

Anthropo-Eccentric Variations on Times of Crises

With Michel Serres and Posthumanism

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Michel Serres's and Posthumanism's reciprocally isomorphic reflections may offer not mainstream suggestions of an overall human repositioning, now, in times of war, pandemic/post-pandemic, environmental crisis, political, economic, and cultural problems, more mandatory than ever. If in fact, as it seems, it is question of de-anthropocentering/de-anthropomorphizing the world, to allow common principles and interrelationships between entities to emerge from within, Serresian and Posthumanist variations on the theme of the parasite/virus and the recognition of the world would provide profitable ideas on this way.

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Contingencies and Urgencies

The contingencies of war, pandemic, and post-pandemic as well as environmental crisis, and political, economic, and cultural problems lead us to discuss and decline Michel Serres's¹ and Posthumanism's² reciprocally isomorphic³ reflections, which probably offer not mainstream suggestions of an overall human repositioning, now more mandatory than ever. It is in this perspective that Serres and Posthumanism point to the urgency of an awareness of objective novelty as one with urgency of building the new itself, that is specifically urgency of the awareness of a new human as an urgency of its realization (new way of being in the world, of matching with the way the world is and is changing). Hence, man as the fulcrum of classical, humanist, and modern humanism, the *Anthropos* as a species ontologically, ethically, and epistemologically central, language, memory, calculation, human will as agencies *par excellence*, the soul as essence of man, all must be rethought in the riverbed of the instance of awareness/construction of a human/humanism de-anthro(pocentr)ized and

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¹ As regards the themes of this contribution, on Serres I recommend Rignani, 2012; 2014; 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2022a; 2022b; Moser, 2016; Dolphijn (Ed.), 2019; Watkin, 2020; Aa, 2020.

² It should be remembered here that Posthumanism critically rethinks the anthropocentric-humanist-dualist vision, according to which the human species, the *Anthropos*, is distinguished, by superiority, compared to other species on the ontological level (the human essence is superior to the others), epistemological (human knowledge is the model and reference of other forms of knowledge), and ethical (man is the only bearer of moral values), and Man is exclusively the male, white, Western, educated, which, as such, is the center (of reference) of the world, and he is separated from all the rest. For an overview of the various orientations within the Posthumanism, I refer to some recent manual and glossary contributions as well as to the bibliographic references contained therein: Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018; Rosendahl Thomsen & Wamberg, 2020; Baioni, Cuadrado Pereyas, & Macelloni, 2021; in addition, a synthesis of all these topics is provided by Ferrando, 2019.

³ Although I have always doubted, and continue to do so, the heuristic profitability of the "assessment" of Serres's Posthumanism or not, especially considering the fluidity of the posthuman and the intellectual independence of Serres himself, I have nevertheless found and highlighted isomorphisms between them in relation precisely to the conception of human and of the interface between it and the world. I have developed these positions specifically in Rignani, 2012; 2014; 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022a.

re-co-belonging; in other words, it is a question of thinking/returning eco(nto)logically to a human in relation to a relational world from which it itself seems in a certain sense to have excluded itself.

Otherwise said, it is a question of de-anthropocentering/de-anthropomorphizing the world, to allow common principles and interrelationships between entities to emerge from within (Rignani, 2022a).

This urgency of human repositioning can therefore be identified as an inheritance, delivery, and general task that Serres and Posthumanism articulate and decline in particularly timely and appropriate proposals for the current era of crisis. I am referring to the Serresian and Posthumanist variations on the theme of the parasite/virus and the recognition of the world.

Variations on the Virus and Pandemic/Endemic

I come to the first of these two thematic complexes.

The virus, an obligate parasite, as I have highlighted elsewhere (Rignani, 2021), is today the background noise of our existences, that is what Serres would say the interference, the disturbing element, the interruption, and at the same time also the start of a change, however that may be (Serres, 1980), which makes it spontaneous, so to speak, to ask whether an approach other than common fear and containment/extinction strategies could have been and could be adopted.

A negative at first glance response can be combined with the challenge of overcoming contingency and the single point of view listening to those who, like Serres, in assonance with Posthumanist orientations, have pointed out a re-declination of otherness, of diversity, of discrepancy, and of anomaly in the perspective of overcoming the single point of view towards a synthesis that does not intend to cancel the particular but to complete it (Watkin, 2020). So much so that what is considered in contingency and from a single point of view does not seem to work, in synthesis it works; and this applies to the parasite/virus, but also to the frail and the disadvantaged (Serres, 1999; 2015).

