

Not More of the Same: Michel Serres's Challenge to the Ethics of Alterity

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ABSTRACT: Much French philosophy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been marked by the positive valorization of alterity, an ethical position that has recently received a vigorous assault from Alain Badiou's privilege of sameness. This article argues that Badiou shares a great deal in common with the philosophies of alterity from which he seeks to distance himself, and that Michel Serres's little-known account of alterity offers a much more radical alternative to the ethics of difference. Drawing on both translated and as yet untranslated works, I argue that the Serresian ontology of inclination, along with his conceptual personae of the hermaphrodite and the parasite, informs ethical and political positions that offer a distinctive ethics and politics that present fresh insights about the relation between the singular and the universal, the contingency of market exchange, and the nature of violence.

KEY WORDS: Michel Serres, alterity, difference, ethics, parasite

It has pleased more than one historian of recent French philosophy to characterize the twentieth century in terms of a preoccupation with alterity and difference. Foremost among such historians is Vincent Descombes, whose influential *Modern French Philosophy* foregrounds the theme in its original French title.¹ Descombes notes the positive ethical charge accorded to alterity in this period by those philosophies that resist any attempt "to translate the other into the language of the same," that is, "[t]o temper the brutal element of existence, to absorb the heterogeneous, to give meaning to the senseless, to rationalize the incongruous."²

Prominent among Anglophone assessments of this trend in recent French thought is Todd May's 1997 *Reconsidering Difference*. May identifies difference as a "pattern" that has "emerged in the French philosophy of this generation, of the generation running roughly from the mid to late sixties up to the present,"³

prominent among which are Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Luc Nancy. What is common to these thinkers, May argues, is a shared problem of how to “valorize” difference, or in other words how to code it ethically. Indeed, he evokes an “obsession with the other” in this period,⁴ and he echoes Descombes in his judgment that “[t]o cast the issue in terms common to many Continentalists, the problem is how to avoid reducing difference to the logic of the same.”⁵ Whatever important dissimilarities there are between Levinas, Derrida, Deleuze, and Nancy, May argues, they all share a positive valorization of difference and they all resist reducing alterity to the same.

In the early 2000s, however, the tide decisively turned against alterity and difference in some quarters, and no single volume more succinctly or more polemically inveighed against the positive valorization of otherness than Alain Badiou’s *Ethics*. Whereas the philosophers of difference saw alterity as the key to a radical ethics and politics, Badiou argued that according positive ethical charge to alterity and difference forecloses any true ethics. Badiou’s own position is not that we need less alterity than the philosophers of difference would like, but that we already have much, much more: “Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*,”⁶ and “[t]here are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself. As many, but also, then, neither more nor less.”⁷ For Badiou, then, alterity and difference are neither philosophically interesting nor ethically privileged.

Badiou’s own proposal is radical: “the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned.”⁸ All the philosophical interest, and indeed the ethical import, for Badiou is not on the side of the other but of the same, where the same is understood not as what is but as “what comes to be” in a truth.⁹ This means that “[t]he only genuine ethics is of truths in the plural—or, more precisely, the only ethics is of processes of truth, of the labor that brings *some* truths into the world.”¹⁰ The ethics of truths is “*indifferent to differences*”¹¹ and so, as Badiou memorably notes, the truth has no dreadlocks.¹²

So it is that we are faced today with two major philosophies of sameness and difference, rhetorically antagonistic and each with its attendant ethics and politics. On the one hand we have the various philosophers of difference—Deleuze, Derrida, Nancy, and Levinas prominent among them—who, each in their own way, positively code alterity and give it a prominent place in their ethics. On the other hand there is Badiou’s philosophy of the same, for which it is sameness, not alterity, that carries a positive ethical charge.

It is not my purpose in these pages to arbitrate between these two broad tendencies. Indeed, it is my argument that to seek to do so would risk missing something very important that they share, something even more important than their differences. What Badiou and his antagonists have in common is the assumption that sameness and otherness are fundamentally and originally distinct,

and that the two terms can unproblematically receive contrasting ethical values. Badiou's own valorization of sameness over a ubiquitous and uninteresting infinite difference does not challenge the distinction between identity and alterity on which the philosophies of difference rely. In fact, there is a series of striking similarities between the philosophers of difference and his own thought. For Badiou, difference is banal, trivial and ubiquitous, in the same way that, for the philosophers of difference, the reduction of the other to the same in Aristotelian logic, in language, and in politics is ubiquitous and simply what "there is," understood as a Heideggerian *es gibt*. The philosophies of difference and Badiou's philosophy of the same also share the assumption that only one of the two terms (sameness or difference) can carry a preeminent positive ethical value, differing only on the small matter of whether it is sameness or difference that receives this unique positive coding. Once again, just as the philosophers of difference claim that alterity is only ever one infelicitous totalization away from being reduced to the same, for Badiou truths require their subject to maintain a vigilant, persevering fidelity if they are not to be dissolved into the endless circulation of opinion or into self-interest.¹³ In short, Badiou's disagreement with the philosophers of difference only makes sense in the context of the ample common ground that they share with his own philosophy of the same.

