

**Part IV**  
**Twentieth-Century Ecological Thought**



Teófilo Sanz

## Marguerite Yourcenar's Ecological Thinking: Wilderness, Place-Connectedness, Biocentrism, and an Ethic of Care

**Abstract:** In recent years, literary critics in the francophone world have attempted to develop their own ecocritical theory as a counterpoint to the enormous weight of anglophone studies in the field, and the emergence of *écopoétique* [ecopoetics] is a response to ecocriticism's supposed lack of attention to a text's formal and aesthetic elements. This chapter reflects on the potential of a specifically francophone ecocriticism based on non-anthropocentric ethical values. Twentieth-century writer Marguerite Yourcenar always claimed that ecology was a main concern for her, and this chapter uses an ecocritical approach to consider her relationship with nature. Studying in particular her fictional novel *Un homme obscur* [*An Obscure Man*], and taking into account her autobiographical work and paratexts, this chapter analyses the role of the natural environment in the literary production of the first female writer accepted into the *Académie française* [French Academy]. My overview shows the rich variety of ecocritical themes in Yourcenar's work: wilderness, place-connectedness, biocentrism, and an ethics of care. Yourcenar's texts, which evoke remarkable sensitivity and commitment to animals and the planet, are proof that her literary aesthetic goes hand-in-hand with an environmental commitment, giving a voice to what French philosopher Michel Serres calls *Biogée* – all life on Earth.

The collective volume *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies* (2012), edited by Greg Garrard, offers a broad panorama of ecocritical theory and its innovative results. Multiple discourses and aspects of reality are implicated that allow us to reconceptualise the world: literature, postcolonial theory, globalisation, post-humanism, climate change, new media, deconstructionism, film, etc. The most important thing, as Richard Kerridge writes, is that an ecocritical approach be guided by the principle of connections between humans and the non-human world.<sup>1</sup>

Adopting a broad framework that takes into account various ecocritical hypotheses, I will explore the ways in which the ethics and ecological poetics of Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–87) can be read in relation to the natural

---

1 Richard Kerridge, 'Ecocriticism and the Mission of "English"', in *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*, ed. by G. Garrard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 11–23 (12–13).

environment. Ecology is indubitably present in the reader's expectations of Yourcenar's work, since she pioneeringly alerts us to catastrophes related to the deterioration of our planet. A collection such as *Marguerite Yourcenar y la ecología* [*Marguerite Yourcenar and Ecology*] (2007), edited by Andrea Padilla and Vicente Torres, is a valuable tool for understanding the scope of the author's ecological commitment. As Michèle Goslar writes in her contribution to the volume,

Si lo político puede ser definido como voluntad de incidir en el comportamiento de un grupo de individuos, puede decirse entonces que la preocupación constante de Marguerite Yourcenar por el porvenir de los animales y la naturaleza fue de carácter político. Esta preocupación por el respeto de la vida en todas sus formas se manifestó desde sus primeros escritos y en todos los géneros que cultivó: novela y poesía, teatro y ensayos, traducciones y discursos, entrevistas y correspondencia.<sup>2</sup>

[If the political can be defined as a willingness to affect the behaviour of a group of individuals, it can thus be said that Marguerite Yourcenar's constant concern for the future of animals and nature was of a political nature. This concern for respecting life in all its forms manifested itself beginning with her first writings, and in all the genres that she cultivated: novels and poetry, theatre and essays, translations and discourses, interviews and correspondence.]

Another broad anthology about Yourcenar's ecological thinking, entitled 'Marguerite Yourcenar et l'écologie [Marguerite Yourcenar and Ecology]', was published by the Centre International de Documentation Marguerite Yourcenar (CIDMY) in 1990.<sup>3</sup> An ecocritical approach to Yourcenar's œuvre reveals that, in the majority of her works, there is a chance for real compromise with respect to Nature and the living beings – human animals and non-human animals – inhabiting it. Yourcenar's *Un homme obscur* [*An Obscure Man*] (1981) offers a vision of nature conveyed through a stark aesthetic of writing that can be studied from an ecopoetic

## An ecocritical approach to Marguerite Yourcenar

Marguerite Yourcenar was the first woman to hold a position in the *Académie française* [French Academy]. Nominated by Jean d'Ormesson, her appointment took place in 1981, not without reticence on the part of some of *les immortels* [the immortals], many of whom – including Claude Lévi-Strauss – strongly opposed a woman entering into the exclusive body. Renowned anthropologist Lévi-Strauss defended his opposition with the argument that ‘on ne change pas les règles de la tribu [you don't change the rules of the tribe]’.<sup>4</sup>

Yourcenar was a writer committed to ecological matters. She expressed her support for the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Animals, proclaimed by the International League of Animal Rights in 1978, and signed at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. She maintained that ecology was a part of her life, and one of her main concerns. In the chapter ‘Un écrivain dans le siècle [A Writer of the Times]’ in *Les Yeux ouverts* [*Open Eyes*], she responds to Matthieu Galey's questions about ecology by referring to the sombre state of affairs depicted by some thinkers, such as geographer Franz Schrader, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yourcenar predicts that all the catastrophes foreseen at that time will eventually turn out even worse, given that the panorama had become more terrifying by the end of the century due to acid rain, the pollution of rivers and seas with chemical and atomic residues, the disappearance of thousands of animal species, the generalised use of pesticides, oil spills, destruction of the ozone layer, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Yourcenar continually participated in public activities with associations aimed at the defence of the planet. At eighty-four years old, one month before her death, she travelled to Laval University in Canada to give her penultimate speech, ‘Si nous voulons encore essayer de sauver la terre [If We Still Want to Try to Save the Earth]’, in which she spoke of ‘cette espèce d'égarement de la conscience humaine [this kind of confusion of human conscience]’, and emphasised that ‘la formule “Terre des hommes” est extrêmement dangereuse. La Terre appartient à tous les vivants et nous déperirons avec eux et avec elle [the formula “Earth of men” is

---

4 Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Josyane Savigneau, *Marguerite Yourcenar: l'invention d'une vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 406; translated in Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey, ‘Introduction: Part I’, in *Subversive Subjects: Reading Marguerite Yourcenar*, ed. by J. H. Sarnecki and I. Majer O'Sickey (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 11–16 (12).

5 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts: entretiens avec Matthieu Galey* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1980), 293–4.

extremely dangerous. The Earth belongs to all living beings, and we will perish with them and with it].<sup>6</sup> This conviction is found in the worlds of her literary fiction, in her essays and interviews, and in her extensive autobiographical work, in which she alludes to her fundamental concerns: ecological problems, wars, racism, the ivory trade, factory farms, the leather industry, seal hunting, vivisection, and hunting. I will analyse Yourcenar's work from an ecocritical perspective, mainly focussing on *Un homme obscur*, her last novel, and occasionally referring to her other writings, fictional and factual.

### Nature and place-connectedness

First of all, we must ask what role nature plays in the author's aesthetics. Certainly, it is not a Romantic idea of nature that predominates in Yourcenar's writing; she distances herself from Old World discourses when referring to landscapes.<sup>7</sup> Yourcenar avoids European idyllic types of narration that emphasise the beauty of the landscape in tandem with the feelings of a character afflicted by misery. We do not find representations of Nature as mere scenery or a projection of human moods, whereby a domesticated landscape is portrayed as an ideal refuge and a propitious distraction from the hardships of the Romantics. By contrast, Yourcenar adopts the notion of 'wilderness', of nature uncontaminated by civilisation. This is evident in *Un homme obscur*, which can be considered her ecological testament.

Set in the seventeenth century, the novella narrates the story of Nathanaël, a young Englishman who is sensitive and sickly, who works on a boat roaming the seas at the apogee of the Cartesian era. During his voyages, Nathanaël faces the reality of life and the atrocities of the world. He symbolises naturalness and sensibility. The experience of the journey allows him to discover the unmarred, splendid nature of North America. This world is much more than background scenery for the hero; it is a presence with its own reality. Nathanaël is in awe of this wild nature, and from the ship he perceives coasts fringed by impenetrable forests that bring to mind his reading of Virgil's descriptions of forests at the edge of sanctuaries. At the end of the story, Nathanaël's fusion with Nature becomes complete.

---

6 Marguerite Yourcenar, 'Le Droit à la qualité de l'environnement: un droit en devenir, un droit à définir', *Centre International de Documentation Marguerite Yourcenar* (30 September 1987), <[http://www.cidmy.be/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=43:conference-2&catid=4:discours-conferences&Itemid=34](http://www.cidmy.be/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=43:conference-2&catid=4:discours-conferences&Itemid=34)> [accessed 23 May 2016].

7 Teófilo Sanz, 'L'Engagement écologique de Marguerite Yourcenar', *Polymnies* 1 (2010), 113–18.

It is not surprising that Marguerite Yourcenar, through her protagonist, intentionally describes these landscapes devoid of all cultural or literary semanticisation. In *The Song of the Earth*, pioneering critic Jonathan Bate utilises an ecocritical approach to English literature to assert the importance of poetry in a highly technological society at the turn of a new millennium, and to emphasise the capacity of poetry to return us to the earth that is our home.<sup>8</sup> We find this function in many of Marguerite Yourcenar's works: a tireless traveller, she develops an imaginary marked by a commitment to denounce disasters that affect the beings who inhabit Earth.

