

Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (1980)

[Excerpts]

The tax farmer produced neither oil nor ham nor cheese; in fact, he produced nothing. But using power or the law, he can profit from these products. Likewise for the city rat who takes the farmer's leftovers. And the last to profit is the country rat. But we know that the feast is cut short. The two companions scurry off when they hear a noise at the door. It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information. Was the noise really a message? Wasn't it, rather, static, a parasite? A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order. [3]

Let's draw up the balance. In the beginning is production: the oil crusher, the butter churn, the smokehouse, the cheesemaker's hut. Yet I would still like to know what *produce* means. Those who call production reproduction make the job easy. Our world is full of copiers and repeaters, all highly rewarded with money and glory. It is better to interpret that to compose; it is better to have an opinion on a decision that has already been made than to make one's own. The modern illness is the engulfing of the new in the *duplicata*, the engulfing of intelligence in the pleasure [*jouissance*] of the new homogenous. Real production is undoubtedly rare, for it attracts parasites that immediately make it something common and banal. Real production is unexpected and improbable; it overflows with information and is always immediately parasited. [4]

Man is a louse for other men. Thus man is a host for other men. The flow goes one way, never the other. I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, "parasitic". If the "guest" is a farmer, I consider him to be a parasite in the economic sense. [...] What does man give to the cow, to the tree, to the steer, who give him milk, warmth, shelter, work, and food? What does he give? Death. [5]

To parasite means to eat next to. [...] Abuse appears before use. [...] The host is not a prey, for he offers and continues to give. Not a prey, but the host. The other one is not a predator but a parasite. Would you say that the mother's breast is the child's prey? It is more or less the child's home. But this relation is of the simplest sort; there is none simpler or easier: it always goes in the same direction. The same one is the host; the same one takes and eats; there is no change of direction. This is true of all beings. Of lice and men. [7]

The intuition of the parasitologist makes him import a common relation of social manners to the habits of little animals, a relation so clear and distinct that we recognize it as being the simplest. Let's retrace our steps for a moment, going from these habits back to those manners, reversing anthropomorphism. We have made the louse in our image; let's see ourselves in his. The intuition of the poet of the fable of the rats, and that of the philosopher who wrote of the eagle and the lamb, makes them import a very common relation in the realm of mammals and of the vertebrates in general, the relation of the hunt and of predatory behavior to human habits and customs. Man is a wolf for men, an eagle for sheep, a rat for rats. In truth, a *rara avis*. I've seen few men with the bravery of the rat, the courage of the wolf, the nobility of the eagle. I speak in figures to those who speak in figures; we know not what we say. We are in a labyrinth of images; we'll never get rid of these illusions. Let us leave the theater of representations, which can only become serious in the tragic instance of the unspeakable horror of metamorphosis of becoming a rat. Let's return to our writers. Quite curiously, the manners of this wolf, fox, lion, monkey, cat, or rat are never, or seldom, those of predators; in these stories, they are almost always those of parasites. In the guise of an attack, a theft, a power-play, in the person of these animals, the simple relation of the abusive companion reappears. Beneath the apologist, the parasitologist. [...] The triangle is closed. At each of its point, through story or science, social science or biological science, just one relation appears, the simple, irreversible arrow. [7]

The parasitic relation is intersubjective. It is the atomic form of our relations. Let us try to face it head-on, like death, like the sun. We are all attacked, together. [8]

Our relation to animals is more interesting – I mean to the animals we eat. We adore eating veal, lamb, beef, antelope, pheasant, or grouse, but we don't throw away their "leftovers". We dress in leather and adorn ourselves with feathers. Like the Chinese, we devour duck without wasting a bit; we eat the whole pig, from head to tail; but we get under these animals' skin as well, in their plumage or in their hide. Men in clothing live within the animals they devoured. And the same thing for plants. We eat rice, wheat, apples, the divine eggplant, the tender dandelion; but we also weave silk, linen, cotton; we live within the flora as much as we live within the fauna. We are parasites; thus we clothe ourselves. Thus we live within tents of skins like the gods within their tabernacles. Look at him well-dressed and adorned, magnificent; he shows – he showed – the clean carcass of his host. Of the soft parasite you can see only the clean-shaven face and the hands, sometimes without their kid gloves. [10]

We parasite each other and live among parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment. We live in that black box called the collective; we live by it, on it, and in it. It so happens that this collective was given the form of an animal: Leviathan. We are certainly within something bestial; in more distinguished terms, we are speaking of an organic model for the members of a society. Our host? I don't know. But I do know that we are within. And that it is dark in there. [10]

See diagram and confusion between entropy and negentropy. [19]

I like the word apostasy, which, once rid of its ecclesiastical relations, really means “away from equilibrium”. [20]

The parasite invents something new. He obtains energy and pays for it in information. He obtains the roast and pays for it with stories. Two days of writing the new contract. He establishes an unjust pact; relative to the old type of balance, he builds a new one. He speaks in a logic considered irrational up to now, a new epistemology and a new theory of equilibrium. He makes the order of things as well as the states of things — solid and gas — into diagonals. He evaluates information. Even better: he discovers information in his voice and good words; he discovers the Spirit in the wind and the breath of air. He invents cybernetics. [36]