SERRES'S ONTOLOGY OF INCLINATION AND ORIENTATION

What we find in the thought of Michel Serres, by contrast, is a more radical critique and transformation of the ethics of alterity than Badiou is able to offer.¹⁴ Unlike Badiou, Serres questions not merely the privilege of the same over the other but the very nature of the distinction between those two terms, a distinction that subtends—and unites—Badiou's own position with that of his antagonists. The rest of this article will explore Serres's break not only with the philosophy of difference but with the very opposition between, and contrasting ethical charge accorded to, sameness and alterity, a contrasting charge upon which both Badiou and his antagonists rely, and which they jointly perpetuate.

We can begin to gain a sense of just how radically Serres departs from the orthodoxy of sameness and alterity if we consider his account of existence, which approximates neither to Badiou's ontology of inconsistent multiplicity about which nothing can be said, nor to an ontology of radical alterity or incommensurability for which "every other is wholly other."¹⁵ His account of existence is presented over the course of his many books in a series of figures that intentionally resist reduction either to sameness or to alterity as they are conceived by Badiou and his antagonists, figures of inclination, orientation, and asymmetry, of parasites and multiplicities, of limping, falling, and drifting.

Consistent across many of Serres's discussions of existence is the motif of inclination:¹⁶ everything inclines in an asymmetrical way, spinning, leaning, or drifting. This, he maintains, is the basic condition of all existence, from atoms and stars through snail shells and human bodies (the left breast is statistically larger than the right, he informs us) to languages, manufactured objects, and cultures. Indeed the universe itself came into being, according to a theory to which Serres refers on multiple occasions, as a rupture of symmetry:¹⁷

The stars turn and advance, oriented, like particles around the nucleus of an atom. Crystals and molecules are lateralized, with highly refined symmetries and asymmetries. Direction or orientation comes neither from men nor from their preferences, from their inclinations, but from the inanimate world that precedes the living and from the living that precedes culture. Things lean to one side: force fields, boreal auroras, twisting turbulences, cyclones, spots on the planet Jupiter . . . the universe was born, it is said, from spontaneous symmetry breaking. Direction traverses the immensity of the sky, enters the box of details, and rides on the arrow of time.¹⁸

Serres insists that the motif of inclination is no abstract metaphysics or speculative theory, and that it does not rely on a philosophical intuition or axiom like Badiou's inconsistent multiplicity. Quite to the contrary, he argues, the condition of existence is evident and observable. We each experience it a thousand times each day, from when we observe the cosmic regularity of the sun "rising" and "setting" as the earth rotates on its axis and perpetually inclines in its orbit towards the sun, to when we pick up the right-handed implements most of us use every day without a second thought. This principle of inclination spans nature and culture, the sciences and the arts. It is a familiar principle, he argues, in molecular biology, information theory, crystallography, fluid dynamics, and of course also in the Lucretian *clinamen* that ruptures the symmetry of falling atoms.¹⁹ Without exception, everything inclines: "Orientation can thus be said to be originary, invariable, irreducible, so constantly physical that it becomes metaphysical."²⁰ To exist is to incline, to veer, to be off center.

This paradigm of inclination cannot be accounted for in terms of the sameness and alterity that govern both the philosophies of the same and of difference. The Lucretian *clinamen* does not produce simply more of the same, but nor does it rupture with what precedes it and introduce a radical alterity. We can see here a marked difference from the Derrida who insists on "absolute" alterity, and from Jean-Luc Nancy's insistence on the incommensurability of singulars. For Serres there is no incommensurability, no radical alterity even as an ethical horizon, and even with the Derridean caveat of "if there is such a thing."

Inclination, as well as being the principle of the natural world, also holds sway in culture and language. This once again sets Serres apart from thinkers like Derrida and Nancy, for it distances from his writing any thought that language necessarily

reduces the alterity of that about which it speaks.²¹ Nor is there any dichotomy, for Serres, between textuality and a pre-symbolic Real, or between truths and the inconsistent multiplicity they count as one. In whichever direction we look, no such basic divisions scar the landscape of Serresian thought: it is inclination all the way down, all the way back, all the way up, and all the way forward.

In *The Birth of Physics* Serres elaborates on Lucretius's equation of atoms with letters and the view that, just as the swerve of atoms forms all the bodies in the universe, so also sense emerges through the drifting of letters against the background noise of language:

Everything drifts, whatever happens, from the original atoms, the backdrop. Everything drifts from the elementary roots: and so it is with words, these shifting aggregations of atom-letters. Here is the origin of meaning, the transverse lightning flash on the backdrop that is the background noise. Sense is nothing but its slope, it is the sense of the slope. It is another drift. Existence, time, meaning and language go down the inclined plane together.²²

For the philosophies of difference language reduces alterity, but for Serres it perpetuates inclination. In fact, inclination is operative for Serres at every linguistic level, including the semiotic, the semantic, and the narratological. In a series of four recent books²³ he elaborates an understanding of the structure of stories as a series of inclinations or bifurcations, allowing him to embrace with a single motif both the narratives of human culture and what he calls the "Great Story" of the universe from its origin, through the asymmetries which cause the formation of planets and the inclinations that shape evolution. Similarly, he insists that thinking itself is leaning, and that all its discoveries and creations derive only from branchings, bifurcations, or ruptures of symmetry.²⁴

