



Noise

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SubStance, Vol. 12, No. 3, Issue 40: Determinism. (1983), pp. 4+48-60.

Stable URL:

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MICHEL SERRES

For Élisabeth Montrelay, painter

The story I am going to tell happened in the beginning of the seventeenth century, a time of noisy quarrels whence came the body of reason, beauty, genius that we admire today.

The story I am going to tell and that Balzac tells could not have happened, never happened. One name is French, the second, Flemish, the third, German but it is imaginary. Who has ever seen a meeting between the real and the symbolic in the story? Poussin and Porbus knew Frenhofer¹ as little as they knew his canvas.

The Unknown Masterwork is a fake. It happens in a placeless space, is signed by a nameless author, is told in a timeless time. No, there is nothing beneath, not even a woman. If the masterwork is improbable or impossible it is not unknown and there is nothing to know. Or else: is there still something new to know now?

Balzac depicts three painters, contemporaries and successors. It took place in bad times when stubborn men without any hope were keepers of the sacred flame, men who were certain that they had to keep it alive. They are crossed by a tree of knowledge, of life, or genealogy. Poussin, the child, at the foot of the tree, Porbus, the adult in the middle of the trunk, Frenhofer, the old man, lost among the golden boughs. Or else, since I'm not sure of the direction, Poussin, the child, among the new green shoots, Porbus at the forking of the branches of mastery, and the old painter with the devilish features at the black shadows of the roots; he might have come out of the shadows of a Rembrandt painting. As I tell the story and as Balzac tells the story, and as the old man paints the canvas of the second under the astonished eye of the third, an invisible organist plays the Eastertime motet *O Filii*. Music. Sons and daughters rejoice, the king of heaven was saved from death on this night. What resurrection to be hoped for, what assassinated son of this trinity will be reborn into light? What will be born during these explosive, angry times?

Nicolas Poussin is very young, Nicolas does not know that he is or will be Poussin, has anyone ever known, learned, hoped for such a thing? He lives

up in his loft, in misery, with Gillette, a perfect beauty. Go to Greece or Turkey, go anywhere, you won't find her match. Poussin begins, he begins as we watch, as Porbus and Frenhofer watch, he makes a good copy of the Egyptian Mary in red pencil. The father and grandfather are taken aback and Nicolas is admitted to their group. Porbus, the adult, lives in his studio with this *Egyptian Mary*, a masterpiece destined to go to Marie de Médicis. The young talent draws this woman, the old man repaints her, makes her live, resuscitates her. The genealogy advances exactly as it should. Mabuse, absent, having disappeared without a disciple, bequeathed to the old master who is present here the power of life; the latter dabs a bit of it here and there, on the body, the breast, the background of Porbus's picture, and the child copies it, outlining in red in a monochromatic drawing. Life descends, it is lost; the tree has a meaning, from the old man to the young one.

Nicolas lives with Gillette, a perfect beauty. Porbus lives with Marie,² an image that is alive in spots and not in others. A mixed set. Porbus is at the top, he is going to come down, Marie de Médicis has just left him for Rubens. He floats somewhere in the middle: here she is a woman and there a statue, here stiff as a board, there sparkling with life. A mixed heritage. Frenhofer lives with Catherine Lescault, a courtesan, that beautiful *noiseuse*³ who does not exist: there is nothing on the canvas but a mixed mess of colors. Life goes up and wins; the direction of the tree is the other one.

The tree's direction is one way for men, as the brush loses power as time goes by. For women, it is the other way as beauty wins its calm presence as time goes by. Time goes one way for the maker [*facteur*], the other way for the model. Nicolas, while drawing, lives next to being itself, the old man, the creator, has lost it. Porbus is in the middle, uneasy, undecided, floating around. His picture fluctuates and doubts, it passes the river of time.

At this point, I no longer know which way the tree is going, which way time goes, which way rivers flow. The magnificently beautiful Gillette is neglected naked in the corner of the studio; everyone looks in emulation at the wall of lifeless material. The model says: I love you and I hate you, I scorn you and I admire you. Nicolas has just become an adult like Porbus, after the blinding short-circuit between the brilliant old man and the beautiful girl. Let's try to find the direction of time again.