In 1942, the author discovered Mount Desert Island in Maine, and a connection was born that led to her living there until the end of her life. Over the course of her time in the area, she came to adopt a sensitivity to wilderness that is characteristic of North American nature writing. In that place, open to the sea, she declared: 'on a le sentiment d'être sur une frontière entre l'univers et le monde humain [one has the impression of being on a border between the universe and the human world].'<sup>9</sup> In the prologue to one of her first texts, the play *La Petite Sirène* [*The Little Mermaid*] (1942), Yourcenar writes that she replaced her interest in landscapes of the past with an interest for increasingly out-of-the-way places untouched by humanity.<sup>10</sup>

In the autobiographical trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde* [*The Labyrinth of the World*] (1974–88), which rejects conventional historical narration, the author confirms the degradation of idyllic places from her childhood. In the first entry, *Souvenirs pieux* [*Pious Recollections*], she focusses on the search for her maternal roots. Aiming to be true to reality, the narrator visits places that encompassed her family history, and adds to what she has learned from documents that guide her on trips to Belgium, the land of her ancestors and her first experiences of 'place-connectedness'.<sup>11</sup> In 1956, during one of these trips, she stops at the castle in Flémalle, near Liège. By visiting a familiar place, which had captured her attention in an engraving that she owned, Yourcenar asserts the reality of how symbols of history die: the virgin place shown in the engraving has become a

---

8 Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), vii.

9 Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts*, 134.

10 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Théâtre*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 176 [*La Petite Sirène*, 135–72].

11 The concept of place-connectedness is evoked by Lawrence Buell in *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U. S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 64.

place without grass or trees, an industrial zone with a hellish topography; of the castle, only some ruins remain; of the mansion, allotted to a demolition company, the best-conserved part is an eighteenth-century banister made from wrought iron. Yourcenar arrives one day before the demolition, and the scenery makes her think of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's eighteenth-century etchings, in which staircases happily rise to the sky.<sup>12</sup> Yourcenar considers it vitally important to visit former residences because the stones and interiors that witnessed the lives of the inhabitants help to reconstruct memories.

During a trip in 1971, Yourcenar confirms the degradation of the place: dense, stinking clouds suffocate the visitor; the landscape is littered with closed coal mines and abandoned buildings that remind her of the black sorcerer's ruined castle in *Parsifal*; the engraving *Les Délices du pays de Liège* [*The Delights of the Region of Liège*] is transformed into the 'Apocalypse',<sup>13</sup> triggered by the errors of the human who becomes an apprentice to the sorcerer. In describing the industrial disfiguration of her parents' region, Yourcenar shows her ecological commitment, as she draws on the vestiges of her family history to judge the world.

In *Archives du Nord* [*Archives of the North*], the second book of the familial trilogy, Yourcenar delves into the origins of her paternal family. Thinking about the place in which her family lived, she imagines its state before the birth of the world. She recalls a time when man did not exist,<sup>14</sup> and imagines a virgin nature that changes according to seasons, untouched by calendars or timepieces, returning us to a tranquil world featuring the noises of free animals in their natural environment. The idyllic peace is swiftly shattered by the appearance of 'le prédateur roi, le bûcheron des bêtes et l'assassin des arbres, le trappeur ajustant ses rêts où s'étranglent les oiseaux [the predator-king, the butcher of beasts, and the assassin of trees, the hunter setting his traps in which birds are strangled]'.<sup>15</sup> Man is reflected in all his brutality:

Les bandes dessinées et les manuels de science populaires nous montrent cet Adam sans gloire sous l'aspect d'une brute poilue brandissant un casse-tête: nous sommes loin de la légende judéo-chrétienne pour laquelle l'homme original erre en paix sous les ombrages d'un beau jardin.<sup>16</sup>

12 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 763–4 [*Souvenirs pieux*].

13 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 765–6 [*Souvenirs pieux*].

14 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 954 [*Archives du Nord*].

15 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 957 [*Archives du Nord*].

16 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 958 [*Archives du Nord*].

[Comic books and popular scientific manuals show us this inglorious Adam as a hairy brute brandishing a club: we are far from Judeo-Christian legend, in which originary man wanders in peace among the shadows of a beautiful garden.]

Man and his powers are an anomaly within the whole; his presence is not beneficial to the primitive garden.

Situating the fiction of *Un homme obscur* in the seventeenth century, Yourcenar alerts us to the danger that looms over natural spaces with the advent of modernity. Nathanaël admires the immense beauty of virgin Nature, and his thoughts convey the fragility of the jungles starting to be destroyed by human excess.<sup>17</sup> As with Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature*,<sup>18</sup> Yourcenar denounces mechanistic philosophies that strip Nature of its ancient dignity as a possessor of spiritual energy. Yourcenar's attraction to Renaissance animism, which succumbed to the attacks of mechanism, is shown in the choice of an alchemist as the main character of her novel *L'Œuvre au noir* [*The Abyss*] (1968), in which we find a critique of technologically advanced societies that consider Mother Earth to be inert material. The Yourcenarian condemnation of a disenchanted world given to intensive exploitation of Nature chimes with Rachel Carson's admonitions in *Silent Spring*.<sup>19</sup>

## An ethics of care and gender

Universal compassion is at the centre of Yourcenar's ethics. Beginning with her early writings, she shows sensitivity to the sorrow of living beings who have 'le sens d'une vie enfermée dans une forme différente [the sense of life enclosed in a different form]'.<sup>20</sup> In a letter of 1957, Yourcenar congratulates poet and animal-rights activist Lise Deharme:

Je vous félicite d'avoir eu le courage de traiter ce sujet (il en est peu de plus graves) et de dédaigner d'avance les reproches de sentimentalité que les sots ne manqueront pas de vous adresser.<sup>21</sup>

---

17 Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts*, 296.

18 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980).

19 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

20 Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts*, 317.

21 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, ed. by J. Brami and M. Sarde (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 165.

I salute you for having had the courage to engage with this issue (there are few more serious), and for pre-emptively disdaining the accusations of sentimentality that fools will surely launch against you.]

Yourcenar is aware of resistance to the development of a moral sensibility that acknowledges suffering beyond our species. Faced with a rationalist tradition that considers piety a passion, making it an expression of our corporeal nature that is inferior to intellect, Yourcenar advocates for the development of our sensory and affective capabilities, which have become subjugated to ‘cet ordinateur que le cerveau est pour nous [the computer that is the brain for us]’.<sup>22</sup>

In recent decades, the revaluation of sentiment in the realm of morality has gone hand-in-hand with increased attentiveness to gender studies. With *In a Different Voice*,<sup>23</sup> Carol Gilligan calls for the recognition of a ‘different voice’, an ethic of care – a specifically feminine morality that has traditionally been dismissed. According to Gilligan’s empirical studies, men are guided in moral decisions by principles – they speak of concepts and duties, and think in terms of justice. Instead of a logic of principles, women start from a relational self that leads to a morality of responsibility, as well as to greater contextual relativism. The typologies of moral theorists such as Lawrence Kohlberg characterise the latter form of ethical thinking as inferior to one based on duties and principles, but Gilligan – together with other female theorists of an ethic of care – postulates that these two moral perspectives are not contradictory, and should not be hierarchised.

The concept of a feminine form of moral thinking has been widely debated and criticised. It has been pointed out that modern societies are complex, and that gender roles have become less rigid, making it erroneous to generalise a breed of moral thinking that is characteristic of women, yet statistics continue to show a difference in the numbers of women and men who fulfil caring roles. Most members of ecological and animal rights movements around the world are women.<sup>24</sup> Ecofeminist theorists have taken up the idea of an ethic of care as a way of broadening a sense of moral responsibility for the non-human world, although they have adjusted it to theoretical positions that are very different from each other.<sup>25</sup> Despite disparities, these ecofeminist readings concur in distancing

---

22 Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts*, 320.

23 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

24 Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Éthique animale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2008).

25 Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993); Karen Warren, ed., *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Bloomington, Daniel A. Finch-Race and Stephanie Posthumus - 9783631673454

themselves from essentialist ecofeminist positions that would impede men from adopting an ethic of care; they postulate the end of gendered contrapositions, aspiring to a non-androcentric morality shared by all.

In this sense, we could see Nathanaël as an ethical model in *Un homme obscur*. Nathanaël does not renounce his emotive nature, as dictated by the norms of masculinity – according to which nature is to be denigrated and considered an object that should be dominated in order to defend culture. He does not participate in this power structure, nor does he adhere to an attitude of competition practised by men. Over the course of his life, he accepts an ‘inferior’ rank, showing absolute discretion until his final, silent fusion with nature. Traits such as practising an ethic of care, rejecting violence, manifesting emotions – characteristics devalued on the basis of being historically attributed to women – are the basis of the affective world of Yourcenar's lattermost characters.

Paradoxically, the women who appear in *Un homme obscur* conform to stereotypes. An analysis of the figures of femininity in the text – if we adopt the stance of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* [*The Second Sex*]<sup>26</sup> with regard to the work of André Breton, Paul Claudel and others – confirms that the women in the novel are not granted individuality. Janet, with whom Nathanaël has a short relationship before setting off on his journey, is a clearly stereotyped character, limited to a set of ruses through which she seduces the young man. Foy, Nathanaël's companion on a deserted island, embodies the naïve woman who knows how to work the land, and is blessed with a seductive spontaneity. On his return to Europe, Nathanaël lives with Saraï, a prostitute who tricks and robs her clients. There are positive feminine figures in the novel, but they are always simplified.<sup>27</sup> The main character crosses paths with women who help or save him, such as Madame d'Ailly, who is a symbol of the ideal woman, but she remains unreachable. As in the model of courtly love, Nathanaël's veneration for her serves as a vehicle for perfecting his character. Madame d'Ailly gives him the spiritual force to continue on his path, and sacrifices her physical integrity by kissing him, though she knows that he has a contagious pulmonary disease. Nathanaël slowly becomes a complex character, whereas the women – a means to an end – remain anchored to a concrete function

---

IN: Indiana University Press, 1996); Alicia H. Puleo, *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011).