Even if discontinuity, disruption of equilibrium, such as those induced by the disease/virus/parasite, are unsettling, traumatizing, and tragic in relapses, according to Serres one can still try to identify the potential for change and transformation: encounters, imbalances, and contaminations are the most of the sometimes sources of novelty; while uncontaminated, continuity, and balance mark repetition and sterility (Serres, 2015).

At this point it is worth recalling the Serresian suggestions, which converge overall with the Posthumanist ones (Marchesini, 1997; 2009; 2016; 2020; 2021), on the parasite, as an abusive guest but also, ethically/ontologically, as a universal relationship, a condition that precedes exchange and reciprocity, the presupposition of all existence.

In parasitism in fact Serres (1980) identifies the basic link between things, in the sense not only that is an elementary relationship, but that is an element of the relationship. The parasite, in which the prefix “para-” (close to-) expresses the measurement, relationally, of a distance from- (Serres, 1980, p. 144), is ontologically a deviation from the equilibrium (i.e., birth, invention, etc.); it is a relationship operator that fluidizes the separation between subject and object, making mutuality and contractuality oriented towards symbiosis emerge; and, on the ethical level, it is a condition for the possibility of exchange and reciprocity, not only to be undermined by the latter, but also to remain as a catalyst and flywheel of gift, of gratuitousness, or at least of parasitic symbiosis.

In all this, as I said, the assonance with Posthumanism is quite evident, according to which the human and the other-than-human cannot be thought of disjunctively, in a virus-free dimension, but inter-implicated in

complex synergies, in dynamics of permeability, hybridization, infiltration, infection, contamination, in which the other, the non-conforming, the pathogen, and the dysfunctional can emerge as a flywheel/catalyst of new characters, and of moral resources for the human in and with the world (Marchesini, 1997; 2009; 2016; 2020; 2021; Braidotti, 2013; 2021; Haraway, 1991).

These ones, perhaps, if taken literally, are paradoxes, but the suggestions that can be gathered from them are at least two, interconnected. One is the approach of re-understanding by generalization of points of view (Watkin, 2020) that can help overcome the epidemiological contingency, reconsidering its pathogenic significance in the long term. The other, which can be considered the corollary of the previous one, is the general impulse at the exit from the separative idea of the different, the pathogen, the dissonant, the non-conforming, and the urgency of exorcization, correction, or neutralization. All this, based on the consideration that is not possible to know a priori where the exception is and that in any case it is not even legitimate to ask, since it goes in its own way which can lead to immediate lasting luck or temporary disavowal and sudden luck, in uncertain times and places or even irreversible oblivion (Serres, 2015); but that in any case what matters is recognizing it, and therefore letting the multiplicity, the inventiveness, and the variety emerge beyond the single point of view (Serres, 2015).

What recur here are Serres's words on the untimely, that is on the inventor, so called for his ability to rediscover forgotten and/or ignored but fruitful visions of the world (Serres, 2014), and to think by relating disparate elements, relating to multiplicity (Serres, 2014, p. 366). The inventor, who can be considered the avatar of Serres himself, is in fact someone who has a saltationist vision of life and thought⁴, in which monsters try their luck and become hopeful if the blow succeeds, and hopeless if not; and it is also those who have the idea that the little one can be the engine of extraordinary energy (Serres, 2021) and that the *contre* (against) can become *avec* (with) (Serres, 2021, pp. 231-247).

So, if this untimeliness turned out to be propulsive force towards the exit from the bottleneck, what would become of the disease/virus and the return to normal? A plausible answer could be the image that Serres uses to represent his work: a fluid forest in perpetual motion (Serres, 2014), where sliding (fluidity) and incessant movement are curiously attributed to the fixity/stability (of the trees/forest). So much so that disease/virus, treatment, and normality would emerge as "fluid fixities" in the act of taking the leap and attempting to strike; that is, according to a process of deactivation on the substantial level and of reactivation on the potential one, they would emerge as a bifurcation point and be full of possibilities, which can, hopefully, turn towards the hopeful monster, the evolutionary stage that can produce a new evolutionary line, or even towards the hopeless monster, the failed shot, the siding (Serres, 2014).

However, the fact remains that Serres messes up the cards: what is commonly considered different, contradictory, deconstructed, and heterogeneous (the disease/virus), can trigger or enter inventive relational dynamics of new dimensions of hominization; the small and the infinitesimal (the virus) can induce a dynamism in which the opposition can become co-belonging and coexistence; and the transformations do not occur due to the accumulation of small gradual changes (normality/return to normality), but due to large morphological jumps (Serres, 2014).