I'll begin again, but slowly this time. The three men follow each other, according to the order of Mabuse, just as priests are consecrated time after time, according to the order of Melchizedek. The three painters follow each other, according to the order of representation, the proper name of the dead man cannot fool us. All three have turned around to see their own pictures while, naked and forgotten, beauty cries behind them. As for the three women, they follow each other according to the order of being. Not according to the order of appearance but according to the scale of being. Catherine is destroyed and buried; Mary, floating, existing and not existing, prepares herself for the river of mortality; Gillette, in love, explodes with life and birth. A dissolved image lost in the distribution; half-corpsé, half-mortal, half-statue, half-mobility;

heat and presence. The tree of life comes out of the picture, just as the tree of representations, obviously, goes into it. Why these two times, these two directions, these two ladders, these two trees, do they form a cross?

Is this a very old, very absurd way of thinking?

We haven't looked at the pictures too well. Balzac, however, makes them visible. Let us try to forget the simplistic cascade in which what he makes visible in turn makes visible a picture that in turn makes visible what . . . Let us keep the sacred flame during these bad times. Let us leave the drape of green serge on Catherine, who is so naked underneath the thick coat of colored gems. She might have been Tarpeia, the vestal virgin, buried under the precious bracelets of the Sabine warriors. Did you see, didn't you see Catherine? The painter wanted her not to be seen and destroyed her.

Catherine Lescault, the courtesan named for a river,⁴ is christened *La Belle Noiseuse*. I think I know who the beautiful *noiseuse* is, the beautiful quarreller looking for *noise*. This word crosses the seas and divides in the Channel or the Saint Lawrence. In Old French it meant noise and quarrel; English keeps the sound and French, the fury. In French we keep the word for such restricted use that it is as if French were purged of the noise. Has French become the language of good behavior, of exact communication, the measured, balanced tongue of the judge or the diplomat, precise, well-defined, exact, even a bit icy, an open unobstructed path, all this for having chased away many a beautiful *noiseuse*? It is true that we have forgotten *noise*. I am trying to remember it; for a moment I reattach the two tongues, that of the high seas and that of the icy lake; I shall look for *noise* in the parting of the seas.

There then is the origin. Noise and nausea, noise and nautical, noise and navy have the same etymology. We shouldn't be astonished for we never hear white noise [bruit de fond] better than when at sea. This noise, be it calm or vehement, seems to have been established for all time. On a strict horizontal plane, stable or unstable flows of water constantly exchange places. Space is completely invaded by noise; we are completely occupied by the same noise. The agitation is everywhere to be heard, beside the signals, beside the silence. The silent sea is misnamed. Perhaps white noise [bruit de fond] is at the heart [fond] of being itself. Perhaps being is not at rest, perhaps it is not in motion, perhaps it is agitated. White noise never stops, it is limitless, continuous, perpetual, unchangeable. It has no grounding [fond] itself, no opposite. How much noise has to be made to still the noise? And what fury orders fury? Noise is not a phenomenon, all phenomena separate from it, figures on a ground [fond], as a light in the fog, as any message, cry, call, signal must each separate from the hubbub that fills the silence, just to be, to be perceived, sensed, known, exchanged. As soon as there is a phenomenon, it leaves noise, as soon as an appearance arises, it does so by masking the noise. Thus it is not phenomenology but being itself. It is set up in subjects as well as in objects, in hearing and in space itself, in observers and observed, it passes through the means and tools of observation, be they material or logical, be they channels that were constructed or languages, it is in both the in-itself and the for-itself,

it crosses the oldest and surest divisions of philosophy, yet, noise is metaphysical. It is the complement of physics, in the broadest sense of the word. Its subliminal breathing is heard even on the high seas.

White noise becomes one of the objects of metaphysics. It is at the very limits of physics and surrounds it, it lies under the edges of every phenomenon, a Proteus taking all forms, materials, and substances of manifestations.

Noise, intermittence and turbulence, quarrel and sound; this marine noise is the original one but the original hatred as well. We hear it on the high seas.