26 Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

27 Teófilo Sanz, 'Féminiser le masculin ou renier la féminité: l'éthique de la sollicitude dans *Un homme obscur*', in *Marguerite Yourcenar: la femme, les femmes, une écriture-femme?*, ed. by M. Ledesma Pedraz and R. Poignault (Clermont-Ferrand: Société Internationale d'Études Yourcenariennes, 2005), 377–85.

in a narrative that serves to show the transcendence of a masculine figure. The central masculine character represents the voice of the non-human other: upon freeing himself from the norms of his gender, he becomes a transcendent and wise subject in the very heart of Nature. We can conclude that Yourcenar was able to overcome anthropocentric bias, but not its androcentric counterpart, leading her to attribute a particular of gender to the false universal concept of Man.

Her efforts to overcome anthropocentrism make Yourcenar a pioneer deserving of ecocritical attention. Given the variety of perspectives in the spectrum of environmental thought, we can ask which position most characterises her work. Yourcenar criticises humanist anthropocentrism and the Cartesian theory of the *animal-machine* as a construction that favours exploitation and indifference. She wonders whether the Cartesian assertion has been fundamentally misunderstood, given the common ground of human beings and animal-machines:

Une machine à produire et à ordonnancer les actions, les pulsions et les réactions qui constituent les sensations de chaud et de froid, de faim et de satisfaction digestive, les poussées sexuelles, et aussi la douleur, la fatigue, la terreur que les animaux éprouvent comme nous le faisons nous-mêmes.<sup>28</sup>

[A machine to produce and order the actions, impulses, and reactions that constitute the sensations of hot and cold, hunger and fullness, the sexual impulses, as well as pain, tiredness, and terror that animals feel just as we do.]

In other words, her environmental thinking grants animal dignity a privileged place.

## Sentiocentrism and biocentrism

Yourcenar expresses pathos-imbued sentiocentrism corresponding to the utilitarian philosophy of Peter Singer,<sup>29</sup> who inherits Jeremy Bentham's idea of the capacity to feel pain – not the capacity to reason – being the criterion for acting with moral consideration towards other living beings. In contrast to philosophers such as Singer who seek to ground *anti-speciesism* exclusively in reason, Yourcenar places great importance on the feelings of the subject, without disregarding norms and principles. Yourcenar is attentive to the fact that, despite the French Revolu-

---

28 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 375 [*Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur* ('Qui sait si l'âme des bêtes va en bas?')].

29 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (New York, NY: New York Review, 1975); *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

tion's *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* [*Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*] (1789), there has been massive destruction of human lives, especially in concentration camps, which has degraded the notion of humanity to an extraordinary degree. Reflecting on whether such declarations will be effective if human beings do not change, she responds affirmatively:

Il convient toujours de promulguer ou de réaffirmer les Lois véritables, qui n'en seront pas moins enfreintes, mais en laissant ça et là aux transgresseurs le sentiment d'avoir fait mal. 'Tu ne tueras pas.' Toute l'histoire, dont nous sommes si fières, est une perpétuelle infraction à cette loi.<sup>30</sup>

[It is always advisable to promote or reaffirm the true Laws, not that this will stop them from being infringed upon, but to leave transgressors here and there with the feeling of having behaved badly. 'Thou shalt not kill.' All of history, of which we are so proud, is a perpetual violation of that law.]

Yourcenar extends this law to non-human animals as well: in an era when the abuse of animals continues to worsen seemingly without end, she finds some use in the UNESCO *Déclaration universelle des droits de l'animal* [*Universal Declaration of Animal Rights*] (1978).

Yourcenar's positioning with respect to non-human animals is present in *Un homme obscur*: Nathanaël constantly rejects violence against them; he never speaks of their location, so that hunters cannot shoot them. A representative passage, narrated in a lyrical style, is when the protagonist and Foy spend time in an English colony in the New World. Nathanaël prefers to collect fruits, and to enjoy the forest, instead of following the rest of the young men, who enjoy hunting and fishing. The young man is united in solidarity with the animals who populate the forests: with the bear that he encounters; with the skunk that observes him; with the snakes condemned to be crushed if he reveals their existence to others.<sup>31</sup>

Yourcenar's ethics have biocentric roots. A collection of her reading notes, published as *Sources II*, includes many texts that reveal her thinking and method of writing. Rémy Poignault highlights that these texts 'tenían ante todo un objetivo personal, a saber, el de la meditación cotidiana a la manera de los estoicos, los cristianos o los filósofos orientales [had above all a personal objective, namely one of daily meditation in the style of the Stoics, the Christians, or the

---

30 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 375 [*Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur* ('Qui sait si l'âme des bêtes va en bas?')].

31 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Œuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 930 [*Un homme obscur*].

Eastern philosophers]'.<sup>32</sup> In one of the sections entitled 'Souhails [Wishes], Yourcenar writes about her desires in relation to the world in which she would like to live: 'un monde où tout objet vivant, arbre, animal, serait sacré et jamais détruit, sauf avec regret, et du fait d'une absolue nécessité [a world where every living object, tree, animal, would be sacred and never destroyed, except with sorrow, and in case of necessity]'.<sup>33</sup> In 'L'Homme qui aimait les pierres [The Man Who Loved Stones]' – one of the essays included in *En pèlerin et en étranger* [*As a Pilgrim and a Stranger*] (1991), and dedicated to writer Roger Caillois – Yourcenar writes that stone is an antecedent of man; it is 'un alphabet inconscient [an unconscious alphabet]'.<sup>34</sup> The author even talks about the friendship of stones and their import because – as thirteenth-century mystic Eckhart von Hochheim believed – 'la pierre est Dieu, mais elle ne sait pas qu'elle l'est [the stone is God, but it does not know that it is]'.<sup>35</sup> In *La Voix des choses* [*The Voice of Things*],<sup>36</sup> a quasi-anthology from the end of Yourcenar's life, she insists on what an object can communicate to us. The title of the volume alludes to the noise emitted by the shattering of an ancient sheet of malachite from India that fell from her hands when she was very weak during a period of hospitalisation. Yourcenar, though upset by the destruction of a perfectly shaped mineral as old as the Earth, notes that the sound of it breaking – an example of the voice of things speaking to us – was very beautiful.

Does Yourcenar align herself with a kind of holism that gives value to ecosystems without regard for individuals? No. Yourcenar adopts a kind of biocentrism that encompasses an ethic of responsibility towards every non-human entity. Her biocentrism, corresponding to a markedly mystical anti-violent spiritualism in communion with the cosmos, is the basis of her belief that plants and stones practise reciprocity, thanking us for our care by way of vibrations when we touch them.<sup>37</sup> This idea is exemplified in *Un homme obscur* by Nathanaël's rejection of violence against all life-forms, animal or vegetal: 'le garçon chérissait de même les arbres; il les plaignait, si grands et si majestueux qu'ils fussent, d'être incapables de fuir ou de se défendre, livrés à la hache du plus petit bûcheron [the boy equally loved the trees;

---

32 Rémy Poignault, 'Ensayos y meditaciones', in *Marguerite Yourcenar y la ecología: un combate ideológico y político*, ed. by A. Padilla and V. Torres (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2007), 49–50 (49).

33 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Sources II*, ed. by É. Dezon-Jones (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 240.

34 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 552 [*En pèlerin et en étranger*].

35 Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 550 [*En pèlerin et en étranger*].

36 Marguerite Yourcenar, ed., *La Voix des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

37 Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts*, 322.

he pitied them, so tall and so majestic as they were, for being incapable of fleeing or defending themselves from the axe of the weakest lumberjack].<sup>38</sup> For the young protagonist, trees are individuals with an inherent value.

## Conclusion

Yourcenar's great yearning at the end of her life was for the planet to be free of violence and pollution. She never stopped standing firm against those whom she called 'murderers' of Nature, and 'tormenters' of animals. For her, literature was not only an aesthetic composition, but also an ethical commitment. Ecocriticism should be a sociopolitical commitment as much as a theoretical one, since fiction is tied to the context from which it emerges. The environmental crisis of our world is not a metanarrative, and we should remember that texts do not exist autonomously. In carrying out studies of representations of nature from the innovative perspective of ecocriticism, we must seek, in the words of Richard Kerridge, 'to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their *coherence* and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis.'<sup>39</sup> We can thus raise awareness of the great danger that threatens the survival of our planet. An ecocritical approach to Marguerite Yourcenar's work demonstrates the fruitfulness of this innovative current of cultural criticism that speaks to a far-reaching kind of eco-ethical commitment. Yourcenar's texts and paratexts give a voice to what philosopher Michel Serres calls 'la Biogée [Biogea]', namely all life on Earth,<sup>40</sup> and thus supply ample food for thought about the increasingly pressing need to find ways of preserving the community of all living things for generations to come.

## References

- Bate, Jonathan, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000)
- Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949)
- Buell, Lawrence, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U. S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001)

---

38 Yourcenar, *Œuvres romanesques*, 930 [*Un homme obscur*].

39 Richard Kerridge, 'Introduction', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism & Literature*, ed. by R. Kerridge and N. Sammells (London: Zed, 1998), 1–9 (5) [my emphasis].