The principle that characterizes Serres's position at this point, and that distinguishes it from philosophies both of difference and of the same, is summed up in a phrase that he quotes repeatedly, beginning with his 1968 thesis on Leibniz and continuing in his most recent writings. The quotation comes from a point in Leibniz's *Philosophische Schriften* where he quotes Nolant de Fatouville's Commedia dell'Arte play *Arlequin, Empereur de la lune* (*Harlequin: Emperor of the Moon*, 1693). Given the constant reference to this quotation throughout the more than five decades of Serres's work, it is as close as we will come to a brief summary of his own complex thought. Upon returning from his journey to the moon, the multi-colored Harlequin addresses a learned assembly eager to hear news of the strange world he has encountered, but the report they receive comes as a great disappointment. Harlequin tells his nonplussed audience that the lunar world "is just like here, everywhere and always," only "with varying degrees of size and perfection."²⁵ What a disappointment to the learned assembly who were itching to hear of the exotic, the unheard-of, the Other. To say that even the most distant location is "just like here, everywhere and always" is not a phrase that could readily

be found on the lips of the philosophers of difference, and nor would it sit well with Badiou's philosophy of the same. All alterity is also sameness, he is claiming, even that of the most exotic, far-flung, or inaccessible sort. To begin to probe the implications of Serres's alterity-as-inclination, we turn now to the twin motifs of chirality and hermaphroditism.

*Chirality and the Hermaphrodite*²⁶

Serres's most sustained and explicit challenge to the dichotomy of alterity and sameness is in his as-yet-untranslated 1987 book *L'Hermaphrodite: Sarrasine sculpteur*. In the course of offering an innovative reading of Balzac's short story "Sarrasine" he elaborates an account that privileges neither alterity nor sameness as customarily conceived, but that thinks about difference in terms of asymmetry, chirality, and enantiomorphy.²⁷ According to Serres the character of Zambinella—a castrato—provides Balzac's reader with a meditation on alterity.²⁸ In a move that is perhaps at first surprising (until we become familiar with Serres's rejection of all ontologies of lack, at which point we realize that it is inevitable), he insists on reading castration not as a lack but as a hermaphroditic plenitude, a neutral potentiality that resolves to neither pole of the sexual binary: "Neutral expresses well enough the inclusion of the excluded middle: neither 'neither one nor the other' nor 'both one and the other.' Castration plays the role of the neutral element, here, for every operation that brings alterity into play."²⁹

This hermaphroditic logic reappears regularly throughout the book, as well as elsewhere in Serres's work, not least in an important series of reflections on chirality in which we find another challenge to the same/other paradigm. A left-hander himself, Serres insists that sinistrality is not the opposite of dextrality, nor its 'other'; still less is it the 'same' as right-handedness. In fact, the left-handed person is a "lateral hermaphrodite."³⁰ Our two hands are in a relation neither of identity nor alterity; rather they are enantiomorphs: symmetrical but not congruent. In the final analysis, therefore, enantiomorphy reduces neither to identity nor to alterity, nor again to any mixture of the two. Two enantiomorphic structures are at the same time quite opposite and quite identical³¹ such that, as Serres puts it, the "same" and "other" have become twins.³²

The logic of antithesis and the lexicon of identity and difference are wholly inadequate to describe this hermaphroditic difference, a relation which Serres dubs a "non-symmetrical symmetry"³³ and "the most refined of alterities."³⁴ The left-hander is opposed to the right-hander while remaining identical,³⁵ and this complex relation confounds the unsophisticated categories of "same" and "other," just as it confounds the superposition of one hand exactly upon the other. Our hands are not identical—they cannot be interchanged. And yet they have reflectional symmetry—they are not radically other:

Who am I on this axis or on the surface of the reflective mirror at the center of my body, who am I with organs with no image, no model, no double, no equal? Where have the same and the other gone in the twinned enantiomorphs that mirror each other in this mirror?³⁶

"If we remembered this mirror that never leaves us," insists Serres, "it would help us to understand . . . alterity."³⁷ Specifically, it would help us to understand that the notion of radical alterity so prominent in recent thought is only ever an abstraction from an original chiral inclination.

Elaborating on his own sinistrality in *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, Serres insists that the left-hander is not the equal and opposite of the right-hander. Forced to adapt to a world of objects designed for the dextral user, the left-hander develops capacities of which the right-hander knows nothing. This does not mean, however, that the left-hander is simply ambidextrous or enacts a Hegelian sublation of dextral sameness and sinistral alterity:

Does the thwarted left-hander become ambidextrous? No, rather a crossbred body, like a chimera. Left-handed when it comes to scissors, the hammer, the scythe, the foil, the ball, the racket, the expressive gesture if not society—this, the body—the left-hander has never stopped belonging to the maladroit, sinister minority, as Latin has it; hurray for the Greek language, which dubs this minority aristocratic! But right-handed for the pen and the fork, he shakes the right hand upon being introduced—this, the soul. He is properly brought up for public life, but left-handed for caresses and private life. Those complete organisms have their hands full.³⁸

There remains an un-recuperated remainder in the left-hander's awkwardness and elaborate behavioral compensations, an incessant learning or inclination one way or another rather than a stable synthesis of left and right. She is stably unstable, metastable but not at rest. In short, for the left-hander "identity fits well with opposition and fullness with lack."³⁹

This complex enantiomorphy is a feature not only of our hands, of course, but of our bodies as well, and so whereas for Badiou I am just as infinitely other to myself as to anyone else, and for Derrida every other is wholly other, for Serres the picture is more complex:

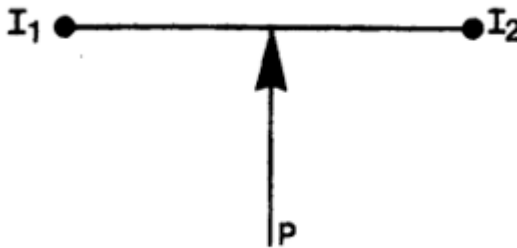
Glass in a window or a mirror divides my body into two zones both same and other, enantiomorphs: our identity mixes in with our own alterity as confusedly as the androgynous Hermes and Aphrodite. Sarrasine extends to human affairs the problem of regions of space, and thus meditates on alterity. Who am I, me other [*moi autre*]?⁴⁰

It is this complex alterity, Serres insists, rather than a unilateral valorization either of the same or of the other, that should govern our thinking and inform our ethics.