The manual laborer has to be blind in relation to the paralyzed intellectual. The helmsman has no porthole; he hears his master’s voice, he listens, he repeats, and he obeys. Just like the blind man a while back, who followed a voice. One furnishes energy; the other, information. One gives the force to work; the other, the directions. Matter and voice [...] This cybernetics gets more and more complicated, makes a chain, then a network. Yet it is founded on the theft of information, quite a simple thing. It is merely necessary to edit the laws and to withdraw knowledge from the greatest number. In the end, power is nothing else. [37]

Animal-raising and vegetable farming are practices that are parasitic on the reproduction of living things. The tree and the cow told us that man never returned or recognized the gifts of flora and fauna. He uses and abuses them but does not exchange with them. He gives food to the animals, you say. Yessir, he gives flora to the fauns, fauna to the fauna, gives inert material to the flora. What does he give on himself? Does he give himself to be eaten? The one who does so will utter a timeless word. One word, *host*. That of the Eucharist. [82]

Contrary to what is said in both classical and contemporary philosophy, men are not the only ones who work. We are never that exceptional. Animals work, as do living organisms. What I mean by that is that life itself works — that it is life through the activity of Maxwell’s demon. The organism gets order and energy, chews them up, sorts them, classifies them, and re-forms its own order and its own energy, eliminating the losses. Does a miller do otherwise? Is the treatment of aggregates in a river another activity? What is a production in a factory? People will say that I am projecting our own organization of work into a natural system. Maybe so. I tend to think that here we are not finding a cause and an effect, but two parallel effects or a circle of cause-effect. I no longer see the difference between the bee and the architect.

Work flows from me like honey, like the spider’s web. I don’t know with what external order I nourished this second order; my body is transformer of itself, but also a transformer for this linguistic wax, a long secretion come from my five fingers; I work hard, I don’t work at all; it comes easily, just like what an animal does when it follows its own instinct in doing this or that. I am a bee or a spider, a tree. I no longer can tell the difference between work and secretion. [86]

Flowing is nothing else: the flow is directed toward the exterior. Could selling be another form of expulsion? Would one exchange only what is chased? It is true that Joseph, ousted in another time and place, was also sold by his brothers. Are we

now at the very origin of exchange? Does one dispose of only what one no longer wants? The fruit will spoil, the grain will rot, the parasites will eat up the stock; we must sell, get rid of it. Chasing, selling, exacting a tax. We are sacrificing our stock, they say. If it is true, **money** is a substitute for the victim. Money is the trace of the excluded person. Money is the symbol of the banished person. The sign of sacrifice. Money is religious; it is God: Marx say so directly. [149]

The exchange of the logical for the material is a parasitic invention. The parasitic is there, at the very beginning of exchange and gift-giving, of gift-giving and damages; it switches the changes between what is not equivalent. From the evidence it seems that the logical and the material are not equivalent. And it makes them equivalent. It is thus the most general equivaluator. It is money itself. The sign at a distance relative to food (para-site), the sign at a distance relative to goods. That is to say, the very mobility of exchange, its flow. Earlier I described the parasite as the power of metamorphosis. It was, in fact, the **general equivalent**. [150]

We must return to these simple peasant practices from which all of culture came. Here are abundant fruit, vegetables, milk, wine, wheat. The fruit spoils, the milk sours, the wine turns in to vinegar, the vegetables rot, the stores of wheat are filled with rats and weevils. **Everything ferments**; everything rots. Everything changes. Rotting and plague are not only symbols of violence but also real, singular referents that only need themselves to give rise to clearly defined process. The surplus is gotten rid of because it is perishable. In fact the rotten is expelled, merchandise is disposed of, because it might start to run. [...] The very simple idea of the equilibrium of exchange is ontological. By the very movement of the exchange, what changes, no longer changes. It might have become rotten, and now it is **money**. [...] Surplus can be disposed of or stocked. It can be stocked in the form of money or as itself. Then rot sets in and the parasites are at home. From this point on, we are bound to go to the end of the process of decomposition: wine-making, cheese-making, bread-making. [156]

What is capital? It is the reservoir above the dam, an iron mine or a coal, manganese, or tungsten mine; a gold mine. A oil well. It is a stock of energy and of primary material; it is an island of **negative entropy**. Elsewhere I called this capital a reservoir. This is an optimistic name: conserve, preserve what can re-serve. In fact, the reservoir is a conceivable function of time. What is capital? A city, a class, a group, a nation. Us. [171]

The real, ultimate capital is the **sun**. Subcapitals are time functions, but our time is that of the sun. Our cosmological, astronomic, functions, but our time is that of the sun. Our cosmological, astronomic, energetic, entropic, informational times, all cyclic and reversible, as well as the irreversible times of disorder and death, of life and order randomly invented — all of these intertwine in the sun. In matter of energy and of matter, only the sun creates and transforms. All kinds of **materialism**, and especially those that seek to account for real movement and its excess, join together with various energetics and perhaps idealisms here — they are, when all is said and done, all **subcults of the sun**. [173]