Proteus, sea-god, minor and marginal god, but first and original in name, is the shepherd who feeds the marine animals in Poseidon's fields. He lives in the waters of the Isle of Pharos, at the mouth of the Nile, Pharos, the bearer of first light [phare], Pharos, a fire that lights the way in the fog, yet whose name means sail and veil: revelation and covering. For example, Penelope weaves and unravels the shift [pharos]. Proteus, in these realms of truth, undergoes a metamorphosis: he is an animal, he can be an element, water or fire. He is inert, he is alive. He is under the light [phare], under the veil. He knows. He is a prophet, he has the gift of prophecy, but he refuses to answer questions. He has all the information but gives none. He is possibility, he is chaos. He is the cloud, the white noise. He hides the answers among infinite amounts of information. For example, his daughter questions him: he turns into a lion, a snake, a panther, a boar, water, a tree, anything at all. The chain must be found that will stabilize the phenomenal. When chained and immobile, Proteus speaks, answers his daughter. Subtle but not malicious. Physics is Proteus in change. White noise is Proteus badly bound [mal enchaîné]. It is the sea let loose [déchaînée]. Here is a myth, barely even a myth that gives us an epistemology that is globally correct and locally rich and precise. The epistemology is not given in a language that is all distended by rigor but through a channel full of noise, sound, and images.

What the story of Proteus doesn't tell is the relation between chaos and form. Who is Proteus when he is no longer water but not yet a panther or a boar? On the contrary, what the story says is that every metamorphosis or every phenomenon is an answer to questions, an answer and a lack of an answer to interrogation. A local answer and a global cover-up. Every appearance—every experience—is the light that shows and the light that blinds. Proteus hides the information in a wealth of information, a piece of straw in a haystack. He has an answer for everything and he says nothing. And it is this nothing that is important. Thus now I prefer metaphysics to physics for it is freed of Proteus' chains.

The intermediate states of Proteus are the roar of the ocean being made. The beautiful *noiseuse* is agitated. She must be recognized amidst the swelling, splashing, breaking of forms and tones, in the unchaining of the element divided against itself. Porbus and Poussin never had the right to look at the picture. And when the old man unveils it, they understand nothing. They look at the picture from all sides, on the right, on the left, in front, from above and below. Different points of view, phenomena. The idiots. And they turn their backs

on the beautiful, living creature, the young girl behind them. The idiots. Porbus and Poussin didn't see the beautiful *noiseuse* and they treat the old man who sees her like a madman. Balzac also thinks him crazy. I am undoubtedly old enough now to see her. How many sailors have seen nothing in the noise of the sea, how many only felt nauseated, organisms invaded by sounds and furies, like moving gray shadows, how many only felt the sad nausea at the root of the tree, the incarnation of Proteus, how many only had phenomenological nausea, how many have never seen the beautiful *noiseuse*, Aphrodite, naked, shimmering with beauty, emerging anew, renewed from the troubled waters, as Gillette emerges, simple as a new-born babe, from the chaotic canvas of the dying old master. Who was the one who threw his brush dripping with color on the seascape to make Aphrodite appear?

Poussin outlines, exactly, precisely, quickly. Poussin doesn't doubt, Gillette is there, quite alive. The edge of the moving line is smooth, like a Taylor series, almost infinitely smooth. No need for it to be trimmed, it is smooth-skinned, like youth. It is rational, hairless, clean, spotless. The exact edge need not wait for definition.

Porbus, an adult, at his height, his mastery, his royalty, does doubt. His picture is everywhere double: here painting, there drawing, here Flemish, there Italian, here dry, there afire, as if incandescent, here a cadaverous statue, there alive enough to fool the emperor. His picture is everywhere double, everywhere there is doubt, mixture. The line trembles a bit, it hesitates, it fluctuates, undecided. *Quod vitae sectabor iter?* Marie de Médicis will soon leave him for Rubens with his abundant reds and pinks. The double doubt is propagated everywhere, at all points, at all spots along the edge, at all parts of the body, at every moment of life itself. Mary/Marie does not know if she will cross the water, the boatman himself is full of this indecision, the river fluctuates and the painter hesitates. Doubt: having two gestures and two intentions, two aims and two conducts, leaving the forking and branching, leaving what needs to be trimmed.

The simple doubles from Poussin to Porbus. The decision is put off, not made. The rise to mastery is also the rise of uneasiness and the absence of rest. The first line of the sketch produces a difference [écart] and passage and edge shake. The river fluctuates. Mastery is undoubtedly this pathetic doubt.