40 Michel Serres, *Temps des crises* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2009), 40.

- Bulletin du Centre International de Documentation Marguerite Yourcenar* 2 (1990), 116 pages
- Carson, Rachel, *Silent Spring* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962)
- Gaard, Greta, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993)
- Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982)
- Goslar, Michèle, 'Marguerite Yourcenar y la protección de la naturaleza: el combate de toda una vida', in *Marguerite Yourcenar y la ecología: un combate ideológico y político*, ed. by A. Padilla and V. Torres (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2007), 37–48
- Jeangène Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste, *Éthique animale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2008)
- Kerridge, Richard, 'Ecocriticism and the Mission of "English"', in *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*, ed. by G. Garrard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 11–23
- , 'Introduction', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism & Literature*, ed. by R. Kerridge and N. Sammells (London: Zed, 1998), 1–9
- Majer O'Sickey, Ingeborg, 'Introduction: Part I', in *Subversive Subjects: Reading Marguerite Yourcenar*, ed. by J. H. Sarnecki and I. Majer O'Sickey (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 11–16
- Merchant, Carolyn, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980)
- Poignault, Rémy, 'Ensayos y meditaciones', in *Marguerite Yourcenar y la ecología: un combate ideológico y político*, ed. by A. Padilla and V. Torres (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2007), 49–50
- Puleo, Alicia H., *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011)
- Sanz, Teófilo, 'Féminiser le masculin ou renier la féminité: l'éthique de la sollicitude dans *Un homme obscur*', in *Marguerite Yourcenar: la femme, les femmes, une écriture-femme?*, ed. by M. Ledesma Pedraz and R. Poignault (Clermont-Ferrand: Société Internationale d'Études Yourcenariennes, 2005), 377–85
- , 'L'Engagement écologique de Marguerite Yourcenar', *Polymnies* 1 (2010), 113–18
- Savigneau, Josyane, *Marguerite Yourcenar: l'invention d'une vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990)
- Serres, Michel, *Temps des crises* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2009)
- Singer, Peter, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (New York, NY: New York Review, 1975)

- , *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979)
- Yourcenar, Marguerite, *Essais et mémoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991)
- , 'Le Droit à la qualité de l'environnement: un droit en devenir, un droit à définir', *Centre International de Documentation Marguerite Yourcenar* (30 September 1987), <[http://www.cidmy.be/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=43:conference-2&catid=4:discours-conferences&Itemid=34](http://www.cidmy.be/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=43:conference-2&catid=4:discours-conferences&Itemid=34)> [accessed 23 May 2016]
- , *Les Yeux ouverts: entretiens avec Matthieu Galej* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1980)
- , *Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, ed. by J. Brami and M. Sarde (Paris: Gallimard, 1995)
- , *Œuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982)
- , *Sources II*, ed. by É. Dezon-Jones (Paris: Gallimard, 1999)
- , *Théâtre*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971)
- , ed., *La Voix des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987)
- Warren, Karen, ed., *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996)



Christopher Watkin

## Michel Serres: From Restricted to General Ecology

**Abstract:** Michel Serres's relation to ecocriticism is complex. On the one hand, he is a pioneer in the area, anticipating the current fashion for ecological thought by over a decade. On the other hand, 'ecology' and 'eco-criticism' are singularly infelicitous terms to describe Serres's thinking if they are taken to indicate that attention should be paid to particular 'environmental' concerns. For Serres, such local, circumscribed ideas as 'ecology' or 'ecophilosophy' are one of the causes of our ecological crisis, and no progress can be made while such narrow concerns govern our thinking. This chapter intervenes in the ongoing discussion about the relation of Serres to ecology by drawing on some of Serres's more recent texts on pollution and dwelling, and this fresh material leads us to modulate existing treatments of Serres and ecology. I insist on the inextricability of two senses of ecology in Serres's approach: a broader meaning that refers to the interconnectedness and inextricability of all entities (natural and cultural, material and ideal), and a narrower sense that evokes classically 'environmental' concerns. Serres's recent work leads us to challenge some of the vectors and assumptions of the debate by radicalising the continuity between 'natural' and 'cultural' phenomena, questioning some of the commonplaces that structure almost all ecological thinking, and arguing that the entire paradigm of ecology as 'conservation' and 'protection' is bankrupt and self-undermining. After outlining the shape of Serres's 'general ecology' and its opposition to ecology as conservation, this chapter asks what sorts of practices and values a Serresian general ecology can engender when it considers birdsong, advertising, industrial pollution and money to be manifestations of the same drive for appropriation through pollution. A response is given in terms of three key Serresian motifs: the world as fetish, parasitic symbiosis, and global cosmocracy.

Michel Serres's relation to ecocriticism is complex. On the one hand, he is a pioneer in the area, anticipating the current fashion for ecological thought by over a decade. He was thinking deeply and at length about ecological issues at a time when few others cared to address the subject: 'I was one of the first, if not the first, to make ecology not just a matter of fundamental urgency but above all a philosophical and even metaphysical question.'<sup>1</sup> When we engage with Michel Serres's ecological thought, we are not simply reading a reaction to a recent critical trend, much less jumping on a modish bandwagon. This links to a wider point of crucial

---

1 Michel Serres, *Pantopie: de 'Hermès' à 'Petite Poucette'* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2014), 62 [hereafter *P*; my translation].

importance for understanding Michel Serres as an ecological thinker, since much ecological rhetoric – from philosophers and politicians – is reactive, seeking to respond to changes and problems, always on the back foot, always fighting a losing battle to ‘protect’ and ‘conserve’. Eschewing this responsive paradigm, Serres’s thought offers a larger ecological vision that can set a positive agenda for change. His proactive stance is driven by the question that he chooses to ask: whereas much ecological thought asks the question ‘how?’ (how do we reduce emissions? How should we think of ‘nature’ differently? How do we ‘save the planet?’), Serres insists on the deeper question ‘why?’ – why do we pollute? ‘What do we really want when we dirty the world?’<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, ‘ecology’ and ‘eco-criticism’ are infelicitous terms for describing Serres’s thinking if they are taken to indicate that attention should be paid only to particular objects (trees, animals, rivers) or questions (climate change, deforestation). For Serres, such local, circumscribed ideas as ‘ecology’ or ‘eco-philosophy’ are one of the causes of the ‘ecological crisis’, and no progress can be made while such narrow concerns govern our thinking. His work abounds with themes that would commonly be filed under ‘ecology’, but if he uses the term relatively little in his writing it is because of his fundamental conviction that it is impossible to isolate a set of discrete ideas under this label. As for the ‘criticism’ in ‘eco-criticism’, the notion has a very unfavourable reputation in Serres’s thinking. The academic culture of critique and criticism that produces one commentary after another has become an impotent and stale exercise in repetition,<sup>3</sup> and with *Le Parasite* [*The Parasite*] (1980) Serres turned his back for good on academic criticism and traditional university discourse (*EHP* 98).

Any attempt to evaluate Serres in relation to ecocriticism must therefore find a way to negotiate these two problems, namely that his thought resists becoming narrowly ecological, and that he eschews the culture of critique. If we allow Serres to challenge and rethink what we might mean by ‘ecocriticism’, we find that he provides us with a deep and robust reframing of ecological thought, and a proactive ecological political agenda.

Among the scandalously sparse secondary literature on Serres, ecology is one of the themes that has received a comparatively thorough treatment. As we embark on the current study, it is helpful to survey salient perspectives on his work. Often

- 
- 2 Michel Serres, *Le Mal propre: polluer pour s'approprier?* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2008), 57 [hereafter *LMP*]; *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?*, trans. by A.-M. Feenberg-Dibon (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 40 [hereafter *M*].
  - 3 Michel Serres and Luc Abraham, ‘Un entretien avec Michel Serres’, *Horizons philosophiques* 10.2 (2000), 97–116 (99; 105) [hereafter *EHP*].

at stake in discussions of Serres as an ecological thinker has been the relation between a broad sense of 'ecology' as general interconnectedness of all knowledge and all fields of inquiry, and a more specific sense pertaining specifically to the 'natural' world. This distinction is brought into play by Sydney Lévy in his introduction to a special edition of the journal *SubStance* (1997) on Serres's ecological thinking. Lévy frames his understanding of 'ecology' in terms of Serresian interdisciplinarity, tracing 'local, tenuous, perilous' passages between different fields.<sup>4</sup> Of particular note in the issue is Paul A. Harris's 'The Itinerant Theorist', in which Harris elegantly articulates the broader and narrower senses of ecology in his contention that 'Serres attempts to evoke an intimate, visceral knowledge of nature in order to redefine the nature of knowledge', in what Harris terms a Serresian 'cultural ecology'.<sup>5</sup> Both the natural world and the universe of knowledge are to be thought, analogously, as complex open systems of interconnection that do not sacrifice the empirical and material on the altar of the general and the abstract.

In her doctoral thesis (2003), Stephanie Posthumus evokes the relation between the broader and narrower senses of ecology in her discussion of Serres's ecological thought. She unfolds the broader sense through careful studies of the motifs of structures<sup>6</sup> and *réseaux*<sup>7</sup> [webs] in Serres's thought, arguing that the author of *Le Contrat naturel* [*The Natural Contract*] (1990) is elaborating his eco-philosophy (in the narrower sense) in terms of his 'vision interconnectée du monde [interconnected vision of the world]';<sup>8</sup> while refusing to identify with narrowly ecological concerns.<sup>9</sup> Making a finer set of distinctions within the two categories of 'broad' and 'narrow' ecologies,<sup>10</sup> Posthumus distinguishes between the academic discourse of 'scientific ecology', the 'ecological consciousness' that names a mere awareness of ecological concerns, and the 'ecologism' that takes action on the basis of those concerns. She further differentiates between the 'ecophilosophy' of Serres's more theoretical texts, the 'ecopoetics' of his treatments of literature, and the 'ecopolitics'

---

4 Sydney Lévy, 'Introduction: An Ecology of Knowledge: Michel Serres', *SubStance* 26.2 (1997), 3–5 (3).

5 Paul A. Harris, 'The Itinerant Theorist: Nature and Knowledge/Ecology and Topology in Michel Serres', *SubStance* 26.2 (1997), 37–58 (39; 44).

6 Stephanie Posthumus, 'La Nature et l'écologie chez Lévi-Strauss, Tournier, Serres' (PhD thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2003), 71–100.