The Parasite

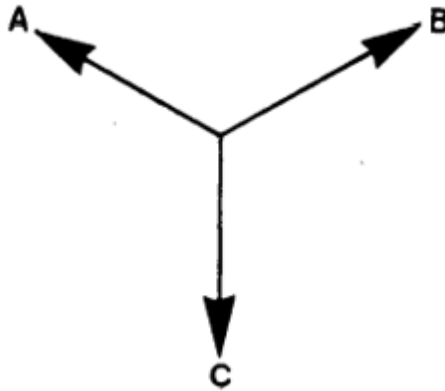
The second Serresian motif that challenges philosophies both of the same and of difference is the parasite,⁴¹ a figure developed at considerable length in Serres's 1980 volume *Le Parasite*,⁴² and that, unlike chirality and the hermaphrodite, has been prominent in the Anglophone reception of his work to date.⁴³ The parasite is neither the same nor the other, and in fact it confuses the distinction between same and other, as Serres explains in relation to La Fontaine's fable "The town rat and the country rat." In the fable the town rat invites the country rat to dinner, and during their feasting the two are interrupted (Serres assumes by the owner of the house in which the town rat lives). The "third man" intrudes upon the rats' meal with a noise (*bruit*), which is one of the three meanings of the French *parasite*: the static or noise that interrupts a signal. Despite the house-owner "parasitizing" the rats, however, it is in fact this third who is himself parasitized by his hungry visitors.

The complex parasitical relations in La Fontaine's fable help Serres to rethink the conventional account of sameness and alterity. The distinction between the same and the other shared by both Badiou and his antagonists requires, on Serres's account, the prior expulsion of the third or the parasite, which is mistakenly thought to supervene upon or interrupt the exchange between self and other, a misunderstanding Serres illustrates with the following diagram, where I_1 and I_2 are the two interlocutors, and P the parasite:⁴⁴



In this customary but incorrect way of understanding alterity, a channel of (linguistic) communication or (economic) exchange is parasitized by a third instance which introduces static, miscommunication, and fraud. In La Fontaine's fable, by contrast, "the guest becomes the interrupter, the source of noise becomes the interlocutor, the channel becomes an obstacle, and vice versa."⁴⁵ In other words, it is now radically impossible to decide who is the parasite and who is the host, who is the same and who is the other, who is the giver and who is the receiver,

and who interrupts whom. The linearity necessary for the identification of same and other is itself revealed as an artificial reduction of an originary, generalized parasitism. This, furthermore, is the condition of all relations. In Serres's generalized parasitism "[t]he same and the other change places with the third" and "[a] diagram is needed where the branches are not determined and where the cuts are not specified":⁴⁶



This differs from, say, the Derridean insistence on the ambiguity between host and guest captured in the French term *hôte*,⁴⁷ because Derrida problematizes the identity of host and guest while retaining the underlying structure of a bipolar relation between two instances, a bipolarity necessary for his account of radical hospitality. Derrida's *hôte* is still working within the linearity of the first diagram, even as it problematizes the difference between I_1 and I_2 . Serres, by contrast, challenges the structure of alterity at a deeper level through his insistence on the radical impossibility of conclusively identifying not merely host and guest but host, guest, and parasite.

In *Le Parasite*, Serres discusses La Fontaine's fable "The Countryman and the Serpent," in the course of which the eponymous reptile is cut into three pieces:

Which is the third part? Or who or what is the third, in this logic of the trenchant decision? Is the third excluded or not? Here we have a trivalent logic where we expected only a bivalent one. The same at the head, the other at the tail, or being at the head and nonbeing at the tail, and this middle trunk that is both same and other, being and nonbeing, and so forth.⁴⁸

Both the philosophies of difference and of the same operate only after discarding the serpent's middle part, and Serres is drawing our attention, quite literally here, to the excluded middle, in French *le tiers exclu* (the excluded third), his

insistence upon which distinguishes his position from philosophies of difference and sameness alike.

Furthermore, the second diagram reveals the poverty of the same/other paradigm, as Serres explains in *La Communication*: “The most profound dialectical problem is not the Other, who is only a variety—or a variation—of the Same, it is the problem of the third man.”⁴⁹ According to Serres’s generalized parasitism, the great danger is not the violent reduction of radical alterity to linguistic signification, nor is it the dissolution of truths in the miasma of endlessly circulating opinion, but it is rather in the very framework of the same/other distinction upon which philosophies of difference and philosophies of the same both rely, no matter with what nuances, caveats, and deconstructions they might festoon this binary schema. Compared to the nuance and subtlety of this generalized parasitism, Serres argues, seeking to understand relations in terms of the logic of the same and the other is like playing the piano while wearing boxing gloves.⁵⁰

IMPLICATIONS

In both the philosophies of sameness and of alterity, an account of difference directly informs an ethics and a politics. Things are no different for Serres, despite some rather hasty conclusions in the secondary literature about the poverty or even the lack of a Serresian ethics.⁵¹ Serres’s ethics has been characterized as a “horror of violence and exclusion,”⁵² but in truth this barely touches the tip of the Serresian ethical iceberg. In this final section we will consider the distinctiveness and potential of an ethics and politics that issue from Serres’s account of parasitic, chiral inclination.

