Representing French and Francophone Studies with Michel Serres

CHRISTOPHER WATKIN

Abstract

What do we talk about when we talk about French and Francophone Studies? If we could approach French Studies as a Martian anthropologist seeking to understand its rationale but ignorant of its history, what might we conclude? As it happens, such disciplinary questions engage one of the major concerns at the heart of French philosophy over recent decades: the problem of the same and the other. Departing from the orthodox accounts of sameness and otherness, the work of polymath and *académicien* Michel Serres offers us a new approach to understanding the relation between identity and alterity, an approach he explores in terms of the motif of chirality. Serres not only delivers a radical challenge to one of the most fundamental commonplaces of recent French thought, namely the opposition between sameness and alterity, but in so doing he also helps us to find new ways of understanding and articulating the nature and specificity of French and Francophone Studies today.

Introduction

What do we talk about when we talk about French and Francophone Studies (FFS)? If FFS is – as we say these days – a "thing" (and that remains to be established), then what sort of thing is it? Much important work has been undertaken in response to questions like these in recent years, both in Australia and elsewhere. This work has charted the move away from framing French literature as the "third classic" alongside Greek and Latin,[1] to a rich diversity of methodological approaches and a variety of objects of study.[2] It has noted the shift from the "Francodoxy" of a Gallic, hexagonal paradigm,[3] through a period still characterized by the centrality of France

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[1] Charles Forsdick, "Mobilising French Studies", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 51: 2–3 (2014), 250–268 (p. 259).

[2] Charles Forsdick, "What's 'French' about French Studies?" *Nottingham French Studies*, 54: 3 (2015), 312–327 (p. 312).

[3] See François Provenzano, *Vies et mort de la Francophonie : une politique française de la langue et de la littérature* (Brussels and Paris: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2011), cited in Forsdick, "What's 'French' about French Studies?", p. 320.

but with an increasing acknowledgment of what are construed as its satellites, now designated with the term "pays francophones", towards a provincializing of Metropolitan France, captured in the title of Dominic Thomas's 2006 book *Black France*.[4] In this latter stage of the journey, Metropolitan France sits alongside but not in a place of privilege over other French-speaking areas and cultures. Finally, there has also been a drive to de-spatialize and de-nominalize FFS, moving away from the area studies paradigm to an approach that treats its object adjectivally (as "French Studies", not "France Studies")[5] or even adverbially (engaging with a given set of concerns – if the reader will pardon the unwieldy term – "Frenchly"), understanding FFS as a collection of modes of engagement with objects of study that can be practised by anyone at any time, not necessarily in a geographically or linguistically French context.

So then, what is FFS? Let us start by considering the community of scholars working in the field, casting our eye down the list of papers offered at the 2017 Australian Society for French Studies conference. To give only a brief sample, we see titles as methodologically, disciplinarily and linguistically diverse as "Realism, Truth and Representation in *le jeune cinéma*", "Comment démêler le vrai du faux dans les textes dramatiques?", "The Scandalous Story of Sex work in Cambodia", "Material Culture and Israelite Identity during the French Wars of Religion", "Commentary on the AIDS *roman à clef*", "The *bagne* as *lieu de mémoire*", "Contesting the Memory of the Algerian War", "Linguistic Representations of 'Home' in a French–Kanak Children's Book", "L'Imaginaire colonial dans les pratiques artistiques en France aujourd'hui" and "Ayant-été et personnage romanesque dans l'œuvre de Patrick Modiano".

What is it, if anything, that makes this Harlequin's coat of approaches and objects of study cohere into the thing we call "French and Francophone Studies"? How can it be that the deep and important differences in method, in concerns and in vocabulary represented in these papers can all be part of the same conference? It is at this point that we come to the wager of this article: what if we could gain some purchase on the nature of FFS, or even on the truth of FFS, by considering it in terms of – or rather considering it against, and as a challenge to – one of the great discussions in recent French thought, perhaps the great discussion of the latter half of the twentieth century: that of the same and the other?

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[4] Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), cited in Jacqueline Dutton, "World Literature in French, *littérature-monde*, and the Translingual Turn", *French Studies*, 70: 3 (2016), 404–418 (p. 407).

[5] See Christophe Campos, "The Scope and Methodology of French", in *French in the 90s: A Transbinary Conference* July 1991, ed. Jennifer Birkett and Michael Kelly (Birmingham: Birmingham Modern Languages Publications, 1992), 33–38 (p. 33); cited in Forsdick, "What's 'French' about French Studies?", p. 313.