7 Posthumus, 'La Nature et l'écologie', 186–99.

8 Posthumus, 'La Nature et l'écologie', 194 [unreferenced translations are mine].

9 Posthumus, 'La Nature et l'écologie', 221.

10 The terms 'broad' and 'narrow' are mine, not Posthumus's.

of *The Natural Contract* and *Hominescence*, concluding that the three ecologies are almost impossible to isolate from each other.<sup>11</sup>

In the article ‘Translating Ecocriticism’ (2007), Posthumus develops her Serresian insights, using them to shine a light on some of the shortcomings of anglophone ecocriticism in terms of five themes: ecology; science; nature; language; humanity. Through a threefold insistence on 1) the inextricability of the broader and narrower senses of ecology in Serres’s eco-philosophy, 2) his affirmation of humanism in an ecological context, and 3) the refusal of ecology – in the broader sense – to distinguish between ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ interconnectedness, Posthumus is able to offer Serresian thought as a corrective to some of the more unreflective Romantic sensibilities of anglophone ecocriticism. *The Natural Contract*, she insists, ‘is not a call to get back to nature, to a less technological way of life’,<sup>12</sup> but encompasses a broader idea of ‘living together’<sup>13</sup> in a way that cuts across the nature-culture divide. Serres’s usefulness for ecocriticism, according to Posthumus, is manifold: he offers ‘exactly what a new generation of ecocritics has been looking for as a way to combine both an urban care and earth care politics’;<sup>14</sup> his *Grand Récit* [Great Story] of the universe helps us ‘avoid an all or nothing attitude towards scientific discourse’;<sup>15</sup> he helps cultivate scientific literacy within ecocriticism;<sup>16</sup> his rejection of linguistic philosophy and his insistence on the empirically encountered material world offers ecocriticism ‘a foundation for reasserting a materialized language in a literary world’;<sup>17</sup> he helps us think the global ‘without erasing local differences’;<sup>18</sup> he ‘presents us with a field of literary texts that would otherwise be excluded from a strictly nature-oriented ecocritical approach’.<sup>19</sup>

In ‘Vers une écocritique française’ (2011), Posthumus returns to the shortcomings of anglophone ecological thought, the monolingualism of ecocriticism, and its neglect of literature. Setting Serres in opposition to an Anglo-Saxon ‘return to

---

11 Posthumus, ‘La Nature et l’écologie’, 229.

12 Stephanie Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism: Dialoguing with Michel Serres’, *Reconstruction* 7.2 (2007), 37 paragraphs, <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/072/posthumus.shtml>> [accessed 27 May 2016], paragraph 11.

13 Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism’, paragraph 12.

14 Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism’, paragraph 12.

15 Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism’, paragraph 17.

16 Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism’, paragraph 18.

17 Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism’, paragraph 28.

18 Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism’, paragraph 35.

19 Posthumus, ‘Translating Ecocriticism’, paragraph 37.

nature<sup>2</sup> – which, Serres insists, would merely spell the victory of town over country<sup>20</sup> – she argues that ecocriticism must be able to yield an ecological politics,<sup>21</sup> which is precisely what Serres's natural contract provides. Once more, she insists that (narrowly) ecological themes cannot adequately be addressed apart from a (broad) ecological way of thinking that embraces all fields of knowledge,<sup>22</sup> and that prevents *The Natural Contract* from being reduced to a thesis on environmentalism.

The present chapter intervenes in this ongoing conversation by bringing some of Serres's more recent texts into the limelight.<sup>23</sup> This fresh material leads us to affirm, and to challenge, existing treatments of Serres and ecology. I affirm the insistence on the inextricability of the narrower and broader senses of 'ecology' (which I call 'restricted' and 'general' ecology) in Serres's approach, but the new material leads me to challenge some of the vectors and assumptions of the debate by radicalising the continuity between 'natural' and 'cultural' phenomena, questioning some of the commonplaces that structure almost all ecological thinking, and arguing that the entire paradigm of ecology as 'conservation' and 'protection' is bankrupt and self-undermining.

## Towards a general ecology

The proposal for a 'natural contract' remains Serres's most widely known contribution to ecological thought, narrowly conceived. Though Serres seeks to avoid the label 'ecological', it is not quite correct to say that the natural contract has nothing to do with ecology. In an interview included in *Pantopie* [*Pantopia*] (2014), he

---

20 Stephanie Posthumus, 'Vers une écocritique française: le contrat naturel de Michel Serres', *Mosaic* 44.2 (2011), 85–100 (88).

21 Posthumus, 'Vers une écocritique française', 90.

22 Posthumus, 'Vers une écocritique française', 91.

23 The discussion will interact mainly with the work usually considered to be Serres's most 'ecological': *Le Contrat naturel* (Paris: Bourin, 1990) [hereafter *LCN*]. In addition to this common reference, I will explore the impact on the debate around Serres and ecology: *La Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2008) [hereafter *GM*]; *Biogée* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2010) [hereafter *B*]; *Habiter* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2011) [hereafter *H*]. My reflections are informed by interviews in which Serres clarifies his arguments: Michel Serres and *Clés*, 'Michel Serres: "Nous traversons la plus importante mutation depuis la préhistoire!"', *Clés* (2014), <<http://www.cles.com/enquetes/article/michel-serres-nous-traversons-la-plus-importante-mutation-depuis-la-prehistoire>> [accessed 27 May 2016]; Michel Serres and *Pouvoirs*, 'Entretien avec Michel Serres: le droit peut sauver la nature', *Pouvoirs* 127 (2008), 5–12.

expands on his aversion to the ecological in a way that helps us to gain a better appreciation of how he situates his own natural contract:

*You have proposed a 'natural contract'. Was this a foray into ecology [une démarche écologiste] on your part?*

No, certainly not. I have studiously avoided the term. There is a confusion today around the word 'ecology' between its use by politicians and by scientists. In political discourse, ecology is the ethical concern to keep nature – understood as a virgin and wild species – protected against human violation. In science, ecology (*oikos-logos* – knowledge of the milieu, of the habitat) is a different thing altogether. The biologist Ernst Haeckel defined it at the end of the nineteenth century as a very sophisticated science that tries to gather together all the geological, chemical, biological, vegetal and animal interactions that constitute a milieu – for example, the biotope of Mont Ventoux. (P 233–6 [my translation])

The two senses of ecology here are in direct opposition: the first, restricted sense reinforces the dichotomies of a thoroughly human politics and a wild or unkempt nature, or of human environmental damage in opposition to a virgin or unspoiled world; the second sense seeks to find links, dependencies and passages between all of the entities in a given milieu, travelling across dichotomies and back again. While Serres does not write about ecology in the first, restricted sense, his thought is most certainly ecological in the second sense – insisting on links and continuities across apparent divisions and differences.

The most fruitful way to understand Serres's contribution to ecology in the aforementioned narrow, political sense must necessarily pass through his elaboration of an ecology in the broader, scientific sense. I introduce the term 'general ecology' to describe this latter ecology in Serresian thought, proceeding as it does not by drawing distinctions and creating oppositions in the spirit of academic 'criticism', but by seeking translations and equivalences between seemingly disparate areas of thought or domains of existence.

### ***Malfeasance: is everything ecological?***

The radical subversion of dichotomies in Serres's general ecology is shown more clearly through specific examples than through abstract discussion, and adopting an approach that foregrounds particular instances of general ecology will help to clarify how Serres forces us to understand the world differently, refusing to set the 'natural' world and human action against each other, and forcing us to revisit aspects of our world and society that we do not commonly associate with ecological concerns. Taking the lead from *Malfeasance*, and incorporating discussions of other key ecological texts, we shall see how Serres frames the phenomenon of pollution not as something utterly foreign and alien to non-human ecology, but as

something fundamentally in continuity with it. If Serres is correct in this regard, we must recognise that the great majority of our environmentalism is built on an assumption that actively hampers clear ecological understanding and intervention.

Serres approaches the phenomenon of pollution not by asking how it can be reduced, but why it is produced. He answers by arguing that it is only one instance of a universal desire, shared by humans and the non-human alike, to occupy space, and to make it unusable by others. Pollution, in short, is a mode of appropriation.<sup>24</sup> Understood as an action that fulfils the desire to occupy space, pollution can be seen alongside other territorial activities that cut across the customary divide between nature and culture: ‘just like animals, we sully the place we want to make into our own nest.’<sup>25</sup> The tiger that urinates to mark its territory is engaging in an action qualitatively equivalent to the multinational corporation dumping its effluent. In micturating on its terrain, the tiger is merely asserting itself as ‘master and possessor’ of its lair (*LMP* 113; *M* 85). Although we have a curious tendency to assume that conventions of property are an exclusively human trait, Serres insists that animals also mark, possess and protect their property and goods (*P* 250).

We may be tempted to dismiss pollution as an unfortunate and avoidable by-product of industrial processes, but Serres insists that to do so is to prevent ourselves from understanding its deep motivation, hence from addressing it in anything but a superficial way. At the very least, Serres is inviting us to reflect on whether we have misunderstood the meaning of pollution:<sup>26</sup>

When rich countries discharge their industrial waste in the mangroves of poor countries, are they not also seizing and re-colonising them? When, on the other hand, inhabitants of a place protest against its designation as a nuclear storage site, do they revolt against a medical risk or against a power exploiting the right to expropriate them? ‘We want to keep our own homes,’ they shout. (*LMP* 67; *M* 48)

Could it not be that in polluting we are exercising that deepest of human (and non-human) desires to appropriate a place in the world, or to appropriate the world itself?

---

24 In common with most Serresian themes, this idea does not emerge ex nihilo in its most developed form in *Malfeasance*. It is adumbrated in *Le Parasite* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1980), *Rome: le livre des fondations* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1983) and *Statues: le second livre des fondations* (Paris: Julliard, 1987).

25 Michel Serres, *Rameaux* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2004), 195 [hereafter *R*; my translation].