Rethinking the Relation of the Local to the Global, and the Singular to the Universal

First, inclination and enantiomorphic alterity make us rethink the relation between the local and the global, the singular and the universal, and this challenges the philosophy of difference’s antipathy to totalizing discourse while also avoiding the devalorization of difference characteristic of sameness philosophy. In *Geometry* Serres notes how, “[i]n a violent but just reaction against perverse ancient ideas preaching a universal that’s almost always reducible to an imperialistic and invading domination, our discourses, for at least a half-century, have rumbled with our differences.”⁵³ This repudiation of imperialistic universality and its concomitant valorization of difference has also, however, come at the price of abandoning the aim of unitary synthesis as we “lose ourselves deliciously in the delicacies of the infinitely small, forgetful of the universal in favor of singularities that carry meaning.”⁵⁴ In other words, we have become able to valorize the local and the singular only at the expense of the global and the universal.

In addition to this zero sum game between singularity and totality there is also an internal tension in the unilateral valorization of difference, namely that “by some perverse paradox, difference ends up imposing itself in turn as a universal dogma that everywhere and always forbids speaking in terms of always and everywhere.”⁵⁵ The paradox may indeed be perverse, but it is also inevitable: the reductive dichotomizing of identity and alterity, compounded by their differential valorization, cannot but issue in a distorted premium on one of these two poles at the expense of the other. Highlighting the perverse consequences of such a position, Serres wryly asks, “is it only the local that can be expressed globally?”⁵⁶

The problem is far from an intramural philosophical one, however. Having sought to content ourselves with differences with the noble aim of fostering peace, what we now find is that “in the name of these same differences twenty wars are flaring and raging today in singular localities of the world, bringing as many misfortunes to men as the imperialist conflicts generalized to the entire world brought to our youth.”⁵⁷ It is no adequate response to the tyranny of the universal to institute a counter-tyranny of difference. What is needed is an approach that does not play off the local against the global, the singular against the universal, and this refusal to pit singularity against universality is what Serres's own account of chiral identity and alterity offers us, with one very important caveat.

The caveat is that the Serresian response to the suite of problems inherent in understanding the relationship between the local and the global does not simply consist in arguing that every local inclination is an instance of the global condition of existence. Philosophies of difference perform such a move themselves, for example in Nancy's singular plural or, *mutatis mutandis*, Derrida's “every other is wholly other,” and Badiou can similarly claim that every locally instantiated truth is universal. What is different in Serres's case is that the path from the local to the global knows no qualitative leap: the global is a network of localities, not something under which the local can be subsumed or into which it can be incorporated. When sameness and difference philosophies think the relation between the singular and the universal, they retain the Platonic structure of the Form and the particular, a structure according to which the universal is an idea in which the singular participates. For Serres, this approach can only ever conceive the global as an “inflated local.”⁵⁸ Such an approach always struggles to grasp the universal, whereas Serres's insistence that even the most alien locality is “everywhere and always” like here, “with varying degrees of size and perfection,”⁵⁹ requires no Platonic leap from the local particular to the global universal. Local and global are co-implicated in the inclination and orientation that characterize all existence:

Orientation goes from the local to the global and from the small to the large, from atoms to stars, from inanimate matter to living matter, from crystals to shellfish, from nature to culture, from the pure to the applied, from space

to time, from things to languages; thus it traverses, as well, and without difficulty, the passage(ways) that philosophy reputes to be the most delicate.⁶⁰

In the continuation of the extract from Fatouville's *Arlequin, Empereur de la lune* quoted above, many-colored Harlequin is forced by his disgruntled audience to divest himself of his coat, eventually stripping down to his naked and tattooed body. As the audience make to leave, however, they turn back in amazement and, looking at the spot where Harlequin had been standing a moment before, exclaim "Pierrot! Pierrot! . . . Pierrot Lunaire!"⁶¹ White, universal, and blank Pierrot stands in the place of the multi-colored, determinate, local Harlequin. Serres's point is a chromatic one: white is not composed of an absence of color but of all colors; the universal and global are arrived at not by jumping out of the local in a puff of abstraction, but by multiplying local instances and seeking carefully to relate them to each other. The global for Serres is incremental, asymptotically approached through finding the complex northwest passages between particular localities, not acceded to in one transcendent leap.

What this means, as Marcel Hénaff notes, is that totality and the global are no longer to be seen, monodimensionally, as totalizing imperialisms to be avoided at all costs, nor as Badiouian truths incarnated in individual particulars, but as conditions of existence that emerge as we move from one locality to another: "the global does not pre-exist the local; it is the ensemble of their relations."⁶² We do not reach the global by abstracting from or transcending the local, but by bringing into relation many different localities.

