

## A New Negentropic Subject Reviewing Michel Serres' *Biogea*

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Michel Serres. *Biogea*. Trans. Randolph Burks. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing. 2012.  
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Conveying to potential readers the significance of a book puts me at risk of glad handing. It's not in my interest to laud the undeserving, especially on the pages of this journal. This is not a sales pitch, but rather an affirmation of a necessary work on very troubled terms: human, earth, nature, and the problematic world we made. It is this world that aspirates the silence (so to speak), and therefore the subject which, along with the development of the "made world" exports the excess augmentation of the cosmically missing, this silence of the natural, et cetera. Had we learned from Locke that lesson of "labor," to consume what we need... but perhaps we need more than what matters?

Serres' *Biogea* has several functions on this manner, if it is indeed a book to be consumed. First, readers searching for novelistic entertainment have a place to dwell. *Biogea* deserves a place in your back pocket; biographical generosity and poetic fluidity should satisfy most textual fetishes. For lay philosophers who want to refresh their acumen, *Biogea* deserves a place on the book shelf, one already reads a sorely needed postmodern tune-up here. Serres' style is clearly French; he leaves few cheese crumbs on his words, rather preciseness and breathing in the work give way to a sweeping manner that breaks the narrative line of sight. A circular narrative and anachronistic fragmentation of terms allows an abyssal atmosphere to swell, if only to pump into the book the externality of its broader text. *Biogea* aspires to a higher standard and the book, at times, is thinking this negentropic problem too. Univocal, the publisher, has crafted a book appropriate for the hands to hold and the translations are an achievement of an otherwise difficult writer to translate.

Terms are the conditions of a broader text. It is important to note that Serres' content is as much a thinking of terminal ports. There is a regard for the transportation technology of the written word. For me, this is the mark of genius, a craftiness that tells of a book device that I may trust. Serres is an accomplished thinker and a necessary voice to check the putative trendiness of anti-postmodernist and market-driven theory of endless cultural liquidation. Offering interventions on subjectivity as an open system we are given a chance to affirm the human, not merely to discard it, but to engage its poetic image emotion, the calibratory silent sense of the analogic world; the terms on which we base our efforts.<sup>1</sup> The human is the center of its own negation, constantly mediating it. Something deeper at stake appears in the work then, and it is quite obvious from the onset. Certainly, a book is an intensification of possible text and those who brought this actual book into

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1. See Michel Serres. *The Parasite*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2007.

existence have captured a rarity in regards to the subject matter and artistic accomplishment.

I mentioned terms as conditions, so let us understand *Biogea* as bio-yea, a yes to *bios*. An affirmation of living and accepting presence for all of its defiance of images, words, and things temporal. Therefore Serres' existence and its existants plays parts; out of linearity and still like a porous bone pumping blood it manufactures into the fleshy life it becomes. Starting from a man named silence chaos emerges, or the man "Old Taciturn" takes up a journey anticipating a great flood. In other words, a development akin to the one in Genesis. In dealing with this ancestral occupation, fusing Genesis with contemporary philosophical terms, Serres initiates this anachronistic fragmentation under the forming subjectivity of his own autobiography.

This mutation in the open system is precisely one of Serres' terms. There an abyss is at work, stated, but also measured by heels on the ground—the abyss dispatching earthen tensions, that which plays our tunes, that which we abide by and recognize in volcanoes, rivers, oceans, earthquakes and weaponry in the battles of the world. Set in later stages of the book, such tensions are harnessed through scientific principles in an attempt to unify the terms of natural force if only to terminate the world. Thus the elevation of the earth into the world is clearly set forth.

Here already, and few pages in, a resonance is set forth under appellations such as the river Garonne, a subjectivity as much as it is inhuman, the river is the inhuman that makes us human. I get the sense that Serres is taking up a challenge issued by Wallace Stevens; namely, that the great poems of heaven and hell have been written, but that only the poem of the earth has resisted composition.<sup>2</sup> On this level we cannot avoid the killing factor of silence, given that our cognition blocks its pure, radical obliteration. Thus a silence of attunement to the earth is in a novel dialectic of the rhythmic and rhythm. A technological world, a triumph of termination is set forth. If a text imposes its will given the reader who authorizes it, it is made to convey or convect a presupposition to a reader or its inhabitant(s). Text is therefore both, in-content, contenting, contentedness, and in reading it, a way to navigate self-destruction (dis-content).