26 This interrogative mood is indicated by the question mark at the end of the book’s subtitle in English and French (*Le Mal propre: polluer pour approprier?*; *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?*). The interrogative is a pedagogic tool, rather than a genuine doubt, as it is clear that Serres sees a Leibnizian translation from pollution to property.

Moving from the 'hard' (physical, material pollution) to the 'soft' (symbolic, informational, linguistic pollution), Serres finds a similar appropriation of space in the cacophony of multiple voices – in the choral hymns of a Greek tragedy, or – to take Steven Connor's example – in the chants and songs of the home fans at an Arsenal football match.<sup>27</sup> In such a sporting context, the noise generated by the crowd acts as a weapon, 'a muniment of din to crush the opposing team',<sup>28</sup> and it is the vocal appropriation of space – more than the geographical location of the turf – that makes the fixture a 'home' tie. In this aggressive occupation of space, the baying crowd is obeying precisely the same logic as the songbird's chirping (*P* 249–50) – likewise a strategy to occupy space – or the sound of a noisy aeroplane, car or motorbike that rings out victory over the space that is occupied (*LMP* 57; *M* 40). In both 'hard' and 'soft' ways, pollution is the signature of the will to power (*LMP* 92; *M* 68).

Serres discerns another common structure between 'natural' and 'cultural' appropriations of space in his comparison between advertising campaigns and epidemics, both of which function as 'machines à fabriquer de l'invasion [invasion-making machines]' (*B* 96) that spread 'virally'. Corporations mark their products in the form of logos and brand names, harnessing all their consumers as willing co-workers charged with scattering their symbolic ordure (*LMP* 37–8; *M* 25) to demarcate their territory. As much as any form of pollution, advertising is about appropriating space – a point that Serres makes through rewriting Jean-Jacques Rousseau's quotation on the origin of civil society:

The first one who, once he had measured out a plot, bought it to besmirch it with his brand so that it proclaimed: 'this is mine and I am the best', and who in fact found people naive enough to let him steal their view, and become his slaves, invented advertising. (*LMP* 70; *M* 50 [translation altered])

The paradigm of appropriation through pollution is also found in the 'golden excrement' of money – a proxy pollutant that serves to appropriate territory and goods just as effectively as sully them (*LMP* 66–7; *M* 48). For Serres, 'the polluter pays' is an evident tautology, mirroring the equivalence of money and excrement (*LMP* 67; *M* 48) found in Freud's discussion of the anal stage of development (*EP* 9). In the case of the carbon tax, a polluting appropriation covers and doubles another in a seamless emphasis: polluter pollutes.

---

27 Steven K. Connor, 'Play Grounds: The Arenas of Game', *StevenConnor.com* (13 February 2008), <<http://stevenconnor.com/playgrounds.html>> [accessed 27 May 2016]; *A Philosophy of Sport* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 57.

28 Connor, 'Play Grounds'; *A Philosophy of Sport*, 60.

The same logic of appropriation through pollution similarly obtains in the 'soft' realm of language. Writing one's signature is a way of sullyng – thus taking ownership of – a document or page, and language more broadly is a means of appropriation: 'can I now say, describe, show what I perceive? No; I have no language at my disposal to do this because all languages come from the networks through which I perceive the so-called real, and that prove there is nothing that cannot be said' (*LMP* 101; *M* 75). Pollution slips easily from the field to the book, from the hard to the soft, from the *pagus* – into which excrement is turned by the ploughing of oxen – to the *pagina* whose parallel lines of text mimic the agricultural furrow (*LMP* 35–6; *M* 23).

Serres also sees a continuity between pollution and phenomenology. The presuppositions in terms of which we perceive the world are sophisticated strategies of appropriation (*LMP* 100), what in another discourse might be called confirmation bias or the minimisation of cognitive dissonance. Thinking that we see and understand things directly, what we encounter is already polluted as it passes through a series of appropriation strategies, such that one is unable to describe that which does not or cannot be appropriated by anyone (*LMP* 102). Serres draws a direct analogy between meaning and pollution when he claims that 'by splashing about in this foul rubbish of meaning, we appropriate the world' (*B* 166 [my translation]).

In all of these examples of appropriation through pollution, Serres insists on the continuities between the 'natural' and the 'cultural'. There is no fundamental division between the 'hard' and the 'soft', no original dichotomy between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' pollution (though such a distinction can of course be introduced later): 'the spit soils the soup, the logo the object, the signature the page: property, propriety, or cleanness. The same word tells of the same struggle; in French, it has the same origin and the same meaning' (*LMP* 11; *M* 3). The dog that barks, the nightingale that sings, the deer that bellows, the hunter who sounds the horn, the lecherous voyeur who whistles at a woman, the company that buys advertising to brag about its products, the warring army, the writer, the perceiver of the world – each is seeking to extend its territory; everyone is urinating in the swimming pool (*LMP* 59; *M* 42).

It could well be objected that Serres is mixing apples and oranges: advertising and brand names are not threatening to destroy the earth; the circulation of money does not pose an immediate ecological danger; the chants of a football crowd do no physical harm; the chirping of songbirds precipitates no ecological crisis. So, why try to argue that they are manifestations of the same phenomenon? What is to be gained, practically speaking, by grouping all these disparate behaviours together under the banner of appropriation through pollution? The reply is quite simply that we cannot understand what motivates, or what is at stake in,

actions and behaviours which are ‘destroying the earth’ until we allow ourselves to see them in their non-atomised context. The desire to treat narrowly ecological questions without reference to any of these other phenomena is an instance of the partial thinking that insists on separating the ‘natural’ from the ‘cultural’, preventing us from asking the ‘why?’ behind the ‘how?’, and from discerning the links that would help us to understand – thus to respond to – ecological questions more adequately. Serres laments that ‘we deal with pollution only in physical, quantitative terms, that is by means of the hard sciences. Well no, what is at stake here are our intentions, decisions and conventions. In short, our cultures’ (*LMP* 87–8; *M* 63).

If we follow Serres in making these links across natural and cultural boundaries, we must acknowledge that polluting behaviour is an extension of patterns and ways of acting to be found in the ‘natural’ world, not something monstrously unnatural that threatens to destroy the pristine ‘natural’ patterns upon which it supervenes. It is important to note that for Serres ‘nature’ does not mean that which ‘given’ as opposed to artificial or constructed. In *Rameaux [Branches]* (2004), he explains: ‘how to define it? By its original sense: what was being born, what is born, what will be born; that is, a narrative of newborn events’ (*R* 134 [my translation]). Serres evokes birth as a figure of the new, as opposed to a linear continuation of a pre-existing story. That which is born departs from the predictable ‘format’ to introduce a new chapter such as the emergence of life on Earth. Within this frame, we might reasonably conclude that pollution could constitute just as decisive an event in the narrative of the world – or of a particular ecosystem – as the emergence of life itself. By this definition, it is far from clear that pollution is unnatural; there is nothing more natural than pollution.<sup>29</sup> The importance of this realisation is that, if true, the entire paradigm of ecology as ‘conservation’ and ‘protection’ is exposed as bankrupt, for it arbitrarily seeks to protect certain manifestations of the very same behaviours that it is militating to exclude. Ecology pursued on this basis undermines its own justification.

## Practising general ecology

Serres’s exposure of the self-undermining nature of ecology as conservation leaves open the question of a more adequate ecological paradigm. In the light of Serres’s general ecology, we must strongly resist the mistaken notion that ‘nature’ is something ‘other’ to be protected. We must stop seeing pollution as a purely human destruction of a purely natural world. But what must we think and do instead? We

---

29 I am grateful to Stephanie Posthumus for highlighting Serres’s insistence on understanding nature in terms of birth (*naissance; naître*).

need better environmental imperatives than to protect and conserve, but what are they? What sort of ecology (in the narrow sense of the term) can arise if the very divisions between the natural and cultural, between the subject and the object, are contested? What imperatives can an ecology engender when birdsong, advertising, industrial pollution and money are considered to be manifestations of the same drive for appropriation through pollution? Serres has much to say on these questions, and the forthcoming section proposes to bridge the gap between the aforementioned principals of general ecology and a specific, determined set of ecological practices. This bridge is tripartite, highlighting three important motifs in Serres's thought that take us from the fact of general ecology to its behavioural and institutional outworking.

### The world as fetish

The first important move in the practice of general ecology is to replace the artificial dyads of nature/culture and subject/object with the subtler notion of the fetish. Serres derives his notion of the fetish from Auguste Comte's evocation of Earth as the *Grande-Fétiche* [Great Fetish] in *Synthèse subjective* [*Subjective Synthesis*] (1856), and he uses it to describe the current relation between humanity and the world, where a fetish is understood as an idol made by human hands that is invested with a transcendent power (*H* 169). In the case of the world as fetish, the stakes are higher. It is not at all Serres's claim that we invest the world with some spiritual or religious power, but that we depend upon the world: it is our condition of possibility. Nor is Serres suggesting that the world in its brute materiality is a human artefact. Such a patent falsity, he hastens to point out, was never the claim in relation to the fetish. Fetishists did not create the block of marble or the log of wood from which they carve their idols any more than we created rocks and the soil (*P* 269). When Serres says that the world is a fetish, he means that we depend upon it, it depends upon us (*LCN* 51),<sup>30</sup> and we produce that which produces us. This change has a subtle but very important consequence: if we depend upon the things that depend upon us, the concept of 'us' itself is necessarily changed (*RH* 141). Is it not just as appropriate, Serres wonders in *L'Incandescent* [*The Incandescent*] (2003), to say 'we are raining' as 'it is raining'?<sup>31</sup> To whom or to what should we attribute the weather when culture is natural, and nature is cultural?