Sameness, Otherness and French and Francophone Studies

It has pleased more than one historian of recent French philosophy to characterize the latter decades of the twentieth century in terms of a preoccupation with alterity and difference. Foremost among such histories – it was certainly a well-thumbed volume in my own undergraduate library – was Vincent Descombes' influential *Le Même et l'autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)*.[6] Descombes notes the positive ethical charge accorded to alterity in this period by those philosophers who resist any attempt to "traduire l'autre dans la langue du même", that is "[a]pprovisionner l'élément brutal de l'existence, assimiler l'hétérogène, donner sens à l'insensé, rationaliser l'incongru".[7] Thinkers such as Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray, Kristeva and others seek in one way or another to avoid reducing difference to the logic of the same.

This way of thinking valorizes what we might call "otherness-truth". For this way of thinking, truth, insofar as there is such a thing, is always that which is left over when everything has been said, that which cannot be directly signified. I know of nowhere where this approach to truth is more crisply or lucidly articulated than in Julia Kristeva's rhetorical question in *Des Chinoises*: "s'il n'y a pas d'‘absolu', qu'est-ce qu'une vérité sinon le non-dit du dit",[8] whether the unspoken is Freudian, or the real that escapes the symbolic, or absolute justice or hospitality, if there is such a thing. Within this paradigm, truth is whatever remains beyond the grasp of our concepts and articulations, other to the reductive grasp of language or other categorising systems.

In the early 2000s, however, the tide began to turn 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 *L'Éthique*, undergirded by the much more substantial *L'Être et l'événement* and supplemented latterly by *Logiques des mondes*.[9] Where the philosophers of difference see alterity as the key to understanding the nature of truth, Badiou argues that the positive valorization of alterity and difference makes truths impossible.

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[6] Vincent Descombes, *Le Même et l'autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)* (Paris: Minuit, 1979). Translated as *Modern French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[7] Descombes, *Le Même et l'autre*, p. 129.

[8] In context, the claim reads:

> Il n'y a pas de temps sans le discours. Donc, il n'y a pas de temps sans le père. Le Père, c'est d'ailleurs cela : signe et temps. On comprend alors que ce que le père ne dit pas de l'inconscient, ce que le signe et le temps répriment des pulsions, apparait comme leur *vérité* (s'il n'y a pas d'‘‘absolu", qu'est-ce qu'une vérité sinon le non-dit du dit), et que cette vérité ne peut être invaginée que comme une femme. Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises* (Paris: Éditions des Femmes, 1974), p. 40.

[9] Alain Badiou, *L'Ethique: essai sur la conscience du mal* (Paris: Hatier, 1998, second edition with Caen: Nous, 2003) – references below are to the 2003 edition; *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1958); *Logiques des mondes* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

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 than they realize: "L'altérité infinie est tout simplement ce qu'il y a",[10] he insists, and "Il y a autant de différence entre, disons, un paysan chinois et un jeune cadre norvégien qu'entre moi-même et n'importe qui – y compris moi-même. Autant, mais donc aussi ni plus ni moins."[11] For Badiou, then, otherness is neither philosophically interesting nor ethically privileged. His own proposal is to invert the ethical hierarchy of sameness and otherness: "toute la prédication éthique sur l'autre et sa 'reconnaissance' doit être purement et simplement abandonnée".[12]

All the philosophical interest, and indeed the ethical import, for Badiou is not on the side of the other but on the side of the same, where the same is understood not as what is but as "ce qui advient" in a truth.[13] This means that "Il n'y a d'éthique que des vérités. Ou plus précisément : il n'y a que l'éthique des processus de vérité, du labeur qui fait advenir en ce monde quelques vérités."[14] In stark contrast to the otherness-truth sketched above, Badiou's ethics of truths is "indifférente aux différences":[15] truth is what is held in common by those who are held by it, the universal ideal of a popular revolutionary movement or of an artistic style. So, as Badiou memorably notes, the truth has no dreadlocks.[16] As opposed to the otherness-truth of the Tel Quel thinkers, we can characterize Badiou's approach as a plea for sameness-truth: truth as that which is constant across differences, and which renders them irrelevant.

So today we are faced, it would appear, with two implacably opposed philosophies, attendant ethics, and notions of truth. On the one hand we have the various philosophers of difference – Deleuze, Kristeva, Derrida, Nancy, Levinas and others – who, each in their own way, find truth in alterity, positively code that alterity and give it a prominent place in their ethical thought. And on the other hand there is Badiou's philosophy of the same, for which it is sameness, not alterity, that is associated with truths and that carries a positive ethical charge.