The time that goes from the child toward maturity or from apprenticeship to mastery is not the simple path taken once again, that of decision and correctness. I waited until I was old enough that I couldn't hope to become older . . . here then it is time to act, he said. Descartes doubts, goes back in time, toward Montaigne, toward his balanced interrogation. Descartes doubts a little and finds, thanks to God, the smooth, decisive simplicity of certainty. He prunes the forking branch, trims the edge, comes back to the straight path. The old and heroic Frenhofer has tasted the simplicities of perfection, all you have to see is his studies, but even more heroic, he goes back beyond the double doubt of Porbus and makes it swell. He doesn't fall, God is supporting him, into the valley of certainties. The word doubt is now in the middle of all his sentences,

it accompanies all his words, like a doppelgänger, moving his brush. His brushes multiply the branches and forkings. He goes back up the thalweg of the river where the Egyptian Mary stood, where the boatman vacillated, he goes up the chreod, the path, the slope of the Scheldt [l'Escault]. The Junction is no longer a low synthesis but a high opening that leads to other openings upstream. The low path, the channel, the slope, the chreod go from upstream junctions to downstream junctions, to synthesis and toward the singular. The high path, a double doubt balanced at first, multiplies its branches like a seven-branched candelabrum, like a varied bouquet, like a bush, an arborescence, a head of hair, a fibrous network of veins and fibrils, an endless network of doubts and uneasiness. The old master hasn't cut or trimmed his uncertainty, he has let the possible abound.

He goes up the slope, back in time, precipitously, he grows younger. Such a worker is born old and dies young; he reverses time. You can recognize the thinker by the way he goes from the truth to what is possible. As life goes from repetition to negentropy. Mortal time flows down the tree; the time of creative work goes straight up. This tree abounds everywhere in profusion.

I haven't interrupted the main lines, he was saying, I spread a cloud of warm blond half-tints around the edges so that you can't know exactly where to put your finger on the spot where the forms touch the background. Up close, this work seems almost fleecy, seems to lack precision, but a few steps away, everything straightens out, stops, separates . . . Yet I still have doubts.

The old man is on the road toward the unknown secret of life.

Descartes, now an adult, his doubt removed, shows the smooth straight path. It is the best one, the optimum path, figured out by superlatives, it is the lowest path. From the low meeting point, the tree seems, quite simply, to be analytical. It is true that this path is universal. You win so much and so often on it that it would be foolish to take another. Reason rushes analytically toward the low, universal junctions of synthesis.

Contrary to Hegel, so young or so old, contrary to Descartes the adult, one can try to get younger by going back up the chreod even further beyond Montaigne.

The masterwork [chef d'oeuvre] is unknown, only the work [oeuvre] is known and knowable. The master [chef] is the head, the capital, the reserves, the stock, the source, the beginning, the abundance and is in the intermediate interstices among the manifestations of the work. No one produces a work if he doesn't work in this continuous flow whence sometimes comes a form. One must swim in language, dive in as if lost, for a weighty poem or argument to arise. The work is made of forms, the masterpiece is the unformed fount of forms; the work is made of time, the masterpiece is the source of time; the work is in tune, the masterwork shakes with noises. Whoever doesn't hear this noise has never written sonatas. The masterwork unceasingly makes noise and sound. Everything is in this matrix, nothing is in the matrix, it can be said to be smooth, it can be said to be chaotic, a laminar flow or a storm-crossed

cloud, a throng. The only things that are known or knowable are what are called phenomena, incarnations of a Proteus out of hiding, they emerge from the noisy sea. The scattered pictures are visible and beautiful; under the green serge veil lies the well. Empty or full, what can we know of it? When an infinite amount of information is scattered in the well, it is the same well as if it were totally bereft of information.

The beautiful *noiseuse* is not a picture, it is the noise of beauty, the nude multiple, the abundant sea, from which is born, or isn't born, it all depends, the beautiful Aphrodite. We always see Venus without the sea or the sea without Venus, we never see physics arising, anadyomene, from metaphysics. Form — information that is phenomenal — arises from chaos-white noise; what is knowable and what is known are born of that unknown.

The work, through profiles, at different moments, by Protean forms, arises from the agitation, from the noisy, turbulent sea around the isle of Pharos, veilings and unveilings of the proto-light. Without this mother-lode, without this unknowable ichnography, no profiles, no work. You have to be brave enough sometimes to unveil the ichnography, the one that is always with you, in the dark, as if in a secret, hidden recess, underneath a veil.

