

Statues of Jeff Bezos

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Abstract

The passage of human civilization into the new geological era of the Anthropocene raises the question of species extinction. How can we confront the possibility of collective death in a way that does not descend into uncontained anxiety or melancholy? Michel Serres' works in the *Foundations* and *Humanism* series offer critical insights into the way in which human violence and death operate as mechanism for binding together human collectives. Serres draws attention to the role of 'social technologies' based around sacrificial practices, the scapegoating mechanism, and the use of corpses as markers of social relations (or 'statues'). Serres argues that these mythic logics and practices persist in modern societies and technoscience. They may also be at work in a modified way in the proposed technical solutions to climate change around space travel and planetary colonisation. Drawing on the tradition of Folk Horror filmmaking and literature, it is argued that reversing the direction of travel, back into the Earth, provides better instruction about how to live and die in the Anthropocene. Reflection on the puteal sites where this may be accomplished will serve as the mechanism.

Keywords

Michel Serres; Anthropocene; Social Technologies; Scapegoating; Folk Horror

introduction

The short story *A Tress of Hair* by Guy de Maupassant concerns the 'mad inmate' of an asylum and his obsession with an 'immense coil' of woman's hair that he discovered in an antique piece of furniture. The hair has come to dominate his waking thoughts with fantasies of the woman from whose head it was cut and the fate that has befallen her. He is turned entirely away from his current circumstances:

The past attracts me, the present terrifies me because the future means death. I regret all that has gone by. I mourn all who have lived; I should like to check time, to stop the clock. But time goes, it goes, it passes, it takes from me each second a little of myself for the annihilation of tomorrow. And I shall never live again (de Maupassant, 2022a).

Turning towards the past, becoming invested entirely in what has been, 'all who have lived', seems to be a stratagem for avoiding the inevitability of death. The inmate seeks out an eternity that is to be both mourned and longed for in the hope that the clock might be stopped. Better, it seems, to live a life perpetually unfulfilled, rather than confront a future which contains only one certainty.

This mournful relationship towards the past resonates with sense of loss that dominates many contemporary cultures of memory. It is commonplace to observe that we live during a 'memory boom', where the obsessive drive toward the preservation, celebration and contestation of the past seems at times to overwhelm concern for the future (e.g. Hoskins,

2014; Blight, 2012). This is expressed not only in relation to cultural events, but also in relation to environmental change. On the Isle of Portland (UK), a huge spiralling stone monument is planned. The Mass Extinction Memorial Observatory will be carved with images of every one of the currently 860 animal species that have been declared extinct since the demise of the dodo in the seventeenth century. In 2019, an official funeral was held in western Iceland for the glacier Okjökull, lost to climate change, and marked with a grave plaque on the grounds where the glacier once stood. Whilst these monuments have the purpose of underscoring the need for action, the mournful relationship they express towards environmental change even has its own name – ‘solastalgia’, the existential distress experienced around irrevocable environmental destruction (Albrecht, 2005).

The problem that we – who live through the opening years of the geological time period of the Anthropocene – all share with de Maupassant’s inmate is around our relationship to death. The tress of hair appears to have destabilized his previously peaceful life. The past now matters, both figuratively and literally, through the medium of the hair, in the same way that these monuments attract solastalgia as a kind of existential gloop into which visitors are drawn. We cannot save what has been lost and as a consequence do not know how really to live outside of the brute fact that a place has already been prepared for our own species in the spiral of extinction. In his arrestingly titled *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Roy Scranton argues that accepting the reality of climate changes requires preparation for both our deaths as individuals and for the ‘global capitalist civilization’ in which we live. Death may negate the person or the culture, but the bodies through which they are composed live on once the energy within them is released back to the planet:

We are finite and limited machines, but we are not merely machines: we are vibrating bodies of energy, condensations of stellar dust and fire, at once matter and life, extension and thought, moment and frequency. The iron in our blood, the oxygen we breathe, and the carbon of which we are composed were all created in the dying hearts of stars. (Scranton, 115)