It is not my purpose here to arbitrate between these two positions. Indeed, I intend to argue that to seek to do so would risk missing something very significant that they share, something even more important than their differences. What Badiou and his antagonists have in common is the assumption that the division between sameness and otherness can be made to hold in the first place, and that the two terms can unproblematically receive contrasting ethical valorisations. In fact,

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[10] Badiou, *L'Ethique*, p. 43, AB's emphasis.
[11] Badiou, *L'Éthique*, p. 44, AB's emphasis.
[12] Badiou, *L'Éthique*, p. 43.
[13] Badiou, *L'Éthique*, p. 46.
[14] Badiou, *L'Éthique*, p. 47.
[15] Badiou, *L'Éthique*, p. 46.
[16] Alain Badiou, "Behind the Sacred Law, There is Fear", IslamOnline.net, 3 March 2004. Available at http://www.lacan.com/islbad.htm. Accessed August 2017.

there is a series of striking similarities between otherness-truth and sameness-truth. Badiou's own valorisation of sameness over a ubiquitous and uninteresting infinite difference does not in fact challenge the dichotomy of sameness and alterity upon which the philosophies of otherness rely. For Badiou, otherness is banal, trivial and "tout simplement ce qu'il y a",[17] in the same way that, for the philosophers of alterity, the reduction of the other to the same in Aristotelian logic, in language and in politics is ubiquitous and simply "what there is".

Badiou and his adversaries also share a concept of absolute or infinite alterity, a radical otherness expressed famously by Derrida in the phrase "tout autre est tout autre": every other is wholly other.[18] Once again, the two positions have in common the assumption that either sameness or otherness (but not both) can carry a preeminent positive ethical value. Finally, just as the philosophers of otherness claim that alterity is only ever a heartbeat or an ill-advised stroke of the pen away from being reduced to the same, for Badiou truths require their subject to maintain a vigilant, ongoing fidelity if they are not to be dissolved into the endless circulation of differing opinions. So Badiou's disagreement with otherness-truth only makes sense in the context of the ample common ground he shares with it.

Furthermore – and with this we circle back to this article's opening concerns – neither otherness-truth nor sameness-truth are supple enough to engage with something as complex as FFS. The two speed gearbox of sameness and otherness does not wield enough nuance to do justice to this diverse and complex area. FFS scholars are not the same as each other, but neither are we wholly other either. We do not all deal in the same truths: what we call truth in linguistics, for example, is not the same as what we call truth in politics, or literature, or film studies, or history. And yet the truths that circulate in and sometimes across our various methodologies are not absolutely other to each other either; they can be connected in sometimes very complex and painstaking ways. So how might we think about FFS, or about anything else for that matter, in a way that reduces neither to otherness-truth nor to sameness-truth?

Michel Serres: chiral truth

In order to break the impasse of sameness-truth and otherness-truth, let us turn to the work of Michel Serres. Serres – as many in the Australian FFS community will know from his fondly remembered visit down under in July and August 1998, as well as from his inimitable writing itself – is a thinker of incredible novelty and fecundity, striking a genuinely distinctive philosophical melody amid a contemporary cacophony of minor variations on a small number of philosophical themes. Serres was writing against the linguistic turn at the height of the linguistic

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[17] Badiou, *L'Éthique*, p. 43.
[18] See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), p. 110.

turn,[19] and he pre-empted by decades some of the most important current international trends, notably eco-philosophy, object oriented thought and the new materialisms,[20] though, for reasons I have reflected on elsewhere,[21] he has never received the same attention as other philosophers of his generation such as Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault.

Born in 1930 in Agen, in the rural Aquitaine area of south-west France, Serres passed through the École Navale in 1949 but resigned from the navy for reasons of conscience and in 1950 entered the École Normale Supérieure, rue d'Ulm. He was classmates with Jacques Derrida, with whom he went on a skiing holiday in 1953, where Derrida met his future wife Marguerite. At the ENS Serres studied mathematics, writing his major thesis on Leibniz. From 1958 to 1968 he lectured at Clermont-Ferrand where he was a friend and colleague of Foucault at the time the latter was working on *Les Mots et les choses*. In 1967 he participated alongside Alain Badiou in a three-part television series entitled "Modèle et structure",[22] and in 1968–9 he took up a teaching post at the newly founded experimental university in Vincennes, where he was succeeded by Gilles Deleuze, later remarking in an interview that he counted Deleuze as his best friend.[23] He is the author of over fifty books to date, including two best-sellers (on the technology of millennials and on the financial crisis of 2008)[24] and has his own weekly radio show on Radio France's *France Info* station: "Le sens de l'info", which appeared weekly from 2002 to 2018. In 1990 he was elected to the Académie française, fauteuil d'Edgar Faure (18ᵉ fauteuil), and he was the first *académicien* who, true to his pacifist convictions, refused to wear the ceremonial sword. Now in his eighty-ninth year, he is still writing today, reliably publishing one to two books a year. So Serres is himself both cut from a quintessentially traditional cloth – ENS, Académie française – and also marginal in his generation, both geographically, for he has always retained an affection for the Garonne region, never succumbing to the common fetishism of Paris, and also intellectually, writing in ways orthogonal to the intellectual breaking waves of the 1960s–1990s.

