

MICHEL SERRES **with** BRUNO LATOUR

Conversations on  
Science, Culture,  
and Time

Translated by  
Roxanne Lapidus



MICHIGAN

## ***Studies in Literature and Science***

published in association with the  
Society for Literature and Science

### **Editorial Board**

*Chair:* N. Katherine Hayles, University of California, Los Angeles  
James J. Bono, State University of New York at Buffalo  
Clifford Geertz, Institute for Advanced Study  
Evelyn Fox Keller, University of California, Berkeley  
Bruno Latour, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines, Paris  
Stephen J. Weininger, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

### **Titles in the series**

*Transgressive Readings: The Texts of Franz Kafka and Max Planck*  
by Valerie D. Greenberg

*A Blessed Rage for Order: Deconstruction, Evolution, and Chaos*  
by Alexander J. Argyros

*Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics* by Michael Joyce

*The Artificial Paradise: Science Fiction and American Reality*  
by Sharona Ben-Tov

*Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*  
by Michel Serres with Bruno Latour

*The Natural Contract* by Michel Serres

*Genesis* by Michel Serres

MICHEL SERRES *with* BRUNO LATOUR

**Conversations on Science,  
Culture, and Time**

Translated by  
Roxanne Lapidus

*Ann Arbor*

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

English translation copyright © by the University of Michigan 1995  
Originally published in French as *Eclaircissements* © by Editions François  
Bourin 1990

All rights reserved

Published in the United States of America by

The University of Michigan Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

1998 1997 1996 1995 4 3 2 1

*A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Serres, Michel.

[*Eclaircissements*. English]

Conversations on science, culture, and time / Michel Serres  
with Bruno Latour ; translated by Roxanne Lapidus.

p. cm. — (Studies in literature and science)

ISBN 0-472-09548-X (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-472-06548-3 (pbk.: alk.  
paper)

1. Serres, Michel—Interviews. 2. Authors, French—20th century—  
Interviews. I. Title. II. Series.

PQ2679.E679Z46513 1995

194—dc20

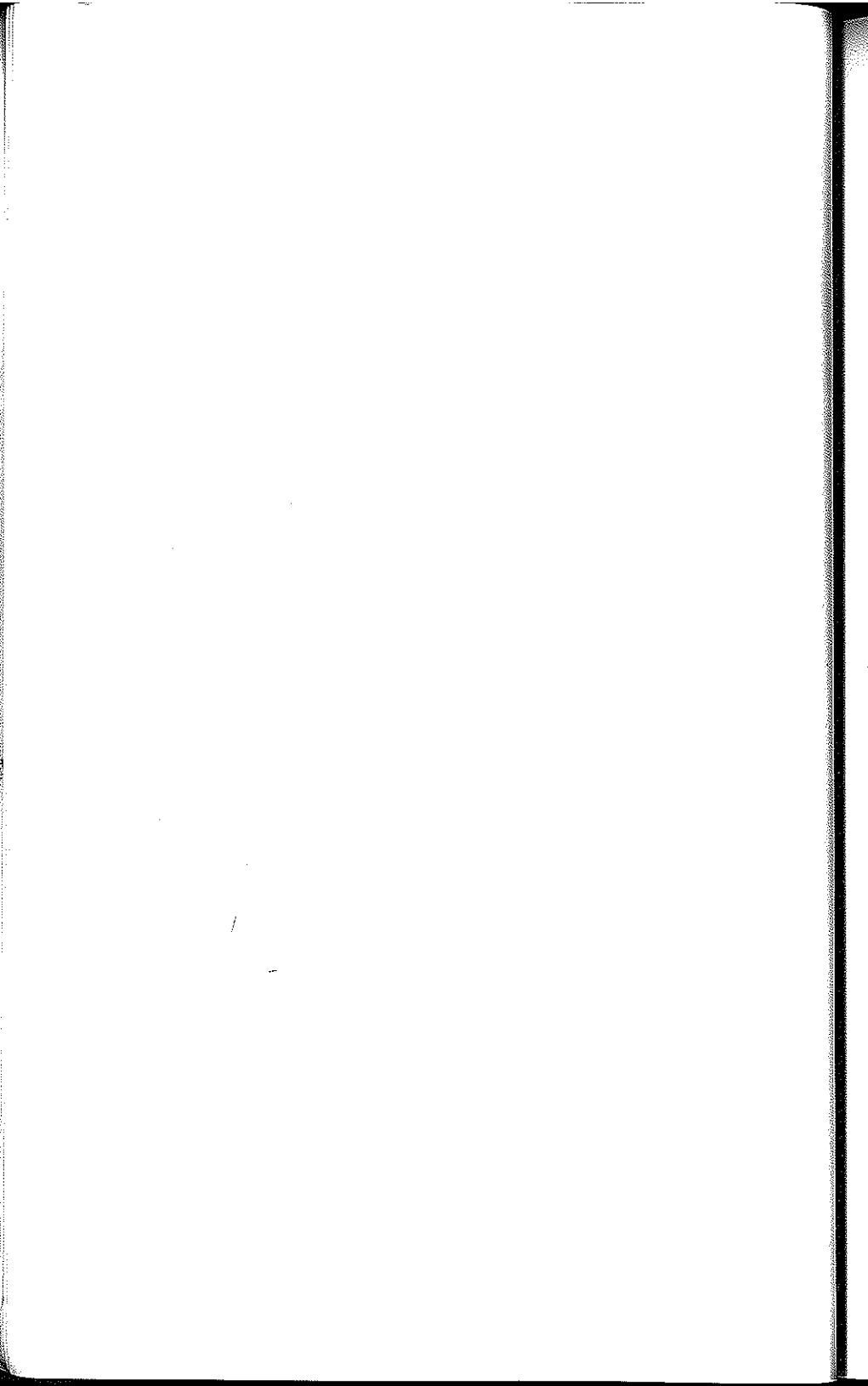
95-2706

CIP

The publisher is grateful for partial subvention for translation from the  
French Ministry of Culture.