This updated account of immortality found through the returning of molecules for use within the Earth System is familiar to readers of Michel Serres’ late series of books (*Hominscence, The Incandescent, Branches, Humanistic Narratives*) collectively known as the *Humanism* series. The central theme of these works is the elaboration of the pathway from the local to the global at a time when the human species has achieved an unprecedented universality across multiple modalities. Serres speaks of the Grand Narrative (*Grand Récit*) of the Earth System and the universe as the contingent branchings and deviations through which becoming unfolds. The dissipation of the unique confluence of energies and materials that make up a person or a species have their sense within the turns and divergences which make up the Grand Narrative. A tress of hair or a monumental stone spiral are akin to emergent points or lightning flashes through which one specific passageway from local (existence) to global (transformation) are momentarily illuminated.

The Grand Narrative may, in a loose and semi-abstract fashion, provide comfort for our contemporary solastalgia. It makes some sense of the fact of species-extinction (and indeed that there yet be some unanticipated technological or cultural invention which could defer its inevitability a little via a different branching), but it does not really provide much

instruction on how we may learn to die well, as Scranton puts it. To build an account of what may be required to renew our relationship to death requires returning to an earlier phase of Serres' work – the *Foundations Trilogy* (Rome, Statues, Geometry). It is here that Serres summarizes his account of the divergence of objects from subjects and that which binds together social order.

social technologies of life and death

Serres' landmark work *The Parasite* concerns (amongst many other things) a triadic conception of relationality where communication between sender and receiver is interrupted by a 'third', or parasite, who must be excluded. This establishes a branching in the relationship which is itself subject to parasitism in a potentially recursive fashion. Towards the end of the book, Serres proposes that considering the parasite as an 'elementary relation' leads towards a generalized theory of social order – 'What living together is. What is the collective? This question fascinates us now' (Serres, 1982, 224). The path mapped out in the section divisions across the book that leads to this question is worth remarking. Rather than situate the problem of what binds human collectives within political thought, with the social contract as the key staging point, Serres tacks instead between fables, religion and cybernetics to extract a series of 'logics'. These then become exemplified in various forms of 'work' and 'techniques', before questions concerning 'economy' and, finally, 'society' can be posed.

The intellectual work across the book can be described using the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' that Steven Connor (2009), amongst others, productively reads across Serres' work. As Lillian Kroth (2023) explains, the distinction between hard and soft can be mapped onto different understandings of entropy as thermodynamic and informational (an 'entropic difference'), which might suggest a separation of questions of order and disorder across 'natural' and 'social' registers. However, Serres is consistent in asserting that the origins of social order are not to be found in anything especially 'social', that is to say pertaining to some idea or quality that defines human relations. Instead, they emerge from a logic of branching and invention that is expressed by the cosmos itself. The groundwork for this was already provided in his study of Lucretius in the *Birth of Physics*, where the formation of language from letters follows the same process where bodies are composed of atoms. Social order is then to be understood as fundamentally no different in kind to the formation of river flows, electrical storms or termite mounds. As Kroth (2023) puts it, it seems that social organization arises from the kind of 'thermodynamic grill' that is equally applicable across Earth System processes. But Serres also observes in *The Parasite* that social organization also has the remarkably 'soft' aspect of being constructed out of arbitrary materials. The water that flows has a very specific chemical composition, lightning occurs under specific conditions of differentials between positive and negative electrical charges and termites can only use a particular range of materials to construct their homes. But human society requires no specific materials for its constitution – 'the construction of the collective has been done with anyone and by means of anything' (Serres, 1982, 229). All that is required is the circulation of 'quasi-object' – for instance, a ball, a holy relic, money, a nuclear weapon – which focuses and co-ordinates social relations as it passes between them.