The reason why I turn to Michel Serres in this argument is that he offers us a

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[19] See Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985).

[20] For a more detailed analysis of Serres's prescient contributions to these debates, see my forthcoming *Michel Serres: Figures of Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[21] See my paper *Michel Serres Today*, available at https://monash.academia.edu/ChristopherWatkin.

[22] Alain Badiou, Michel Serres and Jean Fléchet, *Modèle et structure : Michel Serres et Alain Badiou s'entretiennent* (IPN : 1978). Transcript available at http://www.cndp.fr/media-sceren/DocumentsAccompagnement/modele_et_structure.pdf.

[23] See the transcript of an interview with Hari Kunzru, 10 January 1995, available at http://www.harikunzru.com/michel-serres-interview-1995/.

[24] Michel Serres, *Petite Poucette* (Paris: Éditions le Pommier, 2012); *Temps des Crises* (Paris: Éditions le Pommier, 2009).

strikingly different way of thinking about sameness and alterity, a way that is more amenable to understanding and being able to articulate the complex identity of something like FFS. He resists both the sameness and otherness paradigms, which he would consider equally reductive: it is not the case that every other is wholly other, nor that a universal truth makes differences irrelevant. In a Leibnizian spirit he insists that everything is related, though not straightforwardly so, elaborating an account of truth that privileges neither alterity nor identity but thinks rather in terms of chirality, the property of two objects which have reflective symmetry but which cannot be superimposed one on top of the other, such as almost all amino acids and our left and right hands.

Two chiral structures are at the same time quite opposite and quite identical[25] such that, as Serres puts it, the "same" and "other" have become twins.[26] The logic of antithesis and the lexicon of identity and difference are wholly inadequate to describe this relation neither of simple identity nor of straightforward alterity, a relation which Serres dubs a "symétrie non-symétrique"[27] and "l'altérité la plus raffinée".[28] Chirality resolves neither, in the final analysis, to simple identity nor to radical alterity, nor again to any simple mixture of the two. In fact, it precedes the dichotomy between identity and alterity. Take the example of handedness. A left-hander himself, Serres insists that sinistrality is not the opposite of dextrality, nor its "other", and still less is it the "same" as right-handedness, as if it were interchangeable with it as its equal. The left-hander is opposed to the right-hander while in a way remaining identical with them,[29] 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. The left-handed person cannot be thought of as the equal and opposite of the right-hander. Forced to adapt to a world of objects designed around the right-handed user, the left-hander develops capacities and makes adjustments of which the right-hander knows nothing.

This does not mean, however, that the left-hander is simply ambidextrous or that she represents some Hegelian sublation of sinistrality and dextrality:

> Le gaucher dit contrarié devient-il ambidextre ? Non, plutôt un corps croisé, comme une chimère : resté gaucher pour le ciseau, le marteau, la faux, le fleuret, le ballon, la raquette, pour le geste expressif sinon pour la société – ici, le corps – , il n'a jamais cessé d'appartenir à la minorité maladroite, sinistre, prétend le latin – vive la langue grecque qui la dit aristocrate ! Mais droitier pour la plume et pour la fourchette, il serre la bonne main après la

[25] Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite : Sarrasine sculpteur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 74.
[26] Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, p. 71.
[27] Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, p. 70.
[28] Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, p. 70. Serres makes a similar argument about bilingualism in *Le Tiers-Instruit* (Paris: Éditions François Bourin), p. 6.
[29] Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite*, p. 74.

présentation – voici l'âme – ; bien élevé pour la vie publique, mais gaucher pour la caresse et dans la vie privée. A ces organismes complets les mains pleines.[30]

There remains an unrecuperated remainder in the left-hander's awkwardness and elaborate behavioural compensations, and yet Serres can also insist that only the thwarted left-hander makes for fulfilment and unity because only they are forced outside of their corporeal comfort zone to relativize their own position and experience a world they know was not made for them, and of which their experience is one possibility among others. Perfect ambidextrality, in fact, would fail to yield this sort of fulfilment that comes from being able to see beyond one's own habits and preferences.