⁴ Serres reads the trend of life and thought through the filter of the saltational theory of evolution of Richard Goldschmidt, as known, the first scientist to use the term "hopeful monster" to express the idea of macromutations, morphological leaps in evolution (Goldschmidt, 1940).

The filter of Serresian untimeliness, therefore, discolors, liquifies, de-substantiates the combination of illness/return to normality and, as it were, transfigures it, and refracts it in a metamorphic perspective whereby the virus becomes a monster, that is, something extraordinary, a rupture, a turning point, a root/power of change (on the ecological, evolutionary, economic-global, social relations, technological hybridization, corporeality, awareness, and human self-perception levels); a monster perhaps hopeless, but perhaps also hopeful.

The general message that can be drawn from all this is that hybridization (in this case integration with the virus), its different levels, the awareness of all this are always (sources of) change/novelty. And that therefore normality is radical change and the return to it is the drastic change consisting in becoming aware of the change itself.

In the backlight of the Serresian reflection, the virus, for and with its pandemic/endemic significance, ultimately takes on the character of a monster, that is, of a prodigy and therefore of exception and breakage which, deriving from *monere* (to warn), conveys the warning (of awareness) of the change, characterized by ambivalence.

So, all this can be the stimulus to awaken critical attention and the suggestion to the untimely rethinking of what is hastily and predictably considered disease and normality.

Variations on World Recognition

I come now to the second thematic nucleus.

We can take the further step of grasping behind this Serresian and Posthumanist suggestion of the critical rethinking of the idea of normality and the return to it the indication of the need for the removal of myths like the hierarchical notions of man, economic success, the unlimitedness of earthly resources, activating rather processes of silencing, recognition, and work on absences (Rignani, 2022b).

When Serres affirms that the ego exists only outside the ego (Serres, 1985), that the more I think the less it is me (Serres, 1982, p. 39), that the language imprisons me and makes me an ego (Serres, 1987, p. 128), and when the Posthumanism says that the human is a hybrid fruit and that we are in and for the relationship (Marchesini, 2020, p. 22), both express instances of silencing. That is to say, instances of the muting of a language, of a *logos*, of a reason which, by claiming to be exclusive, excludes or files differences; which considers reality a human production; and that, when a relatively stable phenomenon or a coherent period appears, it works to make us forget the chaos, the stretch marks, the fragility, and the volatility of the possible (Serres, 1982).

Hence silencing appears inter-implicated with recognition and work on absences; in fact, silencing is reducing to silence, which, as Serres states, expands, removes borders, leads to the world (Serres, 1987), and in this way catalyzes the recognition of the multiplicity, variety, possibility, interstitial zones, and interactions of the humans and of things. But in turn silence, multiplicity, possible, interstices, and thresholds (Marchesini, 1997), as the Serresian and Posthumanist reflection shows, are often absences, that is, black holes, repressed from philosophical thought, on which work is therefore urgently needed.

Trying to think the unthinkable, one can in fact realize a silence capable of removing barriers and separations, of emptying any sense of belonging, expulsion, inclusion, and exclusion (Serres, 1987), thus favoring the recognition of a real in which purity, unique reference, linearity reveal themselves to be empty words (Marchesini, 2009), and in which instead multiple, confluences, possibilities, that is the so-called absences, are pregnancy, and everything can do, even according to individual difference, what we humans

believe we are the only ones in power do and say (remembering, speaking, deciding, numbering etc.) (Serres, 2015, p. 202).

If all what has been said, taken literally, may be seen extreme and questionable, what opens up for me to collect as food for thought is the under trace, that is the idea, to say it again with Serres, that is the object that gives birth to human, which gives birth to the object; that the object begins a story that the subject, constituted by it, will continue; and that objects and subjects replace each other (Serres, 1980; 1982), according to a commutability whereby the human is (with/between) things, and according to a hybridized relationality of universal co-belonging.

If this in a nutshell can be the sense of emergencies and needs for silencing, recognition, and work on absences, and therefore can be the sense of the Serresian and Posthumanist call to the intentional/conjunctive exit from the ego, given that the humanist model did not seem nor does seem to work in the face of pandemics, climatic and economic crises and war, nothing prevents us from trying to collect and refine all these suggestions, needs, and emergencies.

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