In *Statues*, Serres elaborates on the role of the quasi-object by describing the cultural practices which emerge around these soft markers of intersubjectivity. He argues that the contemporary focus on 'hard' technologies of world-making and sustaining life (e.g. biotechnologies, green tech, nuclear energy) overlook millennia old 'social technologies' which have served to map out the place of human society within the Earth System:

Everything happens as though the most anciently known and practiced social technologies tries with the means to resolve precisely the questions we now consider to be the most urgent, as though these technologies gave themselves a holistic target whereas the modern, precise, exact, narrow specialized technologies have punctual or specific aims. The junction of the hard and social sciences brings back the problem of the local and the global. (Serres, 2015a, 22)

As Christopher Watkin (2020) describes, Serres often deploys the rhetorical strategy of situating what appears to be an emergent contemporary problem (e.g. environmental destruction) as part of a lineage of soft practices that are co-extensive with the development of human civilization (e.g. purification rituals). Here the modern version of 'learning to die' is related to what is 'most anciently known'. For Serres, the precise structure of that problem is the relationship between the individual living body and the 'original magma' from which it emerges, the 'chaotic dough of prime matter, or the mass crowd, multitude, gathering of bodies making bodies' (Serres, 2015a, 54). As with all forms of order, the emergence of human life is, for Serres, a negentropic rarity, akin to a pocket of turbulence in a stream that is destined to dissipate. Discussing Rodin's sculpture *The Gates of Hell*, Serres notes the ways in which tangled human bodies appear to emerge from the mass of the casting in a manner akin to Venus rising from the sea. But the bodies appear as though they might, at any moment, collapse back into the mass from which they have been extracted. It is the position of the *The Gates of Hell* themselves, caught between opening and closing that temporarily affords human life, that allows it to differentiate itself from the mass. How do these gates work – what is it that makes them swing open and shut?

The preceding volume in the Foundations trilogy, *Rome*, is dedicated to René Girard, Serres' colleague at Stanford University. In this work, Serres draws extensively on Girard's notion of the scapegoat mechanism as basis for social cohesion. Girard's well-known argument is that violence is endemic to social relations, grounded in memetic rivalry, and religious practices have evolved to contain this violence through its collective projection onto a singular figure of exclusion, the scapegoat (Girard, 2000; 2016). In legend, Rome is founded on the killing on Remus, but Serres reads this as but one in a chain of sacrificial deaths which unite the people around what then becomes a sacred site. Property, for Serres, is inextricably linked to human violence, with the blood of those who are sacrificed serving to purify the space of ownership. Human history is the slow process of progressing from sacrificing humans, as scapegoats, to animals, and ultimately to fetishes and relics which serve as quasi-objects. This 'progress' is uneven and threatens to slide back into unbound violence at every turn. The Gates of Hell are then held in place through the evolution of scapegoating practices, which balance life and death to postpone as long as possible the return of the collective to the mass from which it emerges. But the gradual effacement of ritual and myth by technoscience as the means of 'mastering' rivalries has resulted in imbalance – 'we know another hell into which we entered collectively when the gate opened nearly fifty years ago

in order to settle a case' – e.g. Hiroshima (Serres, 2015a, 59). In *Hermes III*, Serres named this as 'thanatocracy' – the prolongation and enlargement of a social logic of violence into the global power of potential all-out nuclear destruction (see Simons, 2022). The question then arises as to whether mythic scapegoating practices can keep pace the thanatocratic turn in technoscience.

from folk horror to space travel

'Folk Horror' is a term used to describe a range of films (e.g. *The Wicker Man*, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, *Witchfinder General*) and literature (e.g. Shirley Jackson, Alan Garner, M.R. James) that are typically set in rural landscapes and concern the maintenance of traditional practices. Adam Scovell (2017) succinctly defines the genre as depicted by pastoral landscapes in which isolated communities with skewed moral beliefs are absorbed in a practice of 'summoning'. For example, *The Wicker Man* unfolds a story of a neo-pagan rural community on the remote island of Summerisle who lure a policeman to become a sacrificial victim at their Midsummer festival. Shirley Jackson's short story *The Lottery* similarly describes a rural North American community who maintain an annual practice of selecting a victim from amongst themselves who will be stoned to death to purge bad omens from the town and thereby assure a good harvest. The central trope of folk horror is then the reinvention of mythic practices to maintain social cohesion in the face of a changing and unpredictable modern world.