This chromatic way of understanding the local and the global circumvents the dangers of totalization and imperialism which so exercise the philosophies of difference. It is "a fully developed philosophy of mixture and hybridization, of identity as the sum or combination of varieties of otherness [*combinaison des altérités*]," a future philosophy of mixture that "connects the global and the local irenically, and presupposes a different ontology."⁶³ It is telling, then, that Peter Hallward identifies two tendencies in Serres's thought, one particularizing and one holistic, which he finds it difficult to reconcile,⁶⁴ and that N. Katherine Hayles similarly identifies "two voices" in Serres, a generalizing voice and a voice resistant to generality.⁶⁵ What Hallward's and Hayles's perplexity shows is that Serres's account of alterity as inclination is not assimilable to the sameness/otherness paradigm in terms of which they are seeking to read him, but it describes a subtler alterity that is at work before the emergence of the forced dichotomy between the local and the global.

Challenging Radical Alterity

Secondly, Serres's chiral and symmetry-breaking otherness leaves no place for the absolute or radical alterity that has its place in both Derrida's and Badiou's thought. This means that, from a Serresian point of view, difference philosophy's respect for the irreducible alterity of the other, or sameness philosophy's commit-

ment to a universal truth that cuts across all differences, can no longer be seen as the ethical holy grail. In fact, radical alterity is reframed by Serres not as the antidote to violence or as that which must be overcome through perseverance to a truth, but as the very source and justification of violence: "The bit of noise, the small random element, transforms one system or one order into another. To reduce this otherness to contradiction is to reduce everything to violence and war."⁶⁶ Once more, to think in terms of sameness and alterity is already to have discarded the middle third of the serpent.

Serres's own refusal to be complicit in this conspiracy of the excluded middle directly challenges the assumption of the philosophies of difference that violence is the reduction of alterity to the same. On Serres's account, in fact, the moment of violence occurs before any supposed reduction of the other to the same. It occurs when chiral alterities or alterities of inclination are forcibly reduced to oppositions and contradictions in order that there may be a clear distinction between same and other in the first place. For Serres himself, by contrast, "[h]ell is the separation of paradise and Hell, the Devil is the bifurcation between God and the Devil, evil is the crossroads of good and evil, and error is the dualism that only opposes twins."⁶⁷ Those twins may be sameness and alterity as framed by the philosophies of difference, or the truths and opinions of Badiou. Both, for Serres, are equally in error, equally violent, and equally hellish.

What is violent, we could add, is the very assumption of the primacy of the same/other dyad such that it should need to be deconstructed in the first place, or such that, on Badiou's account, truth should need to be preserved from dissolution into indifferent difference through an ongoing act of fidelity in the first place. On a Serresian view philosophies of alterity and philosophies of the same are equally violent in reducing the complex subtlety of inclinational, chiral, and parasitic alterity to the brute opposition of same and other. This is nowhere more vividly exemplified than in Serres's ecological thinking, where time and again he insists on the earth and its ecosystem as the forgotten and excluded third in the exchanges between warring parties, their shared disregard for which is the condition of possibility of their conflict in the first place. It is only by ignoring this (quite literally) common ground that the parties can be constituted as antagonists, as Serres poignantly points out in relation to Goya's famous depiction of two pugilists fighting with cudgels as they sink into the sand in which they are standing.⁶⁸ If we desire conflict then we must begin by transforming enantiomorphic difference into the dichotomy of sameness and alterity shared by philosophies of difference and philosophies of the same.

Challenging the Paradigm of Exchange

Another important consequence of Serres's account of alterity is its challenge to the idea that exchange relations are primary in both personal and political con-

texts. The logic of sameness and difference common to Badiou and his antagonists predisposes us to understand politics in terms of an economy of exchange: once there is a difference between same and other then any relation between them is to be understood in terms of reciprocity, of unilateral or bilateral commerce, or its refusal. This is a prominent assumption in Derrida's later work, for instance, when he considers the inevitable reciprocity of gift-giving or hospitality. It is also the paradigm that tacitly governs Badiou's insistence on fidelity to a truth, which is precisely the refusal of exchange between truth and opinion.

For Serres, by contrast—and, I would argue, for all of us if we stop to think about it—parasitism is more fundamental than, and indeed the condition of possibility of, exchange, reciprocity, and the very distinction between same and other. Critiquing the well-worn dictum that society is founded on exchange, Serres emphatically replies:

No: the straight, asymmetrical, more elementary arrow incontestably gives the parasite the first, dangerous, tragic, exposed place. Legal right is required, at least, and morality, on top of that, to patiently construct the double arrow of globally balanced exchanges. Everywhere and always orientation begins; what remains to be constructed are the different balancing acts. Exchange, then, comes second.⁶⁹

The sort of reciprocal exchange relations that govern the philosophies of difference and sameness always come after parasitic relations in at least two ways. First, that which is exchanged has always already been parasitically extracted from the earth, either in the form of quarried or harvested materials, or in the form of intellectual property generated through the parasitic consumption of such materials. Secondly, each of us parasitizes our mother and then our parents or carers for the first months and years of our life, before we enter into any formal economic exchange relationships.