## Contents

Translator's Introduction	vii
FIRST CONVERSATION	
Background and Training	1
SECOND CONVERSATION	
Method	43
THIRD CONVERSATION	
Demonstration and Interpretation	77
FOURTH CONVERSATION	
The End of Criticism	125
FIFTH CONVERSATION	
Wisdom	167
Translator's Note	205



## Translator's Introduction

With the publication of *Hermès I. La communication* in 1969 Michel Serres set the tone for a controversial body of work that has evolved over the past twenty-five years through more than twenty books, which he sees as a series, a natural progression of his lifetime project of understanding what makes our world tick. In that first volume he introduced his main character and alter ego, the Greek god Hermes—the messenger—who, under Serres's pen, travels across time and space, making unexpected connections between seemingly disparate objects and events. These sometimes bewildering juxtapositions, which reflect Serres's unorthodox view of time itself, have baffled many critics and general readers.

It was with an eye to clarifying some of these sources of difficulty that sociologist Bruno Latour persuaded Michel Serres in 1991 to engage in the interviews that make up this book. Published in France under the title *Eclaircissements* (clarifications/illuminations), it was a best-seller and did much to dispel some of the misunderstandings surrounding Serres's work.

For English-speaking readers this translation should serve as an introduction to Serres, a provocative and unorthodox thinker whose major works are now available in English. His two most recent books are *The Legend of the Angels* (*La Légende des anges*, 1993) and *Atlas* (1994). An unabashed maverick, Michel Serres was elected in 1990 to the Académie Française.

Roxanne Lapidus  
University of California, Santa Barbara





FIRST CONVERSATION

## Background and Training

*Bruno Latour: There is a Michel Serres mystery. You are very well known and yet very unknown. Your fellow philosophers scarcely read you.*

*Michel Serres: Do you think so?*

*BL Even though your books are technically on philosophy.*

*MS I hope so.*

*BL This is where I'd like some clarifications. Your books aren't obscure, but the way to approach them is hidden. You map out a path, you go everywhere—the sciences, mythology, literature—but at the same time you often cover up the traces that led you to your results. What I'm hoping for today is not that you will add more results, nor comment on your other books, but that you will help us to read them. In these conversations I hope that we may take up the thread that leads you to your results and that you will show me how you arrived there—that we may go behind the magician's curtain, that we may learn about your colleagues and see the underlying design of a body of work that doesn't appear to have one.*

*MS Scarcely eighteen months ago I would have refused this exercise; now I am willing to go along with it. I'll tell you why a little later.*

*BL My first difficulty is that you situate your works under the sign of Hermes. Now, Hermes is mediation, translation, multiplicity. But at the same time, especially in your later works, there is a side I would call Catharist—maybe that's not the right word—a will toward isolation, sepa-*

*ration, immediacy. So my first question has to do with your intellectual formation. You're not fond of debate; although famous, you are not well understood by your colleagues, and admittedly you often speak ill of them. What terrible thing happened to you, in your development, to make you so "gun-shy" of debate? What events pushed you into this solitary exercise of philosophy?*

### The War Generation

*MS* My contemporaries will recognize themselves in what I have to say first. Here is the vital environment of those who were born, like me, around 1930: at age six, the war of 1936 in Spain; at age nine, the blitzkrieg of 1939, defeat and debacle; at age twelve, the split between the Resistance and the collaborators, the tragedy of the concentration camps and deportations; at age fourteen, Liberation and the settling of scores it brought with it in France; at age fifteen, Hiroshima. In short, from age nine to seventeen, when the body and sensitivity are being formed, it was the reign of hunger and rationing, death and bombings, a thousand crimes. We continued immediately with the colonial wars, in Indochina and then in Algeria. Between birth and age twenty-five (the age of military service and of war again, since then it was North Africa, followed by the Suez expedition) around me, for me—for us, around us—there was nothing but battles. War, always war. Thus, I was six for my first dead bodies, twenty-six for the last ones. Have I answered you sufficiently about what has made my contemporaries "gun-shy"?

*BL* Yes, in part, indeed.

*MS* My generation lived through these early years very painfully. The preceding generation was twenty years old at the beginning of these events and, as adults, lived them in an active way, becoming involved in them. My generation could only follow them in the passivity of powerlessness—as child, adolescent—in any case, weak, and without any possibility of action. Violence, death, blood and tears, hunger, bombings, deportations, affected my age group and traumatized it, since these horrors took place during the time of our formation—physical and emotional. My youth goes from