

MICHEL SERRES

Genesis

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Genesis

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MICHEL SERRES

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Translated by
Geneviève James and James Nielson

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J.N.

*For Annette Gruner Schlumberger
by way of affection and thanks*

I confine myself to crying out, as the birds of the Capitol did in the old days, at the noise of the assailants.

—Thomas Hobbes, dedicatory epistle to *Leviathan*

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A Short Tall Tale

As I was sailing along that summer, under a dazzling sky, and drifting lazily in the wind and sun, I found myself, one fine morning, in the green and stagnant waters of the Sargasso Sea, at a mysterious spot where thousands of tiny sparks, all shapes and all colors, were glimmering crazily in the early morning light. Bearing off, I was dumbfounded to see an area almost two hundred and fifty acres square entirely populated by dancing bottles. There were countless little vessels, and each one no doubt bore its message; each had its freight and each had its buoyant little roll, ballasted with seawrack and rockery; each carried its hope and its despair. The coiling winds had compelled them all there, from far and near, from a thousand different quadrants. Their constant and perilous collisions made for an acute and cacophonous carillon, and this noise mounted heavenward, wafted to the horizon, it filled all space with giddy ecstasy.

The following night, a wide sargasso put me in danger of shipwreck. I had just about foundered. Swiftly I made a raft of some of the bottles, they worked well as floats and bladders, and thus did I make my way back to Bordeaux.

The Object of This Book

What I am offering to be sounded and perhaps fathomed in the following pages is a new object for philosophy.



A flight of screaming birds, a school of herring tearing through the water like a silken sheet, a cloud of chirping crickets, a booming whirlwind of mosquitos . . . crowds, packs, hordes on the move, and filling with their clamor, space; Leibniz called them aggregates, these objects, sets. He brought them to people's attention at least; even if he undervalued them by merely according them the status of a heap of stones; even if he kept them mum by classifying them under harmony.

We are fascinated by the unit; only a unity seems rational to us. We scorn the senses, because their information reaches us in bursts. We scorn the groupings of the world, and we scorn those of our bodies. For us they seem to enjoy a bit of the status of Being only when they are subsumed beneath a unity. Disaggregation and aggregation, as such, and without contradiction, are repugnant to us. Multiplicity, according to Leibniz, is only a semi-being. A cartload of bricks isn't a house. Unity dazzles on at least two counts: by its sum and by its division. That herd must be singular in its totality and it must also be made up of a given number of sheep or buffalo. We want a principle, a system, an integration, and we want elements, atoms, numbers. We want them, and we

make them. A single God, and identifiable individuals. The aggregate as such is not a well-formed object; it seems irrational to us. The arithmetic of whole numbers remains a secret foundation of our understanding; we're all Pythagorians. We think only in monadologies.

Nevertheless, we are as little sure of the one as of the multiple. We've never hit upon truly atomic, ultimate, indivisible terms that were not themselves, once again, composite. Not in the pure sciences and not in the worldly ones. The bottom always falls out of the quest for the elementary. The irreducibly individual recedes like the horizon, as our analysis advances. So then, knowledge returns to sets. But a global unity, all the same, remains scarcely accessible. We lose the particular; we've lost the world. We've obliterated the human being, the human being as something specific, as well as the human being in general. We've long ago given up the hope for a unitary knowledge; there's exceedingly little appearance of us living, thinking, or existing as a collectivity, under one law, indivisible. The universal now only appears as the local monstrously inflated. If reason demands a road that will lead us from the monads situated there, or from some locality or other, to a global monadology, we are forced to admit either that there is none or that it is without foreseeable end. So then, by giving up the multiple for the one, has reason given up its prey to chase a shadow? Reason makes use of concepts, under whose unities are sheltered multiplicities that are most often highly dispersed.



No doubt compelled by these disappointments, we've been obliged to substitute the search for relationships for the futile quest of beings. We have supposed this was a decisive and necessary step forward, but perhaps it was merely a detour. The element became a crossroads or nexus of relations, an exchange or cloverleaf, every system was limned as a network of connections. Locally, far from imagining a subset of two terms, only the line connecting them, an analogy or a distinction, was given emphasis. Globally, every theory of systems became a graph of either a simplex or a complex, all things being first of all situated in the depths of a black box. We despise contents, we administer flow charts. So then: the foregoing reasoning transports itself from particles to

connections, without any major changes. Toward the end of his life, as we now know, Leibniz himself had already conceived a second monadology, a monadology of *vincula*—connections. Once more doubt now enters the picture. Are there any connections to begin with that can't be further analyzed? I have no proofs that the simple parasitic arrow, even, is a basic unit of relationship, truly undecomposable. I have believed as much, of course, and I still do; but I can't be sure. Who, in the end, and from the other side of the picture, can boast of having conceived a general system, of projecting or constructing a general system of communication or relation, as a universal network? What would be conveyed by it? and how? What harmony, what cacophony would come of it? Do we have any sort of an ear for hearing that kind of thing?