Implicit in this realization is a Serresian critique of the exchange economy as a fundamental paradigm which, like the philosophy of alterity of which it is a mirror and whose structure it shares, excludes the parasitic relations that are its condition of possibility. Rather than perpetuate this fiction of the same, the other, and the relations of production and exchange between them, Serres insists on a generalized parasitism. The Serresian primacy of the parasite also challenges the insidious and destructive assumption, fostered by late capitalism, that the only relations of value are financially significant relations of exchange, and according to which only those tasks or jobs which receive financial remuneration are positively valued in terms of status and power. In place of this *homo economicus* with its assumptions of sameness, alterity, and exchange, Serres offers us *homo parasitus* which foregrounds the care-giving, child-rearing, earth-dwelling foundations of the economic that the paradigm of production and exchange predisposes us to treat as a hindrance to “true” productivity. Serres's radical challenge to the primacy of

the same/other dyad, as also to the paradigm of production and exchange, offers transformative models to disability studies and gerontology, directly confronting the insidious stigma of "being a burden" by revealing parasitism as the fundamental and universal condition of existence, both human and non-human.

CONCLUSION

Serres's relation to other recent French philosophers and the ethical and political implications of his work remain among the chronically under-explored aspects of his reception in the Anglophone world.⁷⁰ The aim of this brief treatment has been to address these twin deficiencies, drawing out some contrasts between Serres's account to alterity and that of recent philosophies which either positively value otherness or positively value sameness. By touching on three areas in which Serresian alterity issues in a set of ethical and political concerns and assumptions radically different from those of philosophies of difference and philosophies of the same, I hope at least to have begun to challenge the misconception that Serres's ethical and political thought is a weakness in his writing. Finally, Serres's challenges to common understandings of the universal, violence, and the paradigm of exchange can be of great use to a broad cross-section of arts and humanities scholars who are seeking alternative narratives to the now well-worked patter of fidelity to a truth or of avoiding the reduction of alterity to sameness.

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NOTES

1. Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*. The French title, *Le Même et l'autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)* translates as "The Same and the Other: Forty-Five Years of French Philosophy (1933–1978)."
2. Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 90.
3. May, *Reconsidering Difference*, 1.
4. May, *Reconsidering Difference*, 2. May's language is echoed by Steven Connor when he argues that the tradition of twentieth-century European philosophy "has been preoccupied to the point of mania with alterity." Connor, "Thinking Perhaps Begins There," 578.
5. May, *Reconsidering Difference*, 2.
6. Badiou, *Ethics*, 25/*L'Éthique*, 43; AB's emphasis.
7. Badiou, *Ethics*, 26/*L'Éthique*, 44.
8. Badiou, *Ethics*, 25/*L'Éthique*, 43.
9. Badiou, *Ethics*, 27/*L'Éthique*, 46.
10. Badiou, *Ethics*, 28/*L'Éthique*, 47; AB's emphasis.

11. Badiou, *Ethics*, 27/ *L'Éthique*, 46; AB's emphasis.
12. Badiou, "Behind the Sacred Law, There is Fear."
13. Badiou, *Ethics*, 47/ *L'Éthique*, 69.
14. Any meaningful consideration of each of the thinkers discussed by May in *Reconsidering Difference* would overflow the length of this article. I shall engage primarily with Derrida in the sections that follow, with a brief discussion of Nancy, building up an indicative but not exhaustive picture of how Serres's account of otherness differs substantially from those philosophies which code alterity positively. It is also important to note that the present article does not and cannot aim to situate Serres's account of alterity in a wider context still, engaging with thinkers such as Gilbert Simondon, Bruno Latour, and François Laruelle. My present purpose is to show that Serres's account of alterity exposes similarities between, and cannot be assimilated to, Badiou and his antagonists.
15. Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 98/ *The Gift of Death*, 77; translation altered.
16. See, for example, Serres, *The Birth of Physics/La Naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce*. See also *L'Hermaphrodite*; *Le Tiers-Instruit/The Troubadour of Knowledge*; *Le Gaucher boiteux*.
17. See, for example, Serres, *Le Gaucher boiteux*, 87, and Serres, Legros, and Ortoli, *Pantopie*, 86.
18. Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 14/ *Le Tiers-Instruit*, 36–37; translation altered.
19. Serres, *Le Gaucher boiteux*, 76–77.
20. Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 15/ *Le Tiers-Instruit*, 38.
21. It is not that Derrida and Nancy—or Deleuze, for that matter—consider language and the world to be radically different to each other. This is the perennial misunderstanding of Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" which confuses "text" with "syntactic language." Derrida is quite happy to say that the living cell, for example, is a text. Nancy, for his part, is equally happy to move effortlessly from the material to the conceptual in his account of beings in *L'Expérience de la liberté* and elsewhere. What sets Serres apart from thinkers like Derrida and Nancy at this point is not his insistence that there is no dichotomy between language and the material world, but the persistence, in the latter thinkers, of the idea that language necessarily reduces the difference of that about which it speaks.
22. Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, 34/ *La Naissance de la physique*, 46.
23. See Serres, *Hominescence*; *L'Incandescent/The Incandescent*; *Rameaux*; and *Récits d'humanisme*. I consider the narratological implications of Serres's recent work in "Michel Serres' Great Story: From Biosemiotics to Econarratology."
24. Serres, *Le Gaucher boiteux*, 78.
25. Serres, *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*, 1; CW's translation. Quoted by Serres from Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 6:548. All translations from Serres's *Leibniz* are my own.
26. Interested readers can find my summary and analysis of *L'Hermaphrodite* at <https://christopherwatkin.com/2015/09/04/rethinking-alterity-and-logocentrism-after-phenomenology-with-serress-lhermaphrodite-sarrasine-sculpteur-1987/>. Accessed August 2017.
27. Chiral (from the Greek *kheir*, hand) describes a crystal or three-dimensional form which is "not superposable on its mirror image." An enantiomorph (from the