Here then would one note that the "inhuman" reveals itself, "an aperiodic rhythm of lovers and beloved...the sea as our friend...but as our enemy...maternal vivifying sea." The sea is an open book, or vaginal birth canal, where the engagement of text comes forth: "...woman sea, open vulva." One sees like the sea, but only after it, when the uninhabitable truth of inhabiting it switches the polarity of the sailor's soul: "I was seeing like the sea" (9-11). In other words, we are invited to embrace the nonsense of the visible.

At this point I am taken to Jean-François Lyotard's work *The Inhuman*, specifically the first entry on negentropy that would be congruent with Serres' thematic.<sup>3</sup> The human being exports, deports, or transplants its relation through text, through the system—and this is its sense or relation to silence, to music. Unaware of Serres' proximity to this work, the concept of gender interrelation as regards a solar catastrophe runs clear. It would be, on this basis, that Serres references his peers, the other texts that, as mentioned above, are discarded in philosophy today. For students of philosophy what we have here is perhaps a gift, a needed project.

If silence and death are at work, there is a political valence to deal with, and here, much like the domain of the text and the dominion of the reader, we confront the world of natural, fluid violence. The anti-

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2. Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value" [ca. 1945], in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 724-39.

3. Jean-François Lyotard. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 1992.

postmodernist critique is in part based on a weak idea that the loss of ideology, of a world vision, motivates the “correlationist” project.<sup>4</sup> Serres seems to offer another way to view this when he notes that whereas persons “sometimes kill,” it is clearly “the collective” that “always kills” (17). What is the collective today, if not an organizing function we never see yet acts in its favor in the name of truth? One feels a sense of enigma here, if only to link to what Stevens remarked of communism as a “grubby faith,” providing this applies for capitalism as well, namely any ideology of progress overly interested in absolutes. Here we get the sense that the inhuman, silence, this type of killing, always killing, could not be matched by human-made, political dynamos. Or that if it comes to an equilibrium, a catastrophe is never too far from us to read with our heels. We are left to note that the forces of nature presuppose and permeate political systems, the more these systems obtain force, the more the system takes upon itself the proper name of nature that motivates its dissemination, albeit falsely. This note, that in an age of ecocide and technological captivity (sustainability and transparency) political regimes won’t grow our soul-learning ears any larger than our tongues, stands clear to us. The promise of technological desubjectification is here pushed aside.

Regarding politics, Serres illustrates this fact:

Where did this corpse come from? Who was it? Who killed it? I don’t know. I won’t try to find out. I refuse to get vengeance for it. And I only see Garonne. For our victims, today, are the rivers, too. Their waters have irrigated my life, enchanted my thought, invigorated my body; I’ve known them to be threatening, untamable, as dangerous as the sea when it rages. Yes, murderous.

They decided to control their courses; dams, sometimes senseless, destroying sites and valleys, reduced entire populations to servile displacements; programs for the irrigation of thirsty farmland, often beneficial of course, completed their drying up. (22)

Serres enters into his idea concerning the captivity of language from the natural into a world system:

For thousands of years, we have been licking things with our tongues, covering and daubing them so as to appropriate things for ourselves. If language boils down to a convention, this convention took place between the speakers without consulting the thing named, become as a result the property of those who covered it in this way with their drawn or voiced productions. Malfeasance analyzes these acts of appropriation.

Thus every inert object, every living thing as well, sleeps under the covers of signs, a little in the way that, today, a thousand posters shouting messages and ugly riots of color drown, with their filthy flood, the landscapes, or better, exclude them from perception because the meaning, almost nil, of this false language and these base images forms an irresistible source of attraction to our neurons and eyes. This appropriation covers the world’s beauty with ugliness. (38-39)

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4. See the introduction: Quentin Melliassoux. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. New York: Continuum. 2008.

Technological concealment coming to bear, we begin to get a sense of another commentary on the condition of sensing, driving home the necessity of a text dealing with such subject matter to be what its terms insist.

Thus toward new openings:

The new opening. As low beneath our feet as you like, the Biogea opens us to another space, high enough for us to be able to acquire a wisdom there, that of redeveloping this same place differently from our fathers, this place that's still politically cut up by old hatreds, beneath the flood of tears and blood that we call history. Without this soft place, spiritually very old, but newly conceived in this way, without the juridical construction of a common good, opposed to our filthy ownership, I don't see how our planet, hard, will survive. Hardness that depends on a softness, material belonging that depends on this temporary rented location (51).