It is illuminating to reflect upon this complex account of sinistrality in relation to the experience of moving out of one's own comfort zone to learn a second or third foreign language and culture. In Mary Louise Pratt's influential formulation, learning a modern foreign language is about "knowing languages and knowing the world through languages".[31] One of the implications of this richly dense formula is that learning a second or third language and culture is unique among university subjects. It cannot be reduced to a "what", to a body of knowledge or set of processes, insights, facts, skills or codes. A language and culture are not a "what", an object of study, but "how" we access any object of study whatsoever. Languages aside, as a general rule whatever subject I study at an Anglophone university I study in English, even if within that subject I am required to learn another natural or artificial language. In other words, my fundamental mode of accessing the world is not challenged and put into question in the learning of those subjects in the way it is when I learn a modern foreign language in the target language. In the latter case, my way of engaging with the world itself is at stake and I am challenged – though of course it is a challenge I can refuse – to bring more of myself to my studies, to open more of myself to questioning, to become more aware of the modalities and contingencies of the way I understand myself and the way I relate to the world around me, and to do so at a more intimate level than if the primacy of my first language remains unchallenged.

These concerns of learning – and learning in – a second or third language are very keenly felt by Serres himself, as he attests in "My Mother Tongue, My Paternal Languages", originally given as an address at the conference "Lost Empire: France and Its Other Worlds", held at Stanford University in April 2006.[32] In this

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[30] Serres, *Le Tiers-Instruit*, pp. 35–36.

[31] Mary Louise Pratt, "Building a new public idea about language", *Profession* (2003), 110–119 (p. 112).

[32] Michel Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue, My Paternal Languages", in Elisabeth Mudimbye-Boyi (ed.), *Empire Lost: France and its Other Worlds* (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), 197–206. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to

address he explains that his mother tongue is not French at all but the "Occitan, Gascon"[33] spoken in the family home during his childhood in Agen. Serres's youth and education were dogged by linguistic prejudice. He was mocked at the naval academy for the way in which he pronounced the end of the words "trente" and "quarante" in a hearing test;[34] though he graduated *2ᵉ ex aequo* in his cohort for the *agrégation de philosophie* in 1955, he was not put forward for a teaching post in much of France on account of the difficulty the students would be assumed to have in understanding him,[35] and he witnesses to his frustration at trying to make himself understood when asking for "un aller-retour Bois-Colombes" at a Parisian train station.[36] This is what we might call Serres's linguistic sinistrality, which gives rise to his feeling of being an "interior Francophone"[37] who spoke (and would still speak, could anyone understand him) a "gascon francophonie",[38] the linguistic equivalent of the thwarted left-hander's accommodation to the dominant chirality.

Serres is acutely aware of the asymmetry and power dynamics at play even in the study and "protection" of "endangered" languages, and he impishly describes how

> [o]n the day that the university set aside funds for the participant-observer study of my ruined Occitan culture, I began to dream, with some vengefulness, I admit, of gathering a team of Pyrenean shepherds who would take the train for Paris and study the customs of the professors of the Collège de France, their cuisine (raw or cooked?), and their sexual habits.[39]

He is also painfully aware of the prejudices of institutions charged with the preservation and development of language. How can it be, for example, that the word *"adischats"*, spoken by six million French people as a way of taking leave of each other, finds no place in the *Dictionnaire Robert* and is considered among "provincial regionalisms, archaic and obsolete",[40] while faux Anglicisms such as "winglet" easily find their place there? The increasing insinuation of English into the *Robert* is for Serres a move in which we see the biter bit, where even the French language, dominant in relation to regional dialects and accents, is under threat now from "the one exclusive communicative idiom" of English.[41] The national company which forced the closure of the local firm is now under threat from the multi-national corporation.

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this address.
  [33] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 197.
  [34] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 199.
  [35] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 199.
  [36] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 200.
  [37] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 202.
  [38] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 206.
  [39] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 201.
  [40] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 203.
  [41] Serres, "Conclusion: My Mother Tongue", p. 204.

Serres, then, is closer to the community of learners of French as a foreign language than we might otherwise think, and in particular he is close to those with experience of being a linguistic minority within a dominant system, whether regional languages in France, Creole speakers in France's DOM-TOM, First Nations' languages in Canada, Aboriginal languages in Australia, or indeed the experience of students, both domestic and international, in an Anglophone university context, whose first language is not English. The experience of these and other groups of being forced to learn a dominant language parallels Serres's own linguistic sinistrality.

So as we colleagues teaching in FFS departments coax, encourage and perhaps from time to time even force our students to inhabit a language and culture that sit sometimes slightly and sometimes radically askance their comfortable patterns of thought and expression, what we are doing is drawing them into a linguistico-cultural sinistrality which is, globally speaking, a majority experience of multilingualism. We invite them to take what, for now, is the hard way round for them, to accommodate to a world that – as some of them may perhaps be discovering for the first time – is not made for them. It is an experience of decentring and a relativizing of one's own way of being in the world that the left-hander knows all too well.