- Greek *enantios*, opposite, and *morphe*, form) is “a form which is related to another as an object is related to its image in a mirror; a mirror image.” See *Oxford English Dictionary*.
28. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 78, 99.
 29. “Neutre exprime assez bien l'inclusion d'un tiers-exclu: ni l'un ni l'autre ou et l'un et l'autre.
 - La castration joue le rôle d'élément neutre, ici, pour toute opération mettant en jeu l'altérité,” Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 96; CW's translation.
 30. See *Le Tiers-instruit*, 36/*The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 13.
 31. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 74.
 32. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 71.
 33. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 70.
 34. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 70. Serres makes a similar argument in *Le Tiers-instruit* about bilingualism. See *Le Tiers-instruit*, 26/*The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 6.
 35. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 74.
 36. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 71.
 37. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 71.
 38. *Le Tiers-instruit*, 35–36/*The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 13.
 39. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 74–75.
 40. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, 99.
 41. In addition to the hermaphrodite and the parasite, other Serresian personae could be drawn upon to develop these themes further. The “troubadour of knowledge” (*le tiers-instruit*) would be an important reference, as would Hermes, angels, and the Harlequin/Pierrot doublet.
 42. Serres, *Le Parasite/The Parasite*.
 43. See Baran, “Predators and Parasites in *Le Père Goriot*”; Brown, “Michel Serres: Science, Translation and the Logic of the Parasite”; Burton and Tam, “Towards a Parasitic Ethics”; Clegg, Kornberger, and Rhodes, “Noise, Parasites and Translation”; Guilherme, “Michel Serres' *Le Parasite* and Martin Buber's *I and Thou*”; Lanone, “Parasites, or the Politics of Textual Poetics in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*”; Raffel, “Parasites, Principles and the Problem of Attachment to Place”; Thompson, “Productive Parasites: Thinking of Noise as Affect”; Wolfe, “Bring the Noise: The Parasite and the Multiple Genealogies of Posthumanism”.
 44. The diagram can be found on *Le Parasite*, 74/*The Parasite*, 53.
 45. *The Parasite*, 53–54/*Le Parasite*, 74.
 46. Serres, *The Parasite*, 54/*Le Parasite*, 74. The diagram can be found on *Le Parasite*, 74/*The Parasite*, 53.
 47. Jacques Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *De l'Hospitalité/Of Hospitality*.
 48. Serres, *The Parasite*, 23/*Le Parasite*, 36.
 49. Serres, *Hermès: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, 66–67/*Hermès 1*, 41.
 50. Serres, *Le Parasite*, 78/*The Parasite*, 57.
 51. “Serres is, I fear, much less persuasive, much less invigorating, when he tries to show the implications and applications of this thought. In considering the question of evil, for example, he can become prosaic, formulaic, parochial, prescriptive, even a little monomaniac, often grotesquely against the grain of his own thought.” Connor, “Wherever: The Ecstasies of Michel Serres.” “There seems in Serres's recent work to

- be a correspondingly large overestimation of the likely ethical and political outcomes of cultivating more subtle and inclusive thoughts of the shape of things.” Connor, “Topologies: Michel Serres and the Shapes of Thought,” 105–17.
52. Yates, “The Gift is a Given: On the Errant Ethic of Michel Serres,” 192.
 53. Serres, *Geometry*, x/*Les Origines de la géométrie*, 9.
 54. Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 165/*Le Tiers-instruit*, 247–48.
 55. Serres, *Geometry*, x/*Les Origines de la géométrie*, 9; translation altered.
 56. Serres, *Geometry*, x/*Les Origines de la géométrie*, 9.
 57. Serres, *Geometry*, x/*Les Origines de la géométrie*, 9.
 58. Serres, *The Five Senses*, 308/*Les Cinq Sens*, 338–39.
 59. Serres, *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*, 1. Quoted by Serres from Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 6:548.
 60. Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 14–15/*Le Tiers-instruit*, 38.
 61. Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, xvii/*Le Tiers-instruit*, 17.
 62. Hénaff, “Des pierres, des anges et des hommes,” 83. CW’s translation.
 63. Serres, *The Five Senses*, 259/*Les Cinq Sens*, 283.
 64. Hallward and Serres, “The Science of Relations: An Interview,” 231–32.
 65. Hayles, “Two Voices, One Channel,” 3–12.
 66. Serres, *The Parasite*, 21/*Le Parasite*, 34.
 67. Serres, *The Parasite*, 20/*Le Parasite*, 33.
 68. Serres discusses Goya’s *Men with Sticks* in *The Natural Contract*, 1/*Le Contrat naturel*, 13.
 69. Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 16/*Le Tiers-Instruit*, 40.
 70. The essays in Bernd Herzogenrath’s edited volume *Time and History in Deleuze and Serres* are a mixed bag when it comes to discussing Serres and Deleuze together, rather than treating only one of the two philosophers. Julian Yates’s “The gift is given: On the errant ethic of Michel Serres” is a solid treatment of Serres and Derrida on the gift, and Crispin T. Lee’s *Haptic Experience in the Writings of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Michel Serres* finds illuminating comparisons between its three titular authors. When it comes to constructive treatments of Serres’s ethics and politics, Julian Yates’s chapter cited above is once again worthy of mention, as are James Burton and Daisy Tam’s “Towards a Parasitic Ethics” and David Webb’s “Michel Serres on Lucretius: Atomism, Science, and Ethics”.

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