an economy

of academic credit. The eulogistic epigrams solicited from distinguished peers are addressed to the prospective buyer as warrants of quality and inducements to join those in the know (which prompts one to ask how many synonyms there can be for 'original' and 'significant'). At the same time, however, they are one of the currencies in which academic authors negotiate their positioning in the relations of prestation and counter-prestation that sustain an economy of credit and reputation.

The cover of this version of the English translation of *Le parasite*, which was originally published a quarter of a century ago, shows a somewhat sinister coil of nematode worm, fixed in a medium whose graininess suggests laboratory lighting and optical magnification. According to Serres, the interesting thing about internal parasites is that they turn interiority into environment: 'L'extérieur, pour lui, est l'intérieur d'un autre' (p. 350). In this image the worm is turned out of its environment and fixed in a medium that makes it observable *ex situ*, outside its host of choice. Here, the irony of parasitic economies becomes almost too easy. In representing the contingency of any distinction—or folding—between interior and exterior, the worm image both represents and performs the basic relation that holds together the diffracted form of the book. Each of the economies of the book is, in relation to each of the others, 'beside the grain' (*para sitos*). In another sense, however, the image is less apt; and, with the theme of animality in mind, it is worth explaining why. The currently available paperback edition of the French text has a nineteenth-century engraving of a scene from La Fontaine's fable of the ant and grasshopper: scaled up, and dressed in bonnet, shawl and bustle, both arthropods appear as metallic, mechanical and uncannily humanoid creatures. Instead of a laboratory specimen we have a scene from a fable. A different imagined market, perhaps, and certainly a different sense of why animals concern us. So what kind of animal emblem is the parasite?

*Le parasite* can be read as an extended reconstructive commentary on the *Fables* of La Fontaine, interleaved with readings from the Bible, the works of Rousseau (who figures here as a set of variations on the personage of Jean-Jacques: refugee, *domestique*, contractarian) and Molière's *Tartuffe*. Crudely, the

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book is a retelling of a set of classic fables. The form of the fable is interesting for two reasons, both of which have to do with the sense in which animals concern us. First, fables are timeless. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observed that fables were useful as rhetorical examples because they were readier to hand than any actual historical event, and because, even if they had not actually happened, they still got at the truth of things. Fables are timeless in the sense that they represent an origin—origin in the sense of emergence (*Entstehung*) rather than origin in the sense of foundation (*Ursprung*). Indeed, in his essay on ‘L’invention de l’autre’, Derrida suggests that the fable—represented in the specific form of an eponymous poem by Francis Ponge—is a kind of origination machine: a text that writes its own beginning and whose other-reference is primarily self-reference. In that sense, fables are what they are for Serres—forms in which human beings as communicative actants (re)invent their origins as beings that exist both in themselves and for themselves. Second, all of the classic fables concern animal characters. In the usual interpretation of the classic form these animals figure as ciphers for human qualities. The specific truth of each character—foxes are cunning, tortoises are slow, ants are industrious—is a human attribute predicated of an animal. Again, the fable is an exemplum that holds a moral truth about human conduct. Serres suggests that we read things the other way around: ‘I would propose that we retrace our steps, that we go from animal habits to human manners, that we reverse our anthropomorphism’ (p. 23). As he puts it in a later work, *Hominescence*, fables are really about animals as such: ‘far from representing our human societies, the *Fables* take up and permanently mimic animal groups’ (2001: 116).

Reflecting on the question of biotechnology, *Hominescence* takes up the theoretical doublets of *Le parasite*: energy and information, economy and communication, animal and machine. In doing so, it returns to the form of the fable as a vector of origin, and there are reasons for suggesting that this form holds the most apposite lesson of *Le parasite*. Fables are also a kind of writing: parasitism in action. Stories are unceasingly told and retold, one story parasitizes another, information is re-animated by new communicative transactions: ‘Divines fables, plus l’auteur en écrit, plus encore il en reste à écrire. La production ne saurait tarir’ (p. 182). True to the genre, Cary Wolfe’s introduction to this new edition relates Serres’ reading of parasitism to other texts in which the fable has been relayed, translated, and