Serres enters into a summit on the content and the structure of his work. Archimedes is brought in with the concept of three volcanoes. Meaning fire, but as well earth, water, air. For it was Archimedes' war machines that sought to lift the earth, thus bringing in the question of principles of science: "can a principle be invented while controlling its consequences?" (66-7). May the earth be put in a sentence, terminated by terminology, appellations, gone wild?

By means of these element-dominating laws, this old physicist began to tear nature away from the ancient myths; by a strange return, today we're plunging our successes back into the anxieties and terrors from which that ancient physics was born. Yes, our new history of science and technology is plunging, today, as though in a loop, into the fundamental human myths from which Empedocles' first laws came. A major progression and a regression on the nether side of the origins. Consequently, the contemporary time requires that we try to return to that unity in which the principles of hate and love are at the same time human, living, inert and global. We will never attain a deontology of our knowledge and actions without thinking the subjective, the objective, the collective, and the cognitive all together simultaneously. Here, hate and love are the result of these four components. (71)

Working then on the concept of fire-starting mirrors to the atomic annihilation of the Second War, Serres works into the subjectivity in question on the matter of rhythm—say rhythmic— precisely at that point:

Knowledge is changing today. The all-political is dying; the monarchy of the sciences said to be hard is coming to a close. The science of the things of the world will have to communicate just as much as the things of the world do, which do it much better than humans do, who don't always want to do it. Let's celebrate two changes this morning. The first one strikes a new blow to our narcissism. No, knowledge and the world don't resemble our analytical enjoyments of refined cutting up, of endless debates and of exclusions full of hate. They, on the contrary, form a bloc and a sum, alliance and alloys. Uniting the fields of knowledge among themselves the way the things are connected among themselves, the second newness puts into place sets united by

interlacing, webs and simplexes that combine with the things of the world,  
themselves combined, the combined knowledge that understands them.  
(130-1)

Biogea closes on its opening flood thematic, approaching the initial telos of Genesis. Here the trees are brought into a position with atmosphere, the opaque abyssal reservoir, the tomb of the sun, sea in the polarity of the earthen heaven and hell. The poem of the earth then is silent but deadly, indeed, as funny as that phrase is, mainly a tomb gas.

The meaning of the living and the non-meaning of things converge in the muteness of the world; this meaning and non-meaning plunge there and come out, the ultimate eddy. Mundus patet: through a fissure, through an opening, a fault, a cleft come noises, calls as small as these apertures. I'm listening, attentive, I'm translating, I'm advancing in the scaled-down meaning and science. Mundus patet: should the world open greatly, it will launch me into its silence. The totality remains silent. Knowledge expanded in elation. White origin of meaning, fountain of joy. (198)

#### Final Remarks

One test of a review is the long term trajectory the referee thinks the book will have. I see Serres' text lending greatly into the vision of *Biogea*. In fact, in the vision of the novel inquiries of Stephen Jay Gould's work there is something to be thought on the level of the individual and the species; namely, that humanity and its uniqueness is in its deferral, its thinking and naming, a thinking surrounded by silence that filters into everything, that pulls us through the world, the kinetic pulse we recognize, and all of that we cleave away in the base philosophical maxim of difference itself. Unique individuals are spatial creatures: we dwell, and we ought to get good at it. Yet this is an imaginative space that, if you are crazy enough to believe it, de-term-ine the conditions of its own terms. That is why we are not merely creating spaces on the acceleration of time, or so this ignoramus thinks, to accidentally transcend. Imagination already has this insatiable silence that we drink up and fail to manifest. Space is timeless. The imagination itself, shared by humans for themselves, their objects, and the species as a whole, is a non-defined space of relation; a whole human trajectory as part of nature, and part of worlds that are the other side of thinking nature, the consequence of it, at least our attempt to do so. Our survival is based on our deliberation, our caution, our natural deconstructive sense toward this silence that is already part of the song, sung, singing of this century without end. Good books will let us inhabit this space and recognize a form of life.

Serres' text moves toward dwelling, as noted, in masterful and accessible ways. The pitched battles are the falling replays of anemic and dead politics. As soon as we realize there is humanity, we may be able to enjoy the end of it, our inhuman capability of listening to silence.