Throughout his work, Serres often returns to lapidation (i.e. ritual stoning) to illustrate the scapegoat mechanism. Lapidation produces a human corpse buried under rock that subsequently can serve as a boundary marker. It is the presence of death used to define the space of the community, in a manner similar to the great pyramids, where the body of the Pharaoh is both present and known, but also deliberately concealed. Serres refers to these arrangements as 'statues' or the first objects – 'What is a statue? A living body covered with stones' (2015a, 181). A statue gains its status as an object through the sacrificial process which transforms that which was undoubtedly once a subject into a thing that now binds the community together.

In his final work, *Religion*, Serres reads the bible story of John 8:87 as a transformed version of the scapegoat mechanism. Here a woman who has been accused of adultery is brought before Jesus, who declaims 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her'. But Serres further notes that the story has Jesus writing in the ground before making this statement. Could it be that Jesus has already written the name of the guilty party in the adultery, or perhaps that the crowd suspect that any one of them might already be named in the writing as sinful, and will be revealed as such if the stoning begins? Serres goes on to compare this with the practice of randomly issuing a blank cartridge to at least one member of a firing squad:

Why is this blank necessary? Why is it necessary that, amongst the executioners, this 'at least one' does not kill? Why should he be chosen, in effect, by drawing lots? For the same reason, a profound one. For in the wake of death by stoning or by shooting, judicial review – or a palace revolt, or a popular revolution – may bring to light the innocence of the person was executed. In that event the situation is

reversed, and the people will turn on those who killed the now blameless defendant, which is to say the entire firing squad. But who among this group really killed the one who in the meantime has become a victim? (Serres, 2022, 90)

The blank cartridge and the name written by Jesus serve the same social function, for Serres, of absolving the community in the scapegoating process. If 'at least one' is innocent then collective blame cannot return. Similarly, the randomness of the lottery and the apparent willingness of the victim to arrive 'at the appointed hour' provide a guarantee for the community that ensures the continuity of the practice. All of these examples are evolutions of the scapegoat mechanism. Serres himself comes close to invoking folk horror in the opening example of *Statues*. The book opens with a description of antique ritual sacrifice in Carthage taken from Flaubert's *Salammbo*. In an echo of the Wicker Man, Flaubert narrates how a gigantic statue of Baal would be ceremonially brought from the temple before the crowds. The statue contained multiple huge compartments, into which were packed precious jewels, animals, and in the final space, the first-born children of families of note. A fire was then lit at the base of the statue, which consumed the sacrificial objects and subjects.

This example – whether entirely mythic or not – would serve by itself to illustrate the scapegoat mechanism, but it is used by Serres as a comparative case. The other case is the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986 during the opening moments of its journey into space. At first inspection, the comparison seems spurious, other than an instance of a tragic loss of life. Serres carefully presents a number of structural similarities. For instance, in both cases the goal of the practice is aimed towards the stars and the heavens, and the spectacle is watched by massive crowds (either present or remotely via live television) who gasp in horror at what unfolds. Both practices are financially excessive, pushing the community towards bankruptcy in order to produce ingenious machines that are at the limits of technical innovation. The spectacles are watched by a mixture of commoners and technicians, the latter being specially and ritually clothed. Great fires are lit at the start, leading ultimately towards death at the conclusion. Finally, the spectacle is intended to be repeated multiple times.

The comparison may appear to be forced, and indeed somewhat distasteful. And yet the point that Serres seeks to underscore through comparison is critical: at the heart of technically advanced 'scientific' and 'civilized' societies there persist a recognisably mythic logic which deploys death as the marker of life. As Simons (2022, 141) notes, violence is not a product of modern science, but rather an 'expression of a longer, archaic history of science'. Numerous other examples are testament to this. In *Hominescence*, for instance, Serres ponders why we are willing to tolerate steep levels of fatal road traffic accidents as the price for personal mobility. More recently, we might also ponder what logic was in play in decisions about the numbers of deaths that might be tolerated from Coronavirus infection in order to secure the economy, as famously expressed in the comments reputedly attributed to then Prime Minister Boris Johnson 'no more fucking lockdowns – let the bodies pile high in their thousands' (Guardian, 26th April, 2021). The role of statues as the concealed presence of the sacrificed dead at the heart of community remains central to contemporary societies.