The strength of fetishism as a notion for comprehending our current relation to the habitable world is that it understands the fetish-maker and the fetish as both

30 See also Michel Serres, *Récits d'humanisme* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2006), 138 [hereafter *RH*].

31 Michel Serres, *L'Incandescent* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2003), 338–9 [hereafter *Inc*].

subject and object.<sup>32</sup> In other words, humanity is changed by its new relation to the world just as much as the world itself is transformed. Having treated the world as an object, we find ourselves to be its objects,<sup>33</sup> and we have also become our own fetishes, bringing about our own birth through the intermediary of the world that depends upon us: *homo causa sui*.<sup>34</sup> Just like the natural world, the human is no longer (indeed, never was) something that is given, but rather something that is constructed by our thoughts and actions (*Hom* 24), as well as by the world upon which we depend: ‘we are our own ancestors, Adam and Eve, through the intermediary of the Earth and of life, which we mold almost at our leisure.’<sup>35</sup> Our mastery of DNA and the atomic bomb put our birth and death in our hands, and having become our own handiwork we are no longer the same (*P* 204; see also *R* 40). Serres names this complex intertwining of dependency and agency *natura sive homines* (*E* 256; *C* 176).

Serres’s insistence on the world as fetish is related to, but goes beyond, the notion of the Anthropocene as defined by the Anthropocene Working Group<sup>36</sup> of the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy.<sup>37</sup> The Anthropocene is – if a

---

32 In this respect, it bears affinities with his notion of the quasi-object that is elaborated in *Le Parasite* and elsewhere. The quasi-object, Serres stresses, is also a quasi-subject, and fits comfortably into neither category (objectivity or subjectivity). The quasi-object is also a quasi-subject because it designates a subject that would not be a subject without it. *Le Parasite*, 302; *The Parasite*, trans. by L. R. Schehr (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 225. When Serres evokes the relation between humanity and the world, he prefers Comte’s notion of fetishism, rather than the quasi-object. The fetish foregrounds the dialectic of creation (the created creates its creator) in a way that, while not necessarily absent from the quasi-object, is not emphasised. While it is conceivable for a quasi-object to be ‘natural’ and unmade, manufacture of some description is indispensable to the notion of the fetish.

33 Michel Serres, *Hominescence* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2001), 214 [hereafter *Hom*].

34 Michel Serres, ‘Le Temps humain: de l’évolution créatrice au créateur d’évolution’, in *Qu’est-ce que l’humain?*, ed. by P. Picq, M. Serres and J.-D. Vincent (Paris: Le Pommier, 1999), 71–108 (107).

35 Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Éclaircissements: cinq entretiens avec Bruno Latour* (Paris: Bourin, 1992), 255 [hereafter *E*]; *Conversations on Culture, Science and Time*, trans. by R. Lapidus (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 176 [hereafter *C*].

36 Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy, ‘Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene’’, *quaternary.stratigraphy.org* (23 February 2016), <<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene>> [accessed 27 May 2016].

37 Colin N. Waters, et al., ‘The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene’, *Science* 351.6269 (8 January 2016), <<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/351/6269/aad2622>> [accessed 27 May 2016].

little homophonous wordplay might be permitted – anthropocentric because it registers only one direction of influence: human beings are changing the earth and the climate. The idea of the fetish, by contrast, acknowledges the mutual influence of world and humanity on each other. Nor is Serres's recuperation of Comte's *Grand-Fétiche* to be confused with James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis.<sup>38</sup> The grave error of this latter hypothesis, Serres argues, is to treat the earth as a living entity, whereas life is defined by reproduction (P 278). The earth has no offspring, thus it is not alive. Serres considers that the intentionality and teleology ascribed to the world in the Gaia hypothesis is naive and unscientific – an opinion that he makes very clear in response to a direct question about Bruno Latour's Gifford Lectures on 'Facing Gaia' (2013): 'I recognise, of course, that the earth, considered as a whole, possesses certain characteristics of life – self-regulation, in particular – but that is where it stops. The earth does not evolve in the Darwinian sense of the term' (P 274–5 [my translation]).<sup>39</sup> Serres is a little hasty in his criticism of Latour, since the latter explicitly distances himself from Lovelock's description of Gaia as a 'living organism',<sup>40</sup> reading the ascription of life and intentionality to the planet as an analogue of Louis Pasteur's hesitant granting of agency to bacteria in *Les Microbes organisés* (1878). In 'The Puzzling Face of a Secular Gaia', the third of his Gifford lectures in Edinburgh (21 February 2013), Latour frames his acceptance of the agency of Gaia with the acknowledgment that 'the philosophy of biology has never stopped borrowing its metaphors from the social realm',<sup>41</sup> and he is explicit in stating that 'it is not that Gaia is some "sentient being" but that the concept of "Gaia" captures the distributed intentionality of all the agents

---

38 James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

39 The fetish is conspicuously absent from Latour's writings on ecological themes, including the French version of his six Gifford lectures on 'Facing Gaia' (University of Edinburgh, 18–28 February 2013), in which Gaia is constructed not as a fetish but as a collective term for a distributed proliferation of agencies. 'Facing Gaia: A New Enquiry into Natural Religion', *University of Edinburgh* (18–28 February 2013), <<http://www.ed.ac.uk/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour>> [accessed 27 May 2016]; *Face à Gaïa: huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015).

40 Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia*, xvi.

41 Bruno Latour, 'The Puzzling Face of a Secular Gaia', *University of Edinburgh* (21 February 2013), <<http://www.ed.ac.uk/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour/lecture-three>> [accessed 27 May 2016], 34:41–7.

that are modifying their surroundings to suit themselves better.<sup>42</sup> Latour is not suggesting that the Earth can reproduce itself, nor that we understand it as living in a straightforwardly biological sense. Though Serres's criticism of Gaia rings true for Lovelock, it rings hollow for Latour.

Fetishism undermines the dichotomy between the given and the constructed, hence the artificial division between manipulation and conservation/protection. There can thus be no self-coherent minimalist or non-interventionist environmentalism. To withdraw from the world is not to preserve its purity, naturalness or sacredness, but to draw an arbitrary line between some actions of appropriation through pollution, and others. Furthermore, there never was a nature that was free from the impositions and manipulations of culture because human culture is an excrescence of natural rhythms.

## Symbiosis

If the condition of the world as fetish means that it is no longer possible to try to 'conserve' or 'protect', we must modulate the way in which we conceive our relation with the world, moving from a moribund host dying at the hands of its insatiable parasite to one of parasitic symbiosis. We must understand that the change of outlook that Serres is pressing on us is no trivial or obvious one. The paradigm of symbiosis stretches wide and deep, challenging some of our deep assumptions and predispositions. Serres argues in conversation with Latour that the approach of seeking to 'cure' or 'eradicate' cancer is misguided:

We must always reformulate this question: What is an enemy, who is he to us, and how must we deal with him? Another way to put it, for example, is: What is cancer? – a growing collection of malignant cells that we must at all costs expel, excise, reject? Or something like a parasite, with which we must negotiate a contract of symbiosis? I lean toward the second solution, as life itself does. (*E* 281; *C* 195)

Rather than seeking to eliminate cancer, Serres wagers, we will find a way to 'profit from its dynamism', to live with it in a parasitically symbiotic relation. Similarly, he warns that if we try to eradicate a microbe, it will mutate as many times as necessary, and kill ten great-grandchildren of the child whom we inoculate against it (*B* 146). It would be better to seek to understand how it receives, stores, processes and emits information, in order to find a mutually beneficial symbiosis. Like all diplomacy, such an approach must begin by learning to speak the language of the other.

---

42 Bruno Latour, 'The Puzzling Face of a Secular Gaia', 40:26–43.

Daniel A. Finch-Race and Stephanie Posthumus - 9783631673454

Downloaded from PubFactory at 05/16/2021 08:52:28AM

via free access

This example from pathology hopefully suffices to show that Serres's symbiosis is not a 'motherhood and apple pie' response to the environmental crisis, and is no trivial or 'common sense' paradigm to embrace. It will doubtless raise the objection in the minds of some readers that symbiosis forecloses any possibility of radical, contestatory or disruptive politics. Does symbiosis mean that we are to find a way to live together with, say, racist ideologies and oppression? Where is the possibility for dissent in a system where we seek a way to live together with every enemy, however objectionable? Surely, are there not times when we need to oppose and eradicate? There are, indeed, and symbiosis radically undercuts such objectionable ideologies. To find out how this is the case, we need to turn to the third of the three Serresian motifs that will help us cross the bridge from general ecology to determinate ecological policy: the motif of cosmocracy.

### **From multinational democracy to global cosmocracy**

On a collective level, the paradigm of parasitic symbiosis needs to be accompanied by what Serres calls a new cosmocracy. The old politics was, as its etymology suggests, an irreducibly urban affair at a time when the *polis* could rule the *pagus* as the subject to its object. Today, we no longer live in the same sort of city – one that can separate itself from the earth surrounding and sustaining it – and a new *polis* comes with the need for a new politics. One feature of the new politics offered by Serres is the end of relations of tribal belonging or group affiliation (*appartenance*), in favour of a double affirmation of universality and singularity. The old politics entailed a series of necessary affiliations – to family; to village and community; to nation – facilitated by the difficulty of connecting over distance with people who do not share one's affiliations. The political paradigm of this period was citizenship: affiliation to a particular, geographically determined collective with its own structures and laws. Today, Serres argues, affiliation is on the wane, and it has been overtaken by an increasingly aggressive affirmation of individuality, and a growing sense of the universal, of humanity as a whole beyond its local affiliations (*P* 229–30). It is a change facilitated by the triviality and ubiquity of information storage and retrieval, and by the ease of connecting almost any individual on the planet with any other in a virtual space that does not obey geometric boundaries (*GM* 165–6). This dual affirmation of individuality and universality has come to fruition in the twentieth century, with the increased assertion of individual identity over corporate affiliation, and the increased awareness of humanity as a whole, as well as of the world as a contemplable whole. The new politics is not one of citizens or states, but of

individuals who know themselves to be part of humanity; not of the general, but of the singular and the universal.