We usually excluded weeds and separated the wheat from the chaff. But that is not possible when the wheat is growing. Thus the purge, the sacralization of a given space, of a templum, of a garden, begins by the total and radical expulsion of all species. [177]

The first one who, having enclosed a field or a bit of land, decided to exclude everything there, was the true founder of the following historical era. Agriculture and culture have the same origin or the same foundation, a white spot that realizes a rupture of equilibrium, a clean spot constituted through expulsion. A spot of propriety [sic] or cleanliness, a spot of belonging. [...] The priest, that is to say, the one who makes the motion of expulsion, of cutting up of the *templum*. The farmer makes the same motion. [179]

Ambrosia is found among the Hindus as much as it is here; it is the brew that saved the human population of the Fertile Crescent, and from even further East of Eden, from certain infectious diseases found in the lakes and backwaters. Beer, wine, and bread, foods of fermentation, of bubbling, foods of decay, appeared as safeguards against death. These were our first great victories over parasites, our rivals, obtained, as might be expected, for reasons and intentions that were completely different from those that made them triumph *de facto*. From the Olympians to the Last Supper, we have celebrated the victory to which we owe our life, the eternity of phylogenesis, and we celebrated it in its natural spot, the table.

Here the question discover its model. I shall no longer die from eating bread; my son will no longer die from drinking the wine or the brew of the gods. The chain that was eating us has been abolished. Take this line literally: your ancestors drank water from Jacob's well, and they died. They died from it, as the water was no longer potable. Drink the water changed into wine and the wine changed into the brew of immortality; you will be free of parasites. Of mortal, deadly putrefaction. We must then pass from the model to the ecosystem. We are not different from the animals that were eating us, the small animals that were killing us. We eat ourselves; we kill each other. [183]

The parasite is an element of relation; it is the atom of relation, the directional atom. It is the arrow flying at random in broad daylight. It is the appearance of meaning. The theory of being, ontology, bring us to atoms. The theory of relations brings us to the parasite. [185]

Elsewhere I said that living organisms are bouquets or blades of time, that they are exchangers of time. That life, certainly, is nothing but time, but that this proposition is not simple. And that we know three kinds of time, so different that they can be said to be contradictory; the reversible one, datable by the long equilibria of the world, and two irreversible ones, those of entropy and of Darwinian evolution. The first one protects us and defines our niche; the second makes us die a more or less lasting death, and the last perpetuates us, placing hope in the genius of our daughters and the beauty of our sons. Life would be the intertwining of these three separable chronies. [186]

We don't understand very well how the two chronies or irreversible times intertwine in turn. How one goes down toward death and destruction, while the other constantly produces differences and novelties. The parasite permits us to understand this maximal divergence. Its excessive demands make it always move further down, by the constitution of successive gates; the law of its life is never to allow itself to be supplanted. In this capacity, it exposes every system to ruin, it tends to exhaust reservoirs; it can kill everything it meets. But at the same time it multiplies the complexity which can be either suffocation or novelty; it excites production; it exalts and accelerates the exchanges of its hosts. It is Boltzmannian and Darwinian at the same time. [187]

The parasite is the active operator and the logical operation of evolution, of the irreversible time of life. [...] Irreversible living time begins with the introduction of a parasite. In the common vicinity of what is called inert and what is called living, a virus reproduces in a parasitic fashion. It is not uninteresting that it has been called a [bacterio]phage. Throughout classification and throughout evolution, the parasite is there, protozoan, metazoan, present as if to keep up the continuity of the course of life. [188]

It happens, in particular, that an infectious disease is provoked by the arrival of a parasite, a virus, a protozoan, a metazoan, or a fungus. Introduced either permanently or temporarily in the organism of its host that is henceforth its environment, it intercepts flows, sometimes accelerating them, turning them in its favor at every level. This one is specific – in the digestive tract – for the oral cavity or for intestinal movement; that one is specific for the circulation of blood; a third is specific for the sebaceous gland; I shall stop this enumeration, which would last for volumes on end. The sum or a synopsis of these living creatures and their activities would tell us, I guess, that there are no channels, paths, or flows, that, at least in principle, do not have their interceptors. Each one has its niche, and few niches remain unoccupied. And inversely, he who has a niche is a parasite. [198]

Is mammalian reproduction an endoparasitic cycle? What is an animal that can reproduce only by another animal, inside it? What is a little animal that grows and feeds inside another? It seems to me that it is a parasite, the one who finds a milieu of reproduction and development in another animal, though this other be the same. [216]

Words, bread, and wine are between us, beings or relations. We appear to exchange them between us though we are connected at the same table or with the same language. They are breast-fed by the same mother. Parasitic exchange, crossed between the logical and the material, can now be explained. At Pentecost, the newborn apostles, suckle the tongues of fire, divided and coming from a single base; at the Last Supper, everyone is a parasite at the master's table, drinking the wine, eating the bread, sharing and passing it. The mystery of transubstantiation is there; it is clear, luminous, and transparent. Do we ever eat anything else together than the flesh of the word? [232]