Similarly, in our own work within the field of FFS we are rarely dealing with customary approaches to our objects of study. In my own research, for an academy that still all too often equates Anglophone philosophy with philosophy *tout court*, and still sometimes harbours ideas of French language philosophy that, in other non-philosophical contexts, would attract accusations of xenophobia, it is hard not to be aware of one's disciplinary left-handedness. Furthermore, for FFS as for the left-handed person, sinistrality is not the equal and opposite of dextrality. To inhabit and know the world through a second language is not to be monolingual twice, but neither is it radically other to a monolingual mindset. As we FFS scholars know, it can change and relativize one's understanding of one's first language and culture so that, in the words of T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding", "the end of all our exploring" may well "be to arrive where we started | And know the place for the first time".[42]

French and Francophone Studies, pantasms, and North-West passages

Learning a second language and culture (as opposed to being raised bilingually, which brings its own, different dynamics and challenges) makes left-handers of us and of our students, and does so in a way that can resolve neither to sameness nor otherness. But what about our various disciplinary approaches, methods and objects of study? How can Serres help us to think how these all cohere into the field we call "French and Francophone Studies"? Serres's own example is impressive:

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[42] T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 239–242.

with *licence* degrees in mathematics, letters and philosophy from the ENS and an *agrégation* in philosophy, his own qualifications are genuinely cross-disciplinary. His writing draws knowledgeably on areas as varied as information theory, fluid dynamics, Archimedean and set theoretical mathematics, Platonic dialogue, ecology and topology, and on figures as diverse as Leibniz, Foucault, Comte, Zola, Turner, Balzac, La Fontaine, Lucretius and Molière.

The reader of Michel Serres's writing is struck by how he has developed an idiom that can move – to take one example – from animal behaviour through ancient history to philosophy of language in a matter of paragraphs.[43] As he forges connections between such areas, he is scrupulous to avoid any master discourse. There is no one discipline or one vocabulary to rule them all, no one mode of expression that plays the role of a degree-zero discourse, through which all other disciplinary approaches are to be viewed and against which they are to be judged:

> Non, je ne projette pas une langue sur l'autre, une physique sur l'histoire, une science exacte sur une science humaine, je tente seulement de parler à plusieurs voix. Je tente de penser la multiplicité dans sa différence et ses fluctuations. Je suis perdu, sans lieu, au beau milieu du passage du Nord-Ouest, dans un état intermédiaire entre les sciences, dans la distribution fractale et multiple, de terres, d'eau, de glace éparse, de banquise.[44]

I propose to call what Serres is trying to avoid here a "pantasm", from the Greek *panta*: "all things" or "everything".[45] It is a pantasm, for example, to claim that "everything is fundamentally economic and, in the final analysis, can be adequately explained only in economic terms", or "everything is fundamentally psychoanalytic and can be adequately explained, in the final analysis, only in psychoanalytic terms", and so on. It is the dominance of one discipline or approach over all the others, acting as a yardstick and the final court of arbitration for all other discourses. If "to the person with a hammer, everything is a nail", then to a literary pantasm, everything is a text, and to an economic pantasm, the base is always economic and the superstructure always derives from it.

How does FFS sit in relation to pantasms and Serres's resistance to them? The first thing to note is that FFS itself is not a pantasm. FFS does not claim that "everything is" anything. And yet, it still manages to travel between disparate disciplines, methodologies and approaches. It does so not in an imperial, totalizing and reductive way, but in terms of speaking in what Serres calls "multiple voices".

Pantasms perform a Platonic gesture. They insist that the truth or essence of a thing is not evident in the thing itself but must be sought in some discourse that

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[43] This example is taken from the opening paragraphs of *Rome : Le livre des fondations* (Paris: Hachette, 1983).

[44] Serres, *Rome*, p. 309.

[45] See my discussion of the pantasm at https://christopherwatkin.com/2013/10/07/the-pantasm-heraclitus-michel-serres-and-the-changeux-ricoeur-exchange-on-naming-the-human/.

comes to dominate it: something may look like a war, but it was really all about stimulating the economy; it may look like a novel, but we can only unlock its true meaning if we turn to cognitive science. When sameness and otherness philosophies think the relation between the singular and the universal, they tend to 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 or the universal as what he calls an "inflated local",[46] and such an approach always struggles to grasp the universal. For Serres himself, by contrast, the path from the local to the global knows of no qualitative leap: the global is not a pantasm but a network of localities, not something under which the local can be subsumed or into which it can be incorporated. The global is arrived at incrementally, asymptotically, and not in a Platonic leap.

The principle that characterizes Serres's position at this point, and that distinguishes it both from otherness and sameness philosophies, is summed up in a phrase 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 in turn quotes Nolant de Fatouville's Commedia dell'Arte play *Arlequin, Empereur dans la lune* (1693).[47] Given the recurrent appearances of 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 of the lunar world he has visited, "c'est partout et toujours comme chez nous, aux degrés de grandeur et de perfection près".[48] What a disappointment to the gathered scholars, itching as they were to hear of the exotic, the unheard-of, the Other. To say that even the most glamorously distant location is "partout et toujours comme chez nous" is to claim that all alterity is also sameness.