There is still the problem of finding out how relation is transformed into being, and being into relation—to which we will be returning.



Of old I told the example of the cloud, I told of the concept of a nebulous set, I sketched the fringe of the flame, fluctuating with time; I never attempted to conceive of the multiple as such, directly, without ever allowing unification to come to its aid. I am trying here to raise the brackets and parentheses, syntheses, whereby we shove multiplicities under unities. That is the object of this book: the multiple. Can I possibly speak of multiplicity itself without ever availing myself of the *concept*? I am attempting to open up certain black boxes where it is hidden away, some of the deep freezes in which it has been frozen, a few of the soundproof rooms where it remains mute. Hopelessly, I am attempting to open up Pandora's little casket.

Whence comes the flood, or pandemonium.



The multiple as such. Here's a set undefined by elements or boundaries. Locally, it is not individuated; globally, it is not summed up. So it's neither a flock, nor a school, nor a heap, nor a swarm, nor a herd, nor a pack. It is not an aggregate; it is not

discrete. It's a bit viscous perhaps. A lake under the mist, the sea, a white plain, background noise, the murmur of a crowd, time.

I have no idea, or am only dimly aware, where its individual sites may be, I've no notion of its points, very little idea of its bearings. I have only the feeblest conception of its internal interactions, the lengthiness and entanglement of its connections and relations, only the vaguest idea of its environment. It invades the space or it fades out, takes a place, either gives it up or creates it, by its essentially unpredictable movement. Am I immersed in this multiple, am I, or am I not a part of it? Its edge a pseudopod takes me and leaves me, I hear the sound and I lose it, I have only fragmentary information on this multiplicity.

When we subsume multiplicity under unity, in a concept or a black box, we do not share in or parcel out information. Information is either total or null. We always assume that we don't know, or else that we know everything, yea or nay. Whereas commonly we know a bit, a meager amount, enough, quite a bit; there are various undulations, even in the hardest and most advanced sciences. We are confronted with or absorbed by the multiple where more than three fourths of our knowledge and actions are concerned. Without any principle of individuation, without any simple or easy integration, without any distinguishable concept, without any well-defined boundary between observer and observed, I can only define here an ordinary piece of information, of a given size in some way or another finite and subject to change; I will write once more, neither null nor total. When it's total or null, then unity appears, then comes a concept or a black box, evidence or ignorance, unreason or reason: the exceptions. We're neither gods, nor angels, nor stones, nor dead bodies.

The multiple as such, unhewn and little unified, is not an epistemological monster, but on the contrary the ordinary lot of situations, including that of the ordinary scholar, regular knowledge, everyday work, in short, our common object. May the aforesaid scientific knowledge strip off its arrogance, its magisterial, ecclesial drapery; may it leave off its martial aggressivity, the hateful claim of always being right; let it tell the truth; let it come down, pacified, toward common knowledge. Can it still do this, now that it has vanquished temporal power and reigns in its place, a clerisy? Is there any chance of it still wanting to celebrate a betrothal between its imperial reason and popular wisdom?

The object of this book is both a new one and a common one. We recognize it everywhere, yet reason still insists on ignoring it.



The multiple. Water, the sea. Perceptual bursts, inner and outer, how can they be told apart? How am I to tell, any environment I've entered, become immersed in, that this wood I'm confronted with doesn't go on forever, that I'll get to the edge of the forest some day? I can't see the trees of this forest. A murmur, seizing me, I can't master its source, its increase is out of my control. The noise, the background noise, that incessant hubbub, our signals, our messages, our speech and our words are but a fleeting high surf, over its perpetual swell. Beyond one white plain, there is another white plain, after this dune, a second dune, past a branch of the Ganges delta, a hundred more branches of the Ganges I can't get across. The atmosphere we breathe and hatred, the hate in which we bathe, the hatred that never leaves the we, the hate that separates and joins, that syrupy hate. The collective with its inaccessible edges that we try to conceive with some objectivity. The crowd, fervent or ritual, the common crowd of the centers or the inflamed rabble when it runs wild. Life, the mantle of life that covers me, the generative field of life in which I am only a singularity alive. A certain death at an uncertain hour. Life, my life, work, my work, my labor, my project, this desert with or without a masterpiece, with or without any Mount Carmel summit. Sea, forest, rumor, noise, society, life, works and days, all common multiples; we can hardly say they are objects, yet require a new way of thinking. I'm trying to think the multiple as such, to let it waft along without arresting it through unity, to let it go, as it is, at its own pace. A thousand slack algae at the bottom of the sea.