What is then to be made of the renewed interest in space travel that is most publicly demonstrated in the open competition between a small number of billionaire men – Elon Musk’s SpaceX, Richard Branson’s Virgin Galactic and Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin? The structural similarities between Baal and Challenger seem to be readily applicable here. Great, technically dazzling spectacles that channel the extraction of vast riches to shock and awe the masses as they witness some of the richest people on earth cosplay their way into space. Yet despite these structural similarities, death appears to have switched position in relation to the statue-rockets. On their website, Blue Origin present ‘our vision’ in the following terms:

Blue Origin was founded with a vision of millions of people living and working in space for the benefit of Earth. Blue Origin envisions a time when people can tap into the limitless resources of space and enable the movement of damaging industries into space to preserve Earth, humanity’s blue origin
(<https://www.blueorigin.com/about-blue>)

The premise here is that the resources needed to continue life on Earth are no longer to be found on the planet but exist instead in the ‘limitless resources of space’. Accessing these resources will require a significant proportion of the human population to leave Earth and engage in the difficult and demanding work of maintaining ‘damaging industries’ off-world. This is a sacrificial logic. The many will need to live in space in order to save the few who will reap the benefits of preserving ‘humanity’s blue origin’. This can also be found in Elon Musk’s comments to Werner Herzog about the goals of SpaceX in the film *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World*:

So the window of possibility is open for us to extend life to another planet. To the best of our knowledge life exists only on Earth ... There’s a good argument that life exists elsewhere but we’ve seen no sign of it. I think it’s important for us to take advantage of that window while it is open and to establish life on another planet in the solar system just in case something goes wrong with Earth and you know that could be either a natural or man-made disaster that knocks the technology level below that which is possible, where it is possible to travel to another planet (Elon Musk interviewed by Werner Herzog, 2016).

According to Musk, space travel must be developed at this historical moment because there is a ‘window’ where it may be technically possible before the imminent collapse of human civilization through climate change or human disaster (such as nuclear war). We must act since The Gates of Hell are about to open. The logic is similarly that a few may survive in the face of species extinction itself. There is a broad continuity here of the Baal-Challenger logic, but with one important modification. It is those in the statue will live and by living they give hope that others will also be saved, but with the recognition that the vast majority risk being left behind to their inevitable fate. The statue-rocket prolongs a mythical sacrificial logic. Most of us will have to learn how to die in the Anthropocene or in the off-world economic colonies but will have the comfort of knowing that the few will live on. This corresponds to one dimension in what Bruno Latour termed the ‘politics of the new climatic regime’, where elites have ‘had to stop pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world’ (Latour, 2019, 19).

we don't go back

It seems highly unlikely that the updated sacrificial logic of 'leaving the planet' will do much to allay collective anxieties around climate catastrophe and species extinction. Where else might we look for learning how to die in the Anthropocene? In *Statues*, Serres considers another short story by de Maupassant, *The Spasm*. This concerns a tale told by a father about an unfortunate event concerning his daughter. She was brought apparently lifeless to her father one day, and rapidly buried in the family vault in a coffin surrounded by her jewels and finery. The distraught father returns home and rejects the offer of help from his valet, Prosper, before falling asleep by the fire. He is then suddenly woken in the middle of the night by a ringing at the door:

I was frightened. I opened the door brusquely, and in the darkness I distinguished a white figure, standing erect, something that resembled an apparition. I recoiled petrified with horror, faltering: 'Who-who-who are you?' A voice replied: 'It is I, father'. It was my daughter. I really thought I must be mad, and I retreated before this advancing spectre. I kept moving away, making a sign with my hand as if to drive the phantom away, that gesture which you have noticed – that gesture which has remained with me ever since. 'Do not be afraid, papa' said the apparition. 'I was not dead. Somebody tried to steal my rings and cut one of my fingers; the blood began to flow, and that restored me to life'. And in fact I could see that her hand was covered with blood. I fell on my knees, choking with sobs and with a rattling in my throat. Then, when I had somewhat collected my thoughts, though I was still so bewildered that I scarcely realized the awesome happiness that had befallen me, I made her go up to my room and sit down in my easy-chair; then I rang excitedly for Prosper to get him to rekindle the fire and to bring some wine, and to summon assistance. The man entered stared at my daughter, opened his mouth with gasp of alarm and stupefaction, and fell back dead (de Maupassant, 2022b).

The story is constructed around three positions – father, daughter and valet – and two deaths. In the first death, the daughter is buried, transformed from subject to object. She lies concealed in the family vault, which provides an opportunity for the relation of father and valet to shift. Prosper returns in secret, opens the vault and takes the ring by cutting off the daughter's finger. The stage is set for the second death. The daughter is seemingly resurrected by the loss of her finger and returns spectre-like to the family home. An object miraculated into a subject again. When the valet sees her, he drops dead, shocked wordless, restoring the relationship of father to daughter now secured by his body become object. Serres describes this series of substitutions in the following way:

The object, the subject, lacking any reference, finds one in and through death, since the remains define the here, mark it, fix it, in space and for time. They are organized and placed take on meaning, in relation to death; relative to that reference, they can substitute for one another. What is the object? It's the body come back, the resurrected subject, what we call a ghost – a statue. Or the apparition. Phenomenal. (Serres, 2015a, 74)

The substitutions of subject and object that Serres describes precede any language or attempt at rationalising. Note the way the father gestures as if to ward off the spectre at the door, failing to bring the transformation of object to subject into words, and the mute manner in with the valet collapses. Death distributes (and redistributes) subjects and objects in a brute manner that appear to proceed meaning. The apparition is 'the phenomenon before phenomenology' (Serres, 2015a, 76).

Here then is a different relationship to death, mediated by the apparition. Folk horror is typically set in a 'haunted' landscape. The short stories of MR James, for instance, immerse central characters in places that are inhabited by spectral presences that mark out relations in a way that Mark Fisher (2016) terms 'the eerie'. Like Prosper, Parkin, the unworldly Professor in James' *Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad*, sets in motion a chain of spectral events by removing property from a grave site. It is the disturbance of the site that leads to becoming disturbed in turn. Following Serres' analysis, these events can be seen as outside of the symbolic, organized through a series of substitutions and exclusions that precede sense-making.

We might then say that this encounter with death is of a different order than that which is found within the scapegoat mechanism. It is a kind of living through the experiences of deaths around us which turns us back towards place, enacting a kind of re-grounding back in the landscape. Folk horror may appear to demonstrate anachronistic or conservative attitudes towards the past, which often appears to swallow up the present. But it might be better instead to see this as re-absorption in place which plays off current practices against old beliefs and traditions in a generative process. Howard David Ingham (2018) succinctly names this 'we don't go back', based on a line from Nigel Neale's television drama about mysterious events in a rural village, *Murrain*. In this drama, a vet investigates an outbreak of disease which has infected the local livestock and, seemingly, the farmers themselves. The local community have chosen to scapegoat an elderly woman as the magical source of this illness which veterinary science to explain. The vet disparages such backward-looking superstition but is unable to provide an alternative beyond belief in the application of clinical reasoning. The problem here is that death has become redistributed and the community cannot establish the substitutions required to keep pace. They need a different means of connecting the social logic of blame and exclusion to some as-yet-unmanifested feature of place, an apparition in the world that is beyond their world (whether it be virus, microbe, spirit or demon).