Harlequin is then 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!"[49] Blank, all-white Pierrot now stands in the place of the

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[46] Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), pp. 338–339.

47 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften von G. W. Lezbniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols (Berlin, 1875–1880), VI, p. 548.

[48] Michel Serres, *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), p. 1. The moment is also referenced in *La Traduction : Hermès III* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), pp. 132, 143; *Le Tiers-Instruit*, p. 227, *Le Gaucher Boiteux : puissance de la pensée* (Paris: Éditions le Pommier, 2015), p. 57; *Rome*, p. 199.

[49] Serres, *Le Tiers-Instruit*, p. 17.

multi-colored, determinate, local Harlequin. Serres's point is a chromatic one: blank, universal whiteness is not composed of an absence of colour 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. They are not related, however, in any straightforward way, but by what Serres calls North-West passages, named after the winding and treacherous sea route from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans between Greenland and Canada. It is a real connection, but it is not a straightforwardly linear one.

It is in terms of this local, painstaking navigation that Serres works through what it means to engage in cross-disciplinary study. Traversing the borders between academic disciplines cannot be done in a simple, off-the-shelf manner, but must proceed through a careful, labyrinthine navigation of the complex and unique relations between different fields. It takes time, flexibility and sensitivity. Finding a way through the North-West passage is not general and systematic but each time bespoke, not accomplished in a puff of abstraction but by establishing a careful series of local connections:

> [L]e passage est rare et resserre […] Des sciences humaines aux sciences exactes, ou inversement, le chemin ne traverse pas un espace homogène et vide. La métaphore de cet archipel extraordinairement compliqué du Grand Nord canadien, encombré le plus souvent de glaces, est exacte. Le plus souvent, le passage est fermé, soit par terres, soit par glaces, soit aussi parce qu'on se perd. Et si le passage est ouvert, c'est le long d'un chemin difficile à prévoir. Et singulier, le plus souvent.[50]

Serres characterizes his own work with the image of an eighteenth century salon, bringing the disciplines together, not like a modern university, dividing them and often making them compete with each other.[51] It does not seek a system but a synthesis.[52]

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[50] Michel Serres, *Hermès V : Le Passage du Nord-Ouest* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 18.

[51] Raoul Mortley (ed.), *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1991). Electronic version available at https://www.epublications.bond.edu.au/french_philosophers/4.

[52] Perhaps surprisingly for scholars of modern French thought familiar with the work of Deleuze and Derrida, Serres does not shy away from the term "synthesis" to describe the goal of philosophy (Mortley [ed.], *French Philosophers in Conversation*, p. 53), of his own "procedural" style of thought (*Éloge de la philosophie en langue française* [Paris: Fayard, 1995], p. 239), or of the characters he invents throughout his work (*Le Gaucher boiteux*, p. 116). He insists that, although the relations he traces do not form a systematic or methodological unity, they do form a synthesis (Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Éclaircissements. Cinq entretiens avec Bruno Latour* [Paris: Éditions François Bourin, 1992], p. 150). In short, for Serres "[i]l ne vaut pas la peine d'entrer, jeune, en philosophie, si on n'a pas l'espoir, le projet ou le rêve, de tenter un jour la synthèse" (*Hermès V : Le Passage du Nord-Ouest*, p. 24). For Serres, as opposed for example to the Deleuze and Guattari of *Mille plateaux*, "system" is the term identified with rigidity and closure, and "synthesis" describes dynamic networks of isomorphic relations open

How might all this help us think about French and Francophone Studies? From the point of view of our institutional silos, FFS is rarely adequately understood, and can all too easily be superficially construed as divided and eclectic, as if cross-disciplinarity were somehow a weakness. But Serres helps us understand that this is a naïve view, a view that refuses to take into account how cross-disciplinary approaches are necessary to respond to many of our most pressing current problems. Serres and Bruno Latour after him have insisted on the fact that the challenges we face today, such as climate change, social cohesion and inequality, are complex and cross many disciplinary approaches, and that the best – indeed the only effective – responses to those questions are similarly multi-disciplinary:

> La sagesse donne l'aune de mesure. La crainte de la solution unitaire fait le commencement de la sagesse. Aucune solution ne constitue la seule solution : ni telle religion, ni telle politique, ni telle science. Le seul espoir reste que cette dernière puisse apprendre une sagesse tolérante que les autres instances n'ont jamais su vraiment apprendre et nous évite un monde uni, follement logique, rationnellement tragique.[53]

What great news this is for FFS scholars: we have no need to go outside the bounds of this rich tapestry of approaches characterized as "French and Francophone Studies" in order to be thoroughly immersed in a multi-disciplinary community of researchers who are nevertheless held together by an ever-changing set of North-West passages that never cohere into a master discourse. If monolingualism is the illiteracy of the twenty-first century, then mono-disciplinarity is its parochialism.