I'm attempting to think time. I'm well aware that time has no unity, no moment, no instant, no beginning, no end, and that I have no knowledge of its eternal completeness. For all the times that I've been able to tell, all of them were unities. I am now attempting to rethink time as a pure multiplicity.

Thus, perhaps, can history be born. History is in the midst of these hazy midsts, commonly lived, uneasily thought, it is, as it happens, information neither total nor null, without a clear-cut boundary between the observer and the observed. Like the ob-

server, it is full of sound and fury. A meditation on pure multiplicity, this book, is seeking, beyond the sea, the plain, the branch of the river—noise, hate, time—seeking a philosophy of history. The multiple is the object of this book and history is its goal.



These are objects I seem to live through more than view. I think I pick up noises from them more than I see them, touch them, or conceive them. I hear without clear frontiers, without divining an isolated source, hearing is better at integrating than analyzing, the ear knows how to lose track. By the ear, of course, I hear: temple, drum, pavilion, but also my entire body and the whole of my skin. We are immersed in sound just as we are immersed in air and light, we are caught up willy-nilly in its hurly-burly. We breathe background noise, the taut and tenuous agitation at the bottom of the world, through all our pores and papillae, we collect within us the noise of organization, a hot flame and a dance of integers. My acouphenes, a mad murmur, tense and constant in hearing, speak to me of my ashes, perhaps, the ones whence I came, the ones to which I will return. Background noise is the ground of our perception, absolutely uninterrupted, it is our perennial sustenance, the element of the software of all our logic. It is the residue and the cesspool of our messages. No life without heat, no matter, neither; no warmth without air, no logos without noise, either. Noise is the basic element of the software of all our logic, or it is to the logos what matter used to be to form. Noise is the background of information, the material of that form.



Hearing is a model of understanding. It is still active and deep when our gaze has gone hazy or gone to sleep. It is continuous while the other senses are intermittent. I hear and I understand, blindly, when evidence has vanished and intuition has faded out: they're the exceptions.

I begin to fathom the sound and the fury, of the world and of history: the *noise*.¹



The multiple had been thought, perhaps, but it hadn't been sounded.

Les Treilles, July 1981

La Belle Noiseuse

TREE
 NOISE
 SEA NOISE
 PROTEUS
 DOUBLE DOUBT
 WORK
 ICHNOGRAPHY
 THE FOOT
 THE POSSIBLE
 THE APPARITION OF FORMS

This that I'll be telling happened at the beginning of the seventeenth century, a time of quarrels and to-dos, whence came that body of geniuses, reason, beauty, we admire today.

This that I'll be telling, and that Balzac relates, couldn't happen, never took place. One of the names in it is a French one, another name in it is Flemish, and the third is German, though imaginary. Has anyone ever yet seen, in this history, the meeting of the real and the symbol? Poussin and Porbus no more knew Frenhofer than they knew his canvas.

The Unknown Masterpiece is a fake. This takes place in a locationless location, is from the pen of a nameless author, tells a story beyond time. No, there's nothing behind it, not even a woman. This masterpiece may be improbable or it may be impossible, but it isn't unknown and there is nothing to know. Or else: is there something still, once more, altogether anew to know?

Tree

Balzac depicts three painters, contemporaries and successors. This all took place during dark days when only headstrong souls without hope keep the sacred flame, in the bare certainty that it must continue to burn. A tree passes through them, a tree of creation, a family tree, a tree of life, a tree of knowledge. The child Poussin at the foot of the tree. Porbus, mature, in the middle of the trunk, and the old man Frenhofer, lost and crowned in the golden boughs. Or else—I'm not sure which way it points—the child Poussin in the green boughs, Porbus at the main branching, and the old painter with the diabolical look in the deep shade at the roots—looking like he'd emerged from the dark shadows of Rembrandt. As I am telling the tale, and as Balzac is telling it, and as the old man paints the second man's canvas under the dazzled gaze of the third, an invisible organist plays the Eastertide motet *O Filii*. Music. Sons and daughters, rejoice, the king of heaven was snatched from death this night. What resurrection can we hope for, in these dark times, what murdered son of this trinity is reborn to day, to the light of day? What is to be born from these days of wrath and flashing outbursts?