In both *Rome* and *Religion*, Serres notes the importance of festivals such as the Roman 'mundas patet' (or 'opening the earth'). During these events the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead become permeable. Spirits walk amongst us, and we may contact or pass through to the underworld. A connection to another world is temporarily possible. Serres notes that the passageways between worlds were sometimes materialized as puteal structures, driven into the ground, which could be literally uncapped to open the earth. The puteal is akin to an inverted rocket. Jules Verne envisaged a great journey *From the Earth to the Moon* in a way that is recapitulated in the current fantasies of escaping Earth for space. But he also turned that same logic downward in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, where passageways to a hidden other world are located in the inactive Icelandic volcano Snæfellsjökull. The explorers find a way to open the earth at a site not far from the

now departed glacier Okjökull. Could finding a way back into the Earth, seeking a way to dwell amongst the mass to which human life inevitably returns in death, provide a way to go on living in the Anthropocene?

Serres observes in *Statues* that ancient Egyptian culture configured the relationship between life and death differently. Contemporary Western societies tend to view death as that which is behind us, and which must be avoided rather than confronted. The industrial practice of moving new cemeteries to the edges of urban space characterized the growth of many European modern cities. We no longer live so closely with the dead. But Serres claims that ancient Egyptian culture placed death in front of life as that which living must inevitably confront at every moment. The great pyramids served as black boxes in which the substitution of life and death was enacted and concealed, as a kind of perpetual process of opening the earth. Serres describes this modern version of this process in the following way:

Just as the seeds in the sunflower's massive and round flower grow over a kind of common pedestal and ceaselessly feed on it the way it does on the global mass of the sun, so we are born, live and die dependent on the mass of matter, itself no doubt independent of us, born of the dust, kneaded from carbon and nitrogen and returning, decomposed, to the nitrogen cycle; we must therefore never leave the common stock of birth and death, paradise, hell, moving ourselves over it at a small distance from it, corn seeds on an ear ... Humanity emerges from the mother-matter, from the womb-box, from the jambs of the gate or beams, beneath the lintel, and immense and teeming metropolis. (2015, 54)

The puteal sites which force a confrontation between life and the mass, the earth out of which it all-too-briefly emerges, are the places where we might learn to die well in the Anthropocene, and, more crucially, where it might be possible to reconsider what living together with other species in the Earth System might mean. Where might they be found?

By way of conclusion, here are some potential candidates. Serres offers the Eiffel Tower as one example. But rather than see it as pointed, Baal-Challenger like, towards the heavens, Serres imagines instead that the tower ought to have been placed at Denfert-Rochereau 'so as to sink the fluid foundations of the four pillars into the catacombs, the way Abbot Suger founded the Basilica of Saint Denis over the crypt in which all our kings lie' (2015a, 61). A failed, but nevertheless instructive puteal. Perhaps the Vincom Landmark 81 in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam is a better candidate. This vast 470 metre tower looms over the skyline of a city which is in the frontline of climate change. Increasingly large areas of the city are routinely flooded as the city itself sinks into high flow of the Saigon and Dong Nai rivers, not least under the mass of new buildings. Local superstition has the Vincom tower as a gigantic sword which is plunged into and imprisons a dragon beneath the city. But for how much longer?

But perhaps the most important puteal sites are those of the nuclear power sites at Sellafield in the UK, Chernobyl in the Ukraine and Fukushima in Japan. Each of these sites was literally created around the problem of mass and unlocking the energy bound up with the composition of the Earth System. Each site, to different degrees, also rattled the Gates of Hell without opening them entirely. Sellafield, for example, has a formal forward business

plan of 100 years at a projected cost of £121 Billion for the clean-up of radioactive elements from the site dating back to the brief period of time (1956 – 2003) when it was an operational nuclear power station and nuclear fuel reprocessing centre. There are parts of the site that are currently inaccessible by humans because of high radioactivity – black boxes in which death is present but concealed. The three sites are all necropolises gifted to the Anthropocene. Where better than there to encounter apparitions that redistribute life and death, that provide instruction on how to face the possibility of our collective deaths?

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