diffracted: Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and, in particular, Niklas Luhmann. Crudely, one might say that the best stories in *Le parasite* have been ‘lifted’ by other contributions to the theory of parasitism. For Serres, a set of transactions that the Old European tradition theorized as modes of binary division—contract, exchange, communication, contest, appropriation, decision—always implicate a third term: for each binary term, ‘il existe un troisième avant le deuxième. Il existe un tiers avant l’autre’ (p. 116). Binary divisions are always triangulated by a term that makes their relation, and divisions can be made or observed from a multiplicity of positions. If we read the logic of parasitism as the logic of the excluded third—the blind spot of any observation or operation or the irritant that is metabolized into any seemingly binary transaction, order from disorder—then we might say that this ternary scheme is more thoroughly formalized in Luhmann’s theory of functional differentiation. And if we take the logic in broader and less formalized terms, as a theorization of social and communicative action in terms of *occasio* rather than *causa*, then the most popularized version of the fable is probably Bruno Latour’s story of actants and networks. In particular, much of what was concentrated in Serres’ richly imagined figure of the quasi-object—that is, the ‘thing’ whose circulation calls subjects into being by predicating specific attributes of them—is narrated anew in Latour’s account of Gabriel Tarde as the forefather of Deleuzian *machinisme*. In his foreword to the current French edition, written some twenty years after the publication of the first edition of *Le parasite*, Serres observes that he was tempted ‘to rewrite the book in a quite different style, if only to be understood’ (p. 12).

Rather than renegotiate the relation of Serres as precursor, foil or mediator to any of the other proper nouns through which the fable of the parasite is articulated, it might be more interesting here to focus attention on the recurrent form of the animal parable. The basic question of *Le parasite* and *Hominescence* is that of origins: in the former, the question is how communicative intersubjectivity begins, and that question is developed in the latter book, which is introduced as ‘une reconstruction de nos cultures et de nos philosophies’ (2001: 16). The logic of parasitism is such that origin is never straightforward, always in the making: parasites precede, they make the relation, but paradoxically they do so only because the relation grants them this founding role. For Serres, man is what he was

for Nietzsche—the animal who learned to make contracts—but contract is taken in the broad sense of any kind of triangulated transaction. For present purposes, what is interesting is that this reconstruction of the origins of human sociality is both a performative effect of the fable and a moment that implicates the relation of humans to animals.

We can begin with a quite familiar story of origin. *Le parasite* weaves a narration of Hegel's philosophical parable of lord and bondsman (*maitre et esclave*) into its retelling of La Fontaine's fables. Serres observes that the dialectic is not a relation between individuals or singularities, but a relation of one to a multiplicity. To begin with, masters are few and slaves are many, and the few extract and direct the value created by the many. But masters do not act in person; having acquired a sense of their own mortality they retire behind a host of representative agents (*lieutenants*). Symmetrically, slaves acquire their own delegates—revolutionary leaders or class representatives—who are themselves masters in a relation of one to many: 'this particular slave becomes a master, but far from becoming the master of the master he becomes another master of the slaves' (pp. 111–112). By multiplying mastery, or the relation of one to a multiplicity, this reading reveals the parasitic logic of mastery. Masters are not only multiple, they are permutable. According to the logic of parasitism all relations are ternary, and the configuration of the triangle—host, parasite, interceptor—is mutable depending on how it is made or observed. The 'office' of the master is the face of a quasi-subject, a subject whose substance is an effect of the attributes that are predicated of it by relations of irritation and observation: 'There are no punctual points [*instances*]. Or rather instances, systems, or divides [*rives*], can themselves be analyzed as exchangers, vectors [*parcours*], translations, and so on' (p. 134). So what Hegel figures as rivalry is actually an effect of ongoing derivation: 'the logic of the battle is that of the excluded third' (p. 394). Mastery, if that is still the right word, is an attribute of the parasitic (or rhizomatic) relation that permutes the offices of mastery and servitude, or of subjective 'offices' in general. Indeed, one might say that 'mastery' is always outside, as an attribute of the excluded third or of the environment from which any binary form is precipitated. And only a fable—'seule la fable et sa métempsychose' (p. 117)—can reveal this mode of ongoing permutation, provided one knows how to read it: 'You might fail to recognize the parasite, precisely because it

runs through the fable and courses through the system, magically transforming itself' (p. 117). One of the recurrent themes in Serres' tale of parasitism is that, in the absence of a good theory of the relation, 'we remain in the thrall of poles and stations, substances and substantives', whereas the point is always to be between, or 'to bracket off centers': 'hence this book of metamorphoses: fox, lion, philosopher, imposter, no matter which. What we call subjects. That is the advantage of the fable' (p. 389).

Why should metamorphosis pass through animals as exemplary relays? What do animals have to do with Hegelian dialectic or with questions about the origins of self-consciousness? According to Serres, the fight for mastery and prestige that is represented in Hegel's dialectic of lord and bondsman reduces the relation between human subjects to an 'eternal return of musical chairs' (2001: 126) and it reduces human evolution to the logic of the horde, or hierarchy, and a crude drama of adaptation and survival. Humans reproduce the old dance of baboons and dingoes, and 'the dominator remains as dumb [*bête*] as the beasts he dominates' (2001: 126). This might not be the most interesting interpretation of Hegel—by way of contrast, Jean-Luc Nancy's Hegel is a philosopher of 'the risk of relation' and for Gillian Rose the dialectic is the process of 'seeing oneself being seen' by another—but for Serres the point is that communication transacts predicates rather than beings, and it presumes 'modesty' (2001: 127) rather than mastery.