Nicolas Poussin is still young, Nicolas doesn't know that he is or that he will be Poussin, has such a thing ever been known, recognized, hoped for? He lives in his garret, in poverty, with Gillette, a perfect beauty. Go to Turkey, Greece, wherever, and you won't find a comparable one. Poussin is beginning, he begins before our very eyes, before the eyes of Porbus and Frenhofer, he executes a brisk copy of Mary the Egyptian, with sketches of red. Father and grandfather are excited, Nicolas is invited in.

Porbus, mature, lives in his studio, with his *Egyptian Marie*, a masterpiece intended for Marie de Medicis. The young talent sketches this woman, the old man touches her up, brings her to life, back to life. The genealogy is very exact in terms of descent. Mabuse, absent, gone without a disciple, bequeathed to the old master before us the technique of life, the master applies in little dabs to the breast, to the limbs, to the background, onto Porbus's canvas, and the youth copies it in ruddy strokes, a monochrome

sketch. Life descends, disappears, there's a direction to the tree, from the old man to the young one.

Nicolas lives with Gillette, a perfect beauty. Porbus lives with Mary, an image that lives only in spots and which in spots does not. A mixed set. Porbus is at the top, he's going to be on the descent, Marie de Medicis has just left him for Rubens. He's wavering, unsure, in the middle: Marie is here a woman and there a statue, here stiff as a cadaver, there blazingly radiant. A motley escutcheon. Frenhofer lives with Catherine Lescault, a courtesan, the "*belle noiseuse*"—the beautiful clamorer or the querulous beauty—who doesn't exist; there's nothing on his canvas but a messy medley of colors. Life is on the ascent, it is gaining, the tree runs the other direction.

The tree runs in one direction for the men, where the brush loses, through time, its power. It flows back in the opposite direction for the women, where beauty wins, through time, its tranquil presence. Time flows in one direction for the maker, it flows the opposite way for the model. Nicolas, with his sketches, lives alongside being itself, the old creator has lost this. Porbus is in the middle, disturbed, uncertain and wavering. His painting fluctuates and doubts, it crosses over the river of time.

I no longer know the point of the tree, which way it points, in this crossing, I don't know the sense of time, where the rivers are headed. While Gillette stands absolutely beautiful and forsaken, naked, in the corner of the studio, all eyes look with envy upon the wall of blind matter. The model says: I love you and I hate you, I despise you and admire you. Nicolas has just reached Porbus's maturity, after the blinding short-circuit of the genius old man and the beautiful girl. Let us attempt to get the sense of time again.



I'll begin again, slowly. The three men form a sequence, following the order of Mabuse, as one says that priests are ordained, time and time again, following the order of Melchizedik. The three painters follow one another, following the order of representation, Mabuse's proper name can't fool us. All three of them have turned to their own picture, while, behind them, forgotten, naked, the beauty weeps. The three women, for their part, follow one

another in the order of being. Not according to the order of appearance, but according to the scale of beings. Catherine is destroyed and entombed, Mary, wavering, existing and not existing, is about to cross the river of mortality; Gillette, in love, is exploding with life and nativity. An image lost in the arrangement, dissolved; half-corpse, half-mortal, half-statue, half-mobility; heat that is naive and there, present. The tree of beings comes out of the painting, the tree of representations, obviously, goes into it. Why is it that these two times, two directions, two scales, two trees form crosses?

Is this a quite ancient, quite absurd way of thinking?

Noise

We did not look carefully at the canvases. Yet Balzac makes them manifest. Let us try to forget for a moment the facile stunt where what he shows us shows us in turn a painting, which shows us what . . . Let us keep the sacred fire, in these dark hours. Let the green serge drapery clothe Catherine, so very naked under her thick wall of jeweled colors. She looks like the vestal Tarpeia, buried under the precious bracelets of the Sabine warriors. Did you or didn't you see Catherine? The painter wished not to let her be seen, destroyed.

Catherine Lescault, the river-christened courtesan, is here baptized *La Belle Noiseuse*.¹ I think I know who the *belle noiseuse* is, the querulous beauty, the noisemaker. This word *noise* crosses the seas. Across the Channel or the Saint Laurence seaway, behold how the *noise* divides itself. In Old French it used to mean: noise, uproar and wrangling; English borrowed the sound from us; we keep only the fury. In French we use it so seldom that you could say, apparently, that our language had been cleansed of this "noise." Could French perhaps have become a prim and proper language of precise communication, a fair and measured pair of scales for jurists and diplomats, exact, draftsmanlike, unshaky, slightly frozen, a clear arterial unobstructed by embolus, through having chased away a great many *belles noiseuses*? Through becoming largely free from stormy weather, sound and fury? It is true, we have forgotten *noise*. I am trying to remember it; mending for a moment the tear

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