The picture that is discovered at the end of the story is the ichnography. The beautiful *noiseuse* is not a picture, is not a representation, is not a work, it is the fount, the well, the black box, that includes, implies, surrounds, that is to say buries, all profiles, all appearances, all representations, the work itself.

Poussin, Porbus run toward the canvas, move away, bend over, right and left, up and down, they look for the habitual story-line, the usual scenography. And they stand so as to see an oblique profile. As if by chance, they shall have a spot where a straight form will appear. Scenography, orthography. And they look, as is their wont, for a space where there is a phenomenon, a space and an incarnation, a cell and knowledge. A representation.

And thus, they do not see the ichnography.

Balzac saw the ichnography. I think he figured out that he had seen it. Since he signed his name to it. But like Frenhofer, like Mabuse, he hid it modestly. And it has remained unknown.

Leibniz never saw the ichnography. He undoubtedly demonstrated that it was invisible. He was aware of it, he demonstrated that it is unknowable.

Once again, what is this ichnography? It is the set of possible profiles, the totality of all the horizons. Ichnography is what is possible, or knowable or producible, it is the fount of phenomena. It is the complete chain of the metamorphoses of the marine god Proteus, it is Proteus himself.

It is thus inaccessible. We are bound to a position, our limitation, our definition is our point of view, we are bound to the scenographies. Leibniz said that what is geometrized [géométral] is in God and for Him.

Leibniz never saw the ichnography, but he figured out where it was. This geometrizing is in God, it is God. He had nevertheless a rational idea of this geometrizing. The understanding of God as the sum of true ideas or as the totality of possibilities, as the sum of atoms or of grains of truth, as a totality,

is also rational. It would have undoubtedly seemed absurd to the old master that the totality of the rational was not rational. There is a path from the local to the global, even if our weakness forever prevents us from following it. Better yet, noise, sound, discord — those of music, voices or hatred — are simple local effects. *Noise*, cries and war, has the same extent of meaning, but symmetrically to harmony, song and peace. A noisy philosophy would be the shadow of Leibniz' philosophy. The latter compartmentalizes it. For at that time, the hatred was small and the squabble, petty. The brouhaha, the noise of the sea, the general, confused battle, nausea, are not avoided, but, once again are the effects of pettiness or of small perceptions. Our body is built to integrate all these bits and pieces, patches of gray, raucous waterfalls that would otherwise lead us toward blacking out. Chaos, noise, nausea are together, but thrown together in a crypt that resembles repression, an unconsciousness known as appreciation. We often drown in such small puddles of confusion. The further up one goes, on the contrary, on the ladders of integration, the more the rational is rationalized. Just as the body integrates the noise of small perceptions into perceived signals, God integrates in white light the relative noise of our just, correct thoughts into absolute knowledge. Harmony moves away from noise, irenism moves away from fury, just as the universal moves away from the local, at the same immense, infinite, measurable distance. Thus ichnography should be pure. Smooth, white, united, as if in perfect tune. As a child, I went to his place, and getting as far as his workshop, I think, all I had to contemplate was the beautiful Irene. The picture from *The Production of Things* where the confused sea of color is only a local covering.

Leibniz was smart enough not to deny the existence of disorder, noise, the sound and the fury. We must keep the word noise, the only positive word that we have to describe a state that we always describe negatively, with terms like disorder. The noisy sea is always there, always present and dangerous. Of course, there is something to be afraid of. Leibniz drowns everything in the differential and under the innumerable thicknesses of successive integrations. The mechanism is admirable. No one ever went as far in rational mastery, even into the smallest nooks and crannies. The straight direction of reason that must turn away from this chaos is the ascent of these scalar orders. The path is ahead, it is infinite, the perfect geometrizing remains inaccessible. It is divine, it is invisible. (What nose does the Classical Era repress, what does it turn out, in order to invent our rationalism?)

There, the masterwork is unknown.

Balzac saw it, knew it. And I can show that he saw it. I can really show that he figured out that he had known it: since he signed it. I shall explain what I mean.