Serres's appeal to the salon as a metaphor of his own work draws our attention to one further aspect of this cross-disciplinary enterprise he describes: there is something characteristically French about it. While by no means exclusively French, the phenomenon of the literary or cultural salon has a fine French heritage from the eighteenth century onwards. In addition, France has more than its share of cross-disciplinary authors. We might think of Zola, of Pascal, of Comte, or of Jules Verne, to all of whom Serres has devoted extended studies, or of Diderot or Montaigne, whom he also discusses. Serres designates such authors as those who write with two hands, writers of texts that transgress customary disciplinary boundaries. They are writers of "textes mélangés", authors like Montaigne who is "plus profond qu'il ne le laisse accroire ou que nous l'avons laissé dire et ouï dire", precisely because of his ability to move effortlessly from one domain to another, from the local to the global, from the frivolous to the profound and back again.[54]

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to transformation, reconfiguration and expansion.
[53] Serres, *Le Tiers-instruit*, p. 188.
[54] Michel Serres, *Genèse* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), p. 61.

Conclusion

If, then, we could approach FFS as a Martian anthropologist, insouciant of its genesis, simply seeking to understand what the term designates, what might we conclude? One of our first observations, I think, would be that, in contrast to most non-language academic areas of study, FFS is owned by no dominant methodology, vocabulary, personality or object. And that is both precious, and rare. What this means for FFS scholars is that we are all, to some extent, exiles and guests in FFS. We are all immigrants here: immigrants from linguistics, from philosophy, from literary studies and elsewhere… this is a glorious exilic community bubbling over with cross-disciplinary ferment and speaking multiple voices. We sit askance and athwart the academic disciplinary silos; we trouble the neat compartments and the hegemonic discourses of our universities.

And what of FFS itself? It is emphatically not a pantasm, trying desperately to find the Platonic essence of Frenchness in its various objects of study. Serres would encourage us, in fact, not to see it as a series of objects of study at all, but as a network of North-West passages between different matters of concern. As such, it is a verbal rather than a nominal discipline, not an object but a way of relating. This is important, I think, because it means that we FFS scholars do not need to justify the coherence of our discipline in terms of defining what "Frenchness" is or – even worse – what it ought to be. What if someone were to ask: "what is particularly French about this set of relations you say characterizes FFS?" The answer is simple: the set of relations itself is what is particular to FFS. There is no meta-discourse to reconcile the rich proliferation of North-West passages in an over-arching concept, just as there is no single discourse or approach that can do justice to the French and Francophone world. There is no Platonic essence that transcends the relations that comprise FFS. There is no static idea of Frenchness that includes one relation and excludes others.

Does this mean that anything at all can be included in FFS? Not at all, just as the North-West passage cannot be imagined to connect any place whatsoever with any other, or take any old route to get there. There are many ways of tracing North-West passages: migration of people, of ideas, of language, economic relations, cultural relations, linguistic relations and others, but these routes are by no means arbitrary.

Serres issues a series of particularly pertinent invitations and challenges to a FFS community in an English-dominant country. He challenges us to understand FFS neither as a self-identical whole according to the paradigm of sameness-truth, nor as a dislocated collocation of singular alterities following the paradigm of otherness-truth, but as a set of bespoke relationships composing an ever-shifting de-centred cross-disciplinary conversation. Serres invites us to embrace and exploit our sinistrality, to recognize the benefit, both for ourselves and our students, of being linguistically, culturally and methodologically adaptive and, at least at first, constructively maladroit. He invites us to find the most unlikely North-West

passages between our various concerns and projects of research, to cross our disciplinary boundaries and reach beyond our scholarly comfort zones. It is a rare privilege afforded by a field of research such as ours to take advantage of its cross-disciplinary nature and be disciplinarily adventurous, engaging with concerns and approaches outside our own immediate projects and striking up conversations with those who work in disciplines other than our own. Finally, Serres would invite us, I think, as we journey beyond our disciplinary comfort zones, and as we search out those winding North-West passages, to seek ways to bring those new complementarities to bear on the pressing contemporary problems that can only adequately be addressed in such a multidisciplinary way. FFS is irreducibly, stubbornly, implacably, gloriously cross-disciplinary: a microcosm not, sadly, of what the university is, but of what the university could, and perhaps should, be.

Monash University