The simultaneous emergence of a growing sense of human universality, and a growing individualistic resistance to group affiliations, opens the way for what Serres calls a new ‘cosmocrazy’ – a political system that seeks to cultivate peace between humanity and the environment in the same way that current democracies seek to preserve peace among the citizens of a nation (*LMP* 98). Cosmocrazy is a political system in which not only human interests are represented (as in democracy) – a system that finds a way of formally incorporating the interests of non-human actors in the political process.<sup>43</sup> Cosmocrazy is a truly global politics, and Serres takes care to distinguish it from the current multinational system that obeys the old paradigm of affiliation. On a number of occasions, he recounts the time that he encountered Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the sixth Secretary-General of the United Nations (1992–6). Serres, asking about the possibility of the organisation performing the function of a world assembly, found himself corrected by the Egyptian diplomat: ‘it is not a “global assembly”; it is an “international assembly” where each civil servant is present to defend the interests of his government against the interests of the government facing him across the table. So, kiss goodbye to the world!’ (*P* 262 [my translation]). Boutros-Ghali could find no one to talk to him about air or water as such, for everyone responded that their role

---

43 Serres’s cosmocrazy bears close affinities to Bruno Latour’s ‘parlement des choses [parliament of things]’, an idea that can be traced in Latour’s work as far back as *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes* [*We Have Never Been Modern*] (1991). Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), 197. An important distinction can be made between the two along the lines of the difference between Anglo-Saxon democratic politics and the French Republican model. Latour’s parliament of things is an extension of representative democracy: each human and non-human ‘concern’ receives political representation in the parliament. Serres’s emphasis, by contrast, is not on the communitarian notion of each interest group receiving its voice at the table, but on the commonality of all the members of the cosmocrazy. It is precisely the sort of tribal belongings and group affiliations perpetuated (if not fostered) by Latour’s parliament of things that are challenged by the universalism of the Serresian cosmocrazy: members of a cosmocrazy do not seek representation for their particular lobby or set of concerns; their concern is for the whole. Serres’s twin prongs of individualism and universalism stand in contrast to Latour’s gathering of ‘concerns’, which remain instances of Serres’s unfavoured notion of *appartenance*. For a clarification of the difference between republicanism and democracy in this context, see Jules Régis Debray, ‘Êtes-vous démocrate ou républicain?’, *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1308 (30 November 1989), 115–21.

was to represent the interests of their own government (*EP 22*). Serres concludes that there can never be an intergovernmental solution to environmental problems because the international system is based on affiliation, predisposing everybody to ignore global concerns (*EP 22*). The UN remains an institution of affiliations, resistant to the emergent twin values of individuality and universality.

Far from thwarting political engagement, the twin affirmation of individuality and universality provides Serres with a powerful set of political tools. Let us consider the example of racist ideology that was raised as a potential objection to Serresian symbiosis at the end of the previous section. Racism is the very definition of an ideology of belonging (as opposed to one of universality), creating local groups of affiliation and setting them against each other in just the way that Serres condemns the multinationalism of the United Nations. Racism has no place in his cosmocracy. How does racism differ from the cancer with which Serres seeks to live in symbiosis? In the following way: the equivalence is not between cancer and racism, but between human death caused by cancer and racism. Serres does not argue, let us remember, that we should let cancer ravage the human population on the basis that it has as much of a right to exist as we have. Symbiosis is not a *laissez-faire* policy of 'live and let live', but an intricate, high-stakes game of diplomacy that must serve the interests of both parties. Just as Serres's symbiotic response to cancer is one in which it no longer kills people, but has its energy harvested in productive and beneficial ways, so a symbiotic response to the curse of racism would be to identify and redirect the lust for affiliation and domination that lies at its heart.

In place of the outdated assumptions and institutions that underlie the current resistance to a new politics, Serres offers at the end of *L'Incandescent* a thought-experiment that he entitles 'Appel aux universités pour un savoir commun' ['Call to Universities for a Common Knowledge'] (*Inc 407–8*), to which he appends the outline of a curriculum for the first year of university studies (*Inc 409–10*). The proposal is built on the twin observations that the hard sciences have attained a level of general acceptance transcending national affiliation (universality), and that world cultures form a mosaic tapestry of diverse forms and colours (individuality). It is important to point out that the suggestion is not to create an international monoculture, but to bring together the multicoloured Harlequin of culture and the monochrome Pierrot of the sciences in the same curriculum. Nor is Serres calling for the homogenisation of education, since one third of the curriculum in his plan for the first year remains dedicated to the individual student's speciality. The innovation of the curriculum is that it marries specialisation with the sort of cross-disciplinary training characteristic of Serres's 'tiers-instruit

[troubadour of knowledge]’ (*GM* 158) – a formation that would forestall the mutual suspicion and rivalry between academic disciplines, which merely mimics the competition between national interests in current multinational institutions. It would, furthermore, be a global curriculum taught in academic institutions across the world – a feature that reflects the emergence of the new universality, replacing Neolithic affiliations.

Only one who is educated in the sciences, humanities and arts can respond adequately to an ecological crisis that knows no boundaries between the natural and the cultural. Only such an individual would be ready to embrace Serres’s proposal for a global (as opposed to multinational) institution – an assembly that he playfully names *WAFLE* (Water, Air, Fire, Life, Earth), at which non-human interests would be represented alongside those of humanity. Such an assembly is, Serres freely admits, a utopian proposal in the context of contemporary politics ruled by the logic of affiliation. But, taken together with his proposal for a new curriculum, it presents a concrete political vision that takes seriously the inextricability of nature and culture in general ecology, and the twin assertions of universality and individuality at the expense of local affiliations.

## References

- Connor, Steven K., *A Philosophy of Sport* (London: Reaktion, 2011)
- , ‘Play Grounds: The Arenas of Game’, *StevenConnor.com* (13 February 2008), <<http://stevenconnor.com/playgrounds.html>> [accessed 27 May 2016]
- Debray, Jules Régis, ‘Êtes-vous démocrate ou républicain?’, *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1308 (30 November 1989), 115–21
- Harris, Paul A., ‘The Itinerant Theorist: Nature and Knowledge/Ecology and Topology in Michel Serres’, *SubStance* 26.2 (1997), 37–58
- Latour, Bruno, *Face à Gaïa: huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015)
- , ‘Facing Gaia: A New Enquiry into Natural Religion’, *University of Edinburgh* (18–28 February 2013), <<http://www.ed.ac.uk/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour>> [accessed 27 May 2016]
- , *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997)
- , ‘The Puzzling Face of a Secular Gaia’, *University of Edinburgh* (21 February 2013), <<http://www.ed.ac.uk/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour/lecture-three>> [accessed 27 May 2016]

- Lévy, Sydney, 'Introduction: An Ecology of Knowledge: Michel Serres', *SubStance* 26.2 (1997), 3–5
- Lovelock, James, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
- Posthumus, Stephanie, 'La Nature et l'écologie chez Lévi-Strauss, Tournier, Serres' (PhD thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2003)
- , 'Translating Ecocriticism: Dialoguing with Michel Serres', *Reconstruction* 7.2 (2007), 37 paragraphs, <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/072/posthumus.shtml>> [accessed 27 May 2016]
- , 'Vers une écocritique française: le contrat naturel de Michel Serres', *Mosaïq* 44.2 (2011), 85–100
- Serres, Michel, *Biogée* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2010)
- , *Habiter* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2011)
- , *Hominescence* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2001)
- , *La Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2008)
- , *Le Contrat naturel* (Paris: Bourin, 1990)
- , *Le Mal propre: polluer pour s'approprier?* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2008)
- , *Le Parasite* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1980)
- , 'Le Temps humain: de l'évolution créatrice au créateur d'évolution', in *Qu'est-ce que l'humain?*, ed. by P. Picq, M. Serres and J.-D. Vincent (Paris: Le Pommier, 1999), 71–108
- , *L'Incandescent* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2003)
- , *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?*, trans. by A.-M. Feenberg-Dibon (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011)
- , *Pantopie: de 'Hermès' à 'Petite Poucette'* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2014)
- , *Rameaux* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2004)
- , *Récits d'humanisme* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2006)
- , *Rome: le livre des fondations* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1983)
- , *Statues: le second livre des fondations* (Paris: Julliard, 1987)
- , *The Parasite*, trans. by L. R. Schehr (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)
- , and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Culture, Science and Time*, trans. by R. Lapidus (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995)
- , and Bruno Latour, *Éclaircissements: cinq entretiens avec Bruno Latour* (Paris: Bourin, 1992)

- , and Clés, ‘Michel Serres: “Nous traversons la plus importante mutation depuis la préhistoire!”’, *Clés* (2014), <<http://www.cles.com/enquetes/article/michel-serres-nous-traversons-la-plus-importante-mutation-depuis-la-prehistoire>> [accessed 27 May 2016]
- , and Luc Abraham, ‘Un entretien avec Michel Serres’, *Horizons philosophiques* 10.2 (2000), 97–116
- , and *Pouvoirs*, ‘Entretien avec Michel Serres: le droit peut sauver la nature’, *Pouvoirs* 127 (2008), 5–12
- Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, ‘Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene’’, *quaternary.stratigraphy.org* (23 February 2016), <<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene>> [accessed 27 May 2016]
- Waters, Colin N., et al., ‘The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene’, *Science* 351.6269 (8 January 2016), <<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/351/6269/aad2622>> [accessed 27 May 2016]