Fables re-inject the social into the biological in a move that echoes Foucault's formulation of biopolitics as the folding of life into history; biological beginnings are an effect of social thematization. In *Hominescence* Serres develops his account of biosociality by making a contrast between two human dwellings: 'our old dwelling in which life [*le vivant*] was more technological than we believe, and our new dwelling, in which technology is more alive than we recognize' (2001: 106). In Serres' version, our original dwelling was the farm as a highly local but intensely variegated collectivity; humans shared their lives with animals that were recognized not just in terms of their species attributes but also as individual characters. Humans engaged with the diversity of expressions that Darwin treated as animal emotions, and which Serres calls 'le pur cosmétique émotif' (2001: 108): the bodily semiotics of colour, gesture, stance and voice, each of these semiotic forms being intensely variable and modulable within and between species. This is the

repertoire of the fable, and because fables are unscientific they get away from sociobiological interpretations of animal communication and develop a hybrid story of the origins of self-consciousness and communication. Animal characteristics are predicates rather than substances, so that what is in play has to do with ‘cosmetics’ rather than ‘essences’.

Apprehended through the medium of predicates, the interlocutor figures not as the holder of a desired role but as an irritation or as an invitation to adjust one’s own sense of self to what is revealed by another’s sense of self. What interests us is not a first-order relation of mastery but a second-order relation to the world as we see it mastered by another—‘la conscience double de l’autre et des choses dominées par lui’ (Serres, 2001: 127). So what is learned through dealing with animals is the art of communication as a mode of reciprocal contingency. Here the classic fable divides in two. Read anthropomorphically, the fable ascribes to animals human qualities and competences that belong to the classical or pre-parasitical conception of subjects, objects and relations. La Fontaine’s parables can be read as analogues of Hegel’s story of lord and bondsman: animals represent humans as animals. Read counter-anthropomorphically, the fable is a story of the emergence of a communicative competence that sublimates human existence into ‘*survivance*’ (Serres, 2001: 155). In a sense, this is another take on the basic operation of *Le parasite*: ‘the transubstantiation of being into relation’ (p. 408), or the analogous operation of sublimating environment into communications, noise into information, or ‘materiality into code’ [*le matériel en logiciel*] (p. 381): communication is the medium of human existence. Biotechnology takes up this project of constituting attributes (quasi-objects and quasi-subjects) through communication. Adopting one of the narrative themes that accompanied the generalization of recombinant DNA technology, Serres suggests that biotechnology has given us the capacity to compile and recombine a full array of animal communicative competences: ‘nous les “pouvons” presque toutes et d’autres encores, disparues et virtuelles’ (2001: 156).

The point is not just that humans can endow themselves with animal competences, but that these

competences are identified, appreciated and circulated within a network of parasitic relations of observation and communication, and, crucially, they are understood in terms of their animal origin. If the logic of *Le parasite* is essentially the logic by which materiality is sublimated into communicative codes and transactions, then biotechnology redoubles that logic by ‘folding materiality’, and by figuring biological ‘signals’ as a medium for the evolution of a ‘diversity of ways of apprehending the world and communicating with it’ (Serres, 2001: 153). Technically, biotechnology recruits the communicative competences of animals as enhancements of human competences; thematically, these competences become resources for the self-description of human societies. But biotechnologically combined competences—reproductive, sensory, communicative, nutritive—are still understood in biological or animal terms. To paraphrase Marilyn Strathern, one might say that biotechnological enhancement gives us more humanity and more animality at the same time, more technology and more biology. So, far from being denaturing or dehumanizing in its effects, biotechnology actually completes the old program of ‘co-domestication’ (Serres, 2001: 153); indeed, by compiling animal characters ‘science realizes the old program of the *Fables*, which knew how to metamorphose us into any species’ (2001: 146). This may be only one strand in the fable of the parasite, but it suggests a specific approach to the question of how animals figure in the biosocial imaginary. So if we ask what kind of animal emblem the parasite might be, the answer is just the question in reverse form. Animal characters, as they are narrated in the form of the fable, emblemize the figure of the parasite as the being of any communicative relation: ‘[L]e parasite est une relation élémentaire, il est même l’élément de la relation’ (p. 327).

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