What is ichnography? What is this masterwork where the term "master" [chef] means less a unique and rare success than it does capital, stock, fount, I mean ichnography? Well, the Greek term *ichnos* means footprint. Moving toward the canvas, they saw, in a corner of the canvas, a bit of a naked foot that arose from the chaos of colors, tones, and vague shadings, a kind of formless fog; it was a delicious, living foot! They stood there in complete admira-

tion in front of this fragment that had escaped from the unbelievable yet slow and progressive destruction. The foot appeared there like the torso of some Venus sculpted in marble from Paros, a Venus arising from out of the rubble of a city in flames. Here then is the signature with the very name of ichnography. The beautiful *noiseuse* is the flat projection. It is there, says Porbus, that our earthly art ends. From there it is lost in the skies, says Poussin. Balzac makes us understand that he knows, that he has understood.

The painters followed the path that Leibniz had thought infinite. Having broken in, they contemplate the divine work of geometry without understanding. Why?

Because they expected another picture, one that would have been like an extrapolation, part of the chain of forms. The last, the first representation, why couldn't it be a representation too? Because they were Leibnizians, because they are in the seventeenth century, because they are of the classical era.

Ichnography is not harmony, it is noise itself. Leibniz' system turns around like an iceberg. The woman in front of us, denuded of her appearances, of the dress of representation, no, it is not the beautiful Irene, it is the beautiful *noiseuse*. It is not harmony but shivaree. It is not peace but war; not smooth, transparent and white, not one, but multiple, a thunderous mixture, chaos.

Ichnography is white noise.

Geometrizing was the inaccessible object of metaphysics and still is. White noise is geometrizing.

A field of inquiry thought closed is open.

The noisy, anarchic, clamoring, mottled, striped, streaked, variegated, mixed, crossed, piebald multiplicity is possibility itself. It is a set of possible things, it can be the set of possible things.

It is not strength, it is the very opposite of power, but it is capacity. This noise is the opening. The Ancients were right to think chaos a gaping abyss. The multiple is open and from it is born nature always being born. We cannot foresee what will be born of it. We cannot know what is in it, here or there. No one knows, no one has ever known, no one will ever know how possibilities co-exist and how they co-exist with a possible relation. The set is criss-crossed with possible relations.

Leibniz, once again Leibniz, builds this world like an apartment placed at the peak, the summit, the apex of a pyramid. Rare, unique, perfect, rigorously calculated with optimum principles, in the middle of all possible worlds, it separates like a distinct point from a mass of shade. Beneath it the base of the pyramid extends, reaching out toward infinity. In the unfathomable thickness of this foundation, in the obscurity of these multiple conditions, the elements of the capacity are enshrouded in their own sleep and await their awakening at a certain degree of culture. This infinite base cannot be structured by rigorous and lucid reason. It is immersed in white noise, in the mottled clamor of the confused.

Balzac paints the vision that is the opposite of divine architecture. The perfect, optimum, living, existing, quasi-divine form is a foot. It is at the bottom,

beneath, at the base of the whirlwind. The vision is a sort of twister, a tornado, a hole of noise whose base is existence. In turning this vision around, time goes up toward the possible and space as well, as one goes down toward existing form.

The function, care, and passion of the philosopher is to protect the possible as well as possible, he preserves the possible as he would watch a small child, swaddling it like a new-born, he is the keeper of the flame. The philosopher is the shepherd feeding the flocks on the rocky steppes, flocks of the possible, pregnant ewes and trembling bulls, the philosopher is a gardener, crossing and multiplying the varieties, keeping the forest primeval, he watches during inclement weather, brings new times in history and duration, fat and lean cows, the philosopher is the shepherd of multiplicity.

The philosopher is no longer right, he keeps neither being nor truth. The function of the politician is to be right, the function of the scientist is to be right, there are enough official servants of the truth without adding another, the philosopher does not protect himself with the truth as if with a shield or sword, he does not seek to end fears in the dark, he wants to allow the possible to be free. Hope and liberty are in these marginal areas.

The philosopher watches over these unforeseeable and fragile states, his site is unstable, mobile, suspended, the philosopher seeks to keep the branchings and forkings open, as opposed to those who close and unite them. He goes back up the thalweg, up the chreod, he will seek pasture where the branchings multiply, where the torrents are turbulent, where the new flowers bloom in the high prairies.

The function, care, and passion of the philosopher is the negentropic carillon of the possible.

The multiplicity he feeds is not the original one. It certainly was, if and when there was a beginning. But what does it matter. The multiplicity of the possible is here and now. It is intermediary between phenomena, the noise between the forms that come out of it. I am rather glad that Proteus lives on an island and that he feeds the marine life at sea. When a phenomenon, a form, a relatively stable state, a period, a coherent epoch, or whatever appears, they try to make us forget the extremely fragile nature of their origins and the absence of their legitimacy. Not everything always has the legitimacy ascribed to it, the reason is often given long after the foundation. Everything is founded in the possible, all representations find their source in the beautiful *noiseuse*, all states come to us out of chaos. What is most often forgotten is the possible. It is forgotten so often that it is not visible. Even Poussin does not see or hear the noisy sea. There is chaos, there is a circumstance, and that is all the foundation there is. There is the white noise, then a noise in the white noise, and that is all the song there is. There is the permanent flow, then a fluctuation in this flow and that is the river of time. There is the Roman crowd, a turbulent, agitated, strong, magnificent throng, there are the mob and the multitude, there is the population, what chain of small circumstances made it move along throughout its history? The mob is always the bearer of the possible,

this flow is always the bearer of different times, chaos is always there to serve as a foundation, the noise is always there to invent new music and new harmonies, the beautiful *noiseuse* is always there, a horn of plenty whence come thousands of forms, the source of brilliant pictures. The multiplicity of times accompanies our own poor time, the multiple gapes, it is always open. However the possible is only there if there are keepers, if there are shepherds to feed the flocks on the high steppes, if there are nightwatchmen. Philosophy is the vestal virgin of the possible, the vestal virgin of time, she keeps the sacred flame in hard times.

Politics prunes the possible to remain stable and to keep reason, economy, religion, the army, Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus—and administration today synthesizes all that—have as a function and passion the reduction of multiplicities and possibilities by working at the confluences. The social functions of power attack time. Science collaborates if it cuts the bifurcations to get closer to its truth. The philosopher is the keeper of multiplicity, he is thus the shepherd of time, he seeks to preserve the possible. And that is why he will no longer have a function or power. For the first time he is living through the separation of philosophy from the State. He calls to science to come to his side, the side of knowledge, that is to say, of invention, and not the side of control.

The philosopher allows it to be said that the real is rational, for he allows everything to be said, including stupidities and cruelties, he allows it to be said that the rational is the only real thing. He allows it to be said; alas, he allows it to be done. That the real is rational, that the rational is real, that is said as a matter of course, but, above everything, that is done, constructed. We construct a reality that is a rational one, we construct a reality, among all the possible ones, as we pour concrete on the earth. It is not the only possible concrete and it is not the only possible cover. People in the city always think that what is constructed is a landscape, certain people in the country think that the landscape is the world as is. The old rationalism is the concrete of the world, the philosophy of language is the concrete of meaning, our philosophies of politics and history are the concrete of time. There are other possible words, I know other possible meanings, we can invent other forms of time. And that is why the philosopher swaddles the possible like a newborn, like a bouquet, like a many-branched candelabrum, like a living network of veins and fibrils, he listens to the noises and the carillons.

The beautiful *noiseuse* is the sea, the noise of the sea.

What is geometrized is the noise, ichnography is white noise, all scenography, every profile, every appearance, all are forms that come from this source, signals come from this noise, perceived come from these perceptions.

The multiplicity of colors and tones, the turbulent chaos, the maelstrom, the spinning top, is poised on a foot, on a footprint.

Aphrodite, a beautiful goddess, invisible, erect, is born of this chaotic sea, of this nautical chaos, of this noise. Aphrodite, erect, her foot on the sea, walks on the water. We only know Aphrodite, and then some. We turn away from the waves to admire the one born of the waves.

The Egyptian Mary who will cross the water, and the first Adam of Father Mabuse, and the beautiful portrait à la Giorgione of a woman, so many beautiful pictures, so many beautiful women in portraits are born of this beautiful Eve *noiseuse*, maritime [mer], mother [mère], matrix, fabulous uterus, impregnated with the brush of Uranus dripping with spermatic, bloody color.

How is Venus born from the sea, how is time born of the noisy sky? How are forms born from the unformed? How is peace born of noise and the social contract born of the plundering mob? How are harmony, song, sound, rhythm, and melody born of this noise?

Listen

Murs, ville,
Et port,
Asile
De mort,
Mer grise
Où brise
La brise,
Tout dort.

Dans la plaine
Naît un bruit.
C'est l'haleine
De la nuit.
Elle brame
Comme une âme
Qu'une flamme
Toujours suit!

La voix la plus haute
Semble un grelot.
D'un nain qui saute
C'est le galop.
Il fuit, s'élance,
Puis en cadence
Sur un pied danse
Au bout d'un flot.⁵

Fluctuation.

Listen then to another possible voice. Music. First a light sound, flying low like a swallow before the storm, a murmuring *pianissimo* that moves and sows the poisoned line as it goes.⁶ Some mouth gathers it, and *piano, piano* slips it neatly in your ear. The evil is done, it takes root, it crawls, it creeps and slyly goes; then suddenly, I know not how, you see Calumny erect, it blows, it swells, it grows before your eyes; it jumps, spreads its wings, whirls around, surrounds, pushes and pulls, thunders and lightnings, and becomes, by God,

a general alarum, a public *crescendo*, a universal *chorus* of hate and proscription. Noise.

Translated by Lawrence R. Schehr

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. Serres erroneously has "Fernhofer" throughout. Here, and elsewhere, I have emended it to "Frenhofer" to conform to the standard editions.

2. That is to say, the Egyptian Mary and Marie de Médicis.

3. Noise, as Serres points out, no longer has great currency in French. It is only used in the expression "chercher noise à quelqu'un," which means to seek a quarrel. In this text, whenever *noise* or *noiseuse* appears, there is always an echo of both the French and English meanings of the word: sound and fury.

4. The Scheldt, which in French is L'Escault.

5. Victor Hugo, "Les Djinns."

6. Serres is alluding to Don Basilio's famous aria, "La Calunnia," in Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, throughout this paragraph.

ADDENDA

Due to circumstances beyond our control we were unable to incorporate the following revisions in Ilya Prigogine's and Michel Serres' contributions to the present issue:

Page 38

Paragraph 1 should begin with:

The situation is scarcely more favorable today for the partisans of hidden variables, as shown, for example, in a recent book by d'Espagnat. As for the classical age . . .

Paragraph 2 should begin with:

René Thom seems to accept the idea of chaotic evolution, what he calls the emergence of the "indescribable" from the "describable." We suppose that he also accepts the transformation of "describable" into "describable." At stake therefore . . .

Page 39

The last paragraph should begin with:

On a microscopic level the situation is fairly analogous. A relatively small change in the structure of the Hamiltonian of the system can give trajectories . . .

Page 42

Add to note 3:

(1983 note: I regret that in the original article I did not refer to Ch. S. Peirce whose profound remarks on chance and necessity are quite worthwhile today.)

Add to note 4:

(1983 note: This example deserves more elaboration: no thermodynamical history of the universe is possible without taking gravitation into account. We cannot go more into detail here.)

Add a last note (note 6), which refers to the discussion on fluctuation on page 40:

This article was written in 1980. Since, much progress has been made in the description of fluctuation, both at the phenomenological level and from the point of view of the emergence of the dynamical description. I cannot give a complete list of references here. However, I would like to mention my book, *From Being to Becoming* (Freeman, 1980), and three recent papers: I. Prigogine and C. George, "The Second Law as Selection Principle: the Microscopic Theory of Dissipative Process in Quantum Systems" to appear in PNAS 80 (July 1983); B. Misra and I. Prigogine, "Time, Probability and Dynamics" in: *Offprints from Long-time Predictions in Dynamics*, C. W. Horton Jr., L. E. Reich and A. G. Szebehely eds. (Wiley, 1983) and M. Courbage and I. Prigogine, "Intrinsic Randomness and Intrinsic Irreversibility in Classical Systems," PNAS 80 (1983), 2412-2416.

Page 59

The poem, which the translator chose to reproduce in Victor Hugo's original lay-out on the page, was not presented by Michel Serres as a verse poem. It should read as an independent paragraph in the following manner.

Listen. Murs, ville et port, asile de mort, mer grise où brise la bise, tout dort. Dans la plaine naît un bruit. C'est l'haleine de la nuit. Elle brame comme une âme qu'une flamme toujours suit. La voix plus haute semble un grelot. D'un nain qui saute c'est le galop. Il fuit, s'élance, puis en cadence, sur un pied . . . danse au bout du flot